

Safe screen use



For children and young people today TVs, computers, gaming devices, smart phones and tablets are part of everyday life. Screen technology is a big part of how they learn, socialise and have fun.

There are also health and wellbeing risks if too much time is spent in front of screens, or devices are used inappropriately. Parents can help children stay safe and healthy as they get the most from these technologies. It is important to develop healthy screen habits early in life and to enjoy other activities too.

Children and screens

Screens of all types and sizes have become a part of life for many families. They provide quick access to information, entertainment and connection with family and friends. Children's use of computers, mobile phones, tablets and gaming devices means they are spending more time in front of screens than ever before. This has come at the cost of other things which are important for their healthy development. More time on screens takes time away from:

- physical activity which supports children's physical and mental health
- free play where they use their imagination to learn about the world
- face to face time with others which helps build social skills
- being outside in daylight which can help their vision and sleep.

For parents struggling to fit in the demands of work and family, screens can be an easy and affordable way to keep children occupied. It is important, however, to be aware of the risks to children's health and wellbeing. Families have a big influence on how children use their time. The habits they learn early in life are likely to continue into adulthood.

Screen time

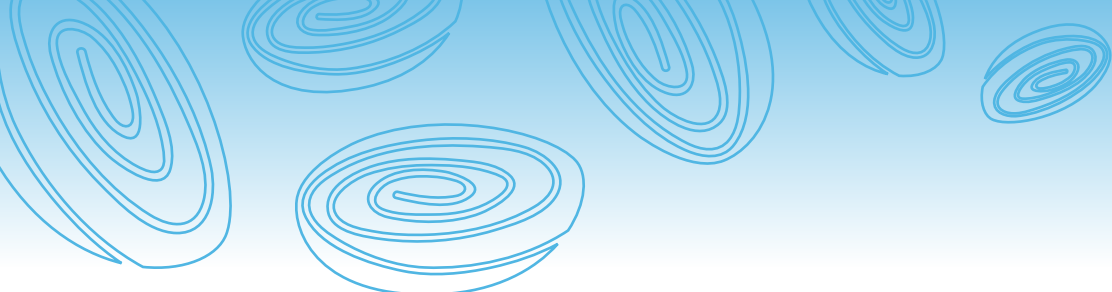
Too much recreational screen time for children, eg TV or video games has been linked to:

- sleep problems. The overuse of electronic media can result in young people going to bed later, taking longer to go into a deep sleep, and sleep being interrupted by devices. This can have a big impact on physical and mental health, eating habits and learning at school
- exposure to more advertising, especially for foods high in fat or sugar. Children often consume more snack foods or sugary drinks when watching TV which can lead to poorer physical and mental health
- weight gain and obesity. Recreational screen time can at times involve children sitting or lying down for long periods. This increases their risk of becoming overweight and obese, developing cardiovascular disease and diabetes. It is important to break up long periods of screen use by getting up and moving around
- problems with brain development. Studies have shown that screen use in early childhood can affect children's developing brain - concentration, learning, thinking
- problems with social and emotional development. Too much screen time can affect children's ability to read facial expressions, learn social skills and manage their emotions.

Help children learn that free time doesn't always mean screen time. Having lots of other activities they enjoy helps develop a balanced range of skills and interests.

Young children and screens

Parents can play a positive role in young children's brain development. When babies and very young children have too much screen time they can get used to the vibrant colours, shapes, sounds and fast movements. This type of



brain stimulation releases the neurotransmitter dopamine, which is linked to pleasure. Children can want more of this and learn to prefer instant gratification over activities they need for healthy development.

If young children use screens at all, try to ensure they view high quality, educational programs. Watch programs with children to help them understand what they are seeing. Talk to them about the program, eg ask 'How do you think that character felt?' or 'Where have you seen that colour before?'

It is inevitable that younger siblings or babies will have some passive screen time while their older sibling is watching TV or playing video games. Where possible try to limit this and give them something else to play with, eg a playmat or toys.

Recommended screen times

Current Australian recommendations ^[1] for children's daily use of all screens, including TVs, computers, tablets, phone screens and games are:

- no screen time for children under 2 years. This is an important time for children's brain development. Interactive play with real people and objects is the best way for them to learn language skills, to learn to think creatively, solve problems and develop fine motor skills. Passive media viewing may keep toddlers entertained but it doesn't teach these important skills
- one hour maximum per day for children 2-5 years. Programs and games should be selected and monitored by parents and not include violence
- two hours maximum per day of recreational screen time for children 5-18 years. This is in addition to screen use for school.

Tips for reducing recreational screen time

It is likely that many children spend more time in front of screens than parents realise, especially with so many new screens to entertain them. It might seem like a big task to cut down their screen time, but every small step is a move in the right direction. Fifteen minutes less screen time a day will soon add up.

It helps to involve children in planning ways to reduce viewing time. Finding fun ways will make it easier for them

to cut back too. You could try 'crowding out' their screen habits with other activities so there is more of a balance.

Your plan could include:

- noting how much time each child currently spends on all screens every day
- talking with them about why it is important to limit screen time. Providing facts can help as it's more difficult to argue against them
- involving them in setting goals to bring all screen use within, or as close to, the recommended limits for their age
- planning what they want to watch and turning the TV off after the agreed program. Don't have the TV going in the background
- using 'on demand' streaming apps to help stay within their time limit and increase the time spent outdoors during the day
- not having the TV or other screens on while getting ready for school, doing homework or at mealtimes. Turning off devices one hour before bed allows children to wind down before sleep
- no TVs in bedrooms, stopping screen use 1 hour before bedtime and no devices in bedrooms after lights out

Could your family set aside some screen-free time each week - perhaps a Sunday morning or weekday evening? Start small and over time your family may want to increase this.

- making a list with your child of other fun activities they can do, including family activities. Write these on a 'Bored board' for when they say 'I'm bored'
- involving children in helping prepare meals if they are used to being on screens at this time. Make a point of having meals together with no TV or other screens. It's a great time to talk and catch up on the day's events
- acknowledging success as children take steps towards their new screen habits.

It is also important to be a good role model and look at ways you can reduce your own screen time. Children are more likely to make changes if they see you doing it too. If you



find this challenging share this with your children as they may be struggling too. You can encourage each other.

It can take time to change habits and it may get worse before it gets better. Be consistent and stick to the agreed plan. You will feel the benefits before too long.

Helping prevent injury

It's helpful to be aware of children's risk of injury when they use screens frequently. Injuries can be more serious and difficult to treat than in adults. They can include:

- neck problems from leaning forward to view screens, rounded shoulders from slouching, or hip problems from sitting at an angle
- muscle soreness, headache, back pain or fatigue
- repetitive strain injury (RSI) which results from repeating the same movements over and over, or from keyboard and mouse use. RSI can be very painful and take some time to heal.

Headphones

Parents can play an active role in promoting safe technology use.

- Limit the amount of time headphones are used and keep the volume to a reasonable level.
- Support your child to take frequent listening breaks.
- Encourage use of child-friendly headphones with a volume-limiting device.
- Encourage use of device settings and notifications to warn them about excessive noise levels, or download a noise meter app to their phone or tablet.

If you have any concerns about your child's hearing, see your doctor.

Computers

Help prevent injury by making sure children:

- have short rather than long computer sessions, take regular breaks and stretch, including hands, wrists and arms. Stop computer use if it hurts

- don't bang the keys hard. It is best to type with both hands, and learning to touch type is even better
- use a proper computer desk with a drop-down keyboard to reduce strain on the arms and shoulders. Adjust chair height so their forearms and thighs are parallel to the floor. Use a stool to support your child's feet if needed. Ensure hands and wrists are level over the keyboard. Make sure upper arms are vertical and their head and hips are facing in the same direction. Adjust the screen so they are looking straight at it, or slightly downwards. Make sure their chin is tucked in and not pushing forward.

If your child is using a laptop or notepad computer for long periods, a separate keyboard can help prevent wrist and arm problems.

Children learn from how they see you using technology. Make sure you use it safely yourself.

Mobile phones

Encourage children not to:

- hold phones between the neck and shoulder while they are on a call
- use the same fingers, especially thumbs all the time when texting or swiping.

It is very important that young people don't use a mobile phone when riding or walking near traffic. Accidents related to mobile phone use are increasing.

Gaming devices

There is a risk of physical injury with frequent gaming, in particular to the hands and wrists, neck and back. Games which involve lots of fast or repetitive hand movements, or game controllers which involve over-extending or over-use of the thumbs or any other body part may increase your child's risk of RSI.

Children may also develop eye strain, dizziness or even nausea from constantly focusing on a screen or using a virtual reality headset.





It can help to:

- make sure children warm up and stretch when playing interactive games with lots of physical movement. It is important they don't play for long periods without a break
- limit the amount of time spent playing games, and also when they are played. Some multiplayer online games happen in different time zones which can mean young people are gaming when they should be sleeping
- watch out for signs of injury as children may be reluctant to tell you in case you limit their game use.

Augmented reality games

Augmented reality games can involve children playing outside the home, or using Virtual Reality (VR) headsets.

- Make sure children and young people know to stay alert to their surroundings, including traffic when using screens outdoors. If they are in other locations, make sure they know how to stay safe. Playing these games with your child can be a fun activity to do together and a way to keep them safe.
- Follow the manufacturer's guidelines for usage of VR headsets. Some have recommended age limits.

The good news is that children who are physically active every day and involved in a variety of activities are less likely to be injured when using technology.

For information about keeping children safe online see Parent Easy Guide 'Cyber safety'.

1 Australia's Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines, Australian Government

Note: The term 'Parents' in this Guide refers to anyone caring for and/or raising children and young people, eg parents, caregivers, step-parents, grandparents, guardians, foster or kinship carers.

Want more information?

eSafety Commissioner

Information about online safety for parents, children and young people. www.esafety.gov.au

Department of Health, Australian Government

Guidelines for physical activity and sedentary behaviour for all ages, including recommended screen times www.health.gov.au

Know Your Noise, National Acoustic Laboratories (NAL)

Information about noise exposure and its impact on hearing. Review of noise apps <http://knowyournoise.nal.gov.au>

Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association

Practical tips for mobile use www.amta.org.au

Children and Media Australia

Information about children and media, and app review service 'Know before you load' www.childrenandmedia.org.au

Australian Classification

Classification ratings for movies and games www.classification.gov.au

Nature Play SA

Ideas for getting children outdoors and playing in nature www.natureplaysa.org.au

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon-Fri for an appointment
Nurses can help with young children's health, eating, sleep and development www.cafhs.sa.gov.au

Raising Children Network

Parenting information, including safe game use www.raisingchildren.net.au

Parenting SA

For other Parent Easy Guides including 'Cyber safety' and 'Television' www.parenting.sa.gov.au



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department of Human Services and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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