
Guidance on Screen Use in Children



MINISTRY OF HEALTH
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Overview

This advisory provides practical suggestions to families with children aged 0-12 years old on how to organise and manage their children's screen use. Guidance for different age groups is also provided to highlight key points that families should be aware of. A handy infographic for parents can be found at <https://go.gov.sg/screenadvisory-infographic>.

Organisations and healthcare professionals working with children could work with parents to develop the healthy screen use practices recommended in this advisory. This advisory is not meant to be used by organisations to set strict screen use limits or guidelines.

Summary of Evidence Findings

The availability of screen devices and their uses have rapidly expanded over recent years. Examples of screen devices include smartphones, tablets, laptops, and televisions. Children use screens now more than ever. As children age, they increase the time that they spend on screens especially after having their own digital devices.

Children can benefit from screen use, such as when family members co-view content together and talk about what they are watching. Educational screen use among children could lead to academic gains and cognitive development. Older children can also benefit from screen use by maintaining and developing friendships online and using educational games and resources.

There are potential downsides to screen use, particularly in children below 36 months, as it is a sensitive period of brain development. Children under the age of 18 months have difficulty absorbing information from two-dimensional screens. Excessive screen use is associated with poorer language skills and shorter attention spans in infants and toddlers. While much of the evidence to date has limitations, there appears to be associations between screen use and insufficient good-quality sleep, sedentary behaviours, increased obesity, and poorer mental health and well-being. These potential negative consequences are linked to the degree that screen use displaces other activities, like sleeping, playing and interacting with friends or being physically active. Longer periods of smartphone usage may increase the likelihood of ocular symptoms, including myopia,

eye strain, and dry eye, especially in children. However, further studies with objective screen time measurements are necessary to assess evidence of an association between screen time and myopia.

At the moment, there is limited evidence of what constitutes a safe time limit for screen use. Instead, parental supervision and collaborating with children to adopt healthy screen habits helps to prevent uncontrolled, excessive and unhealthy screen practices. Details of the evidence review can be found in the Annex – Evidence Review of Screen Use in Childhood.

It is increasingly important to ensure that families adopt healthy screen use habits among children.

The screen use expert subgroup, comprising paediatricians, academics, and representatives from the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education, TOUCH Community Services and Early Childhood Development Agency, formulated the following advisory based on subgroup discussions and their interpretation of the evidence.

The subgroup has taken a prudent approach and suggested time limits for younger children (aged less than 36 months) due to stronger associations between excessive screen use and negative outcomes for this age group. This serves as a practical suggestion on how families should organise and manage their children's screen use.

Overall, the guidance seeks to minimise unhealthy screen practices and promote healthy screen use — maximising the opportunities that screen use can provide.

Overall Guidance to Develop Healthy Screen Use in Children

- **Families should manage screen use based on the needs of an individual child.** Screen use may displace physical activities, in-person social interactions and sleep. Have a plan that balances screen use with other activities and stick to it.
- **Parents are encouraged to be present and engaged when children are using devices.** Try to have open and continual conversations with children to find out what they are doing online and provide timely advice when necessary.
- **Parents should role-model positive screen-use behaviours and habits** for their children and encourage a balance between screen use and other activities. Parents should be mindful of their own device use, and whether it interrupts interactions with their children.
- **Parents should encourage healthy screen use among their children.**

Healthy screen use means choosing appropriate and safe screen content, engaging in active screen use, and co-viewing media with an adult...

- ✓ **Active Screen Use** involves cognitively or physically engaging in screen-based activities, such as completing homework on a computer, following an exercise or art/craft programme online, playing video games or using screens to socially connect through video chatting.
- ✓ **Co-viewing media with an adult** refers to an adult watching TV or video programmes on screens with children, and at the same time discussing with their children about what they are viewing, keeping them actively engaged.

Minimise background screen use and passive screen use...

- ✗ **Background Screen Use** is having television or devices turned on in the background even when a child is not watching them. Background screen use could lead to a decrease in high-quality interpersonal communication and shortened attention span.
- ✗ **Passive Screen Use** involves sedentary viewing and receiving information through screens without the need for interaction and thinking, often without co-viewing with an adult. Evidence shows that excessive passive screen use may hinder development of the ability to make decisions, direct attention, and interact socially.

Moderate recreational screen use

- **Recreational Screen Use** is time spent on screen behaviours that are not related to school or work. This can involve social media use, watching movies or TV, and playing video games or electronic gaming. Recreational screen time can be active, or passive. Using screens for recreational purposes have benefits, as long as healthy screen practices are adopted, and there is a balance with other meaningful activities for the child.

Screen Use Guidance by Age Groups

Guidance for children under 18 months

- ✓ **Discourage any screen use** unless it is for interactive video chatting.
- ✓ **Reduce background screen use.**

Guidance for children between 18 months and 6 years old

- ✓ **Less passive screen use is recommended**, to be balanced with active, interactive and educational screen use.

For children between 18 and 36 months old, suggest limiting total screen use to less than one hour a day.

- ✓ **Co-view media with children where possible.** Speak and discuss with them about what they are viewing to keep them actively engaged. Avoid simply using screens to keep children occupied.
- ✓ **Carefully choose educational content for children and ensure that the content is age-appropriate.** This includes materials that are developmentally appropriate for children based on their age, level of maturity, social-emotional / behavioural capacities. Avoid harmful content such as those that contain references to violence, sexual behaviour, suicide, self-harm, or cyberbullying.
- ✓ **Reduce background screen use.**
- ✓ **Avoid screen use during meals and one hour before bedtime.**

Guidance for children 7 to 12 years old

- ✓ **Develop a collaborative screen use plan** or timetable for the family to help achieve an appropriate balance between screen use and other age-appropriate activities, such as family bonding, interaction with peers, homework and exercise. Use the timetable to moderate the time spent on passive recreational screen use, if necessary.
- ✓ **Be familiar with how to safeguard children from possible harmful online influences.**
 - **Have regular conversations with children** to find out what they are doing online. Educate children about potential online risks, including inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and speaking to strangers online. Provide timely advice when necessary.
 - **Consider using parental control settings** to monitor and ensure children access age-appropriate content. This includes materials that are developmentally appropriate for children based on their age, level of maturity, social-emotional / behavioural capacities. Avoid harmful content that contain references to violence, sexual behaviour, suicide, self-harm or cyberbullying.
- ✓ **Avoid screen use during mealtimes and one hour before bedtime**
- ✓ **Take appropriate steps if you have concerns that your child has difficulty regulating his or her screen use.**

Useful Links and Resources

Annex - Evidence Review of Screen Use in Childhood

<https://go.gov.sg/moh-screenadvisory>

Additional Parenting Resources

Learn how to guide your child on cultivating healthy screen use through balancing it with other activities, role modelling and meaningful viewing.

0-2 years: <https://go.gov.sg/screentimeadvisory-0to2>

3-6 years: <https://go.gov.sg/screentimeadvisory-3to6>

7-12 years: <https://go.gov.sg/screentimeadvisory-7to12>

Tailor a Family Media Use Plan in discussion with the child. This helps achieve an appropriate balance between screen use and other activities, support open communications and implementation of rules on screen use within the family.

<https://www.healthychildren.org/MediaUsePlan>

Find out more on screen use, cyberwellness and other useful evidence-based parenting resources for kids 0-12 years.

<https://www.familiesforlife.sg/Parenting>

Find out more about protecting children from inappropriate content online and how to start a conversation with them on screen use.

<https://www.imda.gov.sg/digitalforlife/Digitalwellness>

Find tips and guides on digital wellness and staying safe online.

<http://www.betterinternet.sg>

Explore how to be good role models for your children and help them discover ways that will keep them healthy and safe in the digital world.

<https://go.gov.sg/moe-raising-a-digitally-smart-child>

Difficulty Regulating Screen Use – What Should Parents Do?

While spending an excessive amount of time on devices is unhealthy, this behaviour does not necessarily mean the child is addicted to device usage.

There is currently no established way to diagnose whether a child is addicted to devices. However, it is possible that a child could present with signs that he or she has difficulty regulating screen use. Common signs¹ include

- Increasing screen time or use of devices to the extent that normal activities like school and home responsibilities are neglected;
- Unwillingness to share the device, or to return it to parents when asked;
- Telling lies about what he or she has been doing on the device, or telling lies to get more screen time;
- Having poor sleep quality and quantity;
- Displaying anti-social responses or behaviours to get more screen time;
- Having poor emotional regulation such as anger and depressive symptoms; and
- Throwing extreme tantrums when the device is taken away (i.e. displaying abnormal levels of irritability and restlessness when not on the device).

If parents are concerned with the amount of time their child is spending on their devices or any of the behaviours above, they are encouraged to discuss with their child on their screen use habits, and develop a realistic screen use timetable to balance their device use with other activities that the child agrees to adhere to. Review the plan regularly.

If there is no improvement and their behaviour continue to cause impairment in the child's life, the child/parent may want to seek help from the school or other community partners.

If there is marked deterioration and significant impairment to the child's life, the child/parent should consider seeking professional help. The professionals could assess the severity of the problem and recommend appropriate interventions.

¹ The common signs indicated are adapted from the 11th Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), diagnostic criteria of 6C51 Gaming disorder.

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