

Safe technology use



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

There are health risks for children when they spend too much time in front of screens, or use devices inappropriately. Parents can help children stay safe and healthy as they get the most from these technologies. It is important that children develop healthy screen habits early and have a balance of activities in their life.

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, gaming devices, tablets and mobile phones means they are spending more time in front of screens than ever before.

This extra screen time has come at the cost of other things which are important for children's healthy development. More time on screens means children are spending less time:

- being physically active which helps maintain a healthy weight and build a strong healthy body
- in free play where they use their imagination to learn about the world
- interacting with others which helps build social skills.

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 remember that families are a major influence on how children use their time. The habits children learn early in life are likely to continue into adulthood.

Screen time

Too much screen time for children has been linked to:

- overweight and obesity. Screen time encourages children to sit or lie down for long periods. This increases their risk of overweight and obesity and developing cardiovascular disease and diabetes. It is important to break up long periods of sitting by getting up and moving around
- exposure to more advertising, especially for energy-dense foods. Children often consume more snack foods or sugary drinks when watching TV. The risk for overweight and obesity is increased if the TV is in their bedroom
- sleep problems. A study in South Australia showed that more than 70% of young people don't get enough sleep on school nights due to overuse of electronic media. Use is even higher on weekends. Going to bed later, taking longer to go into a deep sleep, and sleep being interrupted by devices are all part of the problem. This can have a big impact on physical and mental health, eating habits and children's learning at school
- behaviour and attention problems. Research shows that for every hour of TV children watch each day, their risk of developing attention-related problems increases by 10%
- accepting violence as a normal way to solve problems. Children can become desensitised to violence if they see it often.

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



Young children and screens

The use of screens has been linked to brain development in babies and young children. When they use screens too much at a very young age, children can get used to the vibrant colours, shapes, sounds and fast movements. This is very stimulating for the brain. The neurotransmitter dopamine, which is linked to pleasure, is released. Children can want more of this and learn to prefer instant gratification over real world activities.

If young children use screens at all, make sure they view high quality, educational programs. Watch programs with children to help them understand what they are seeing.

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 and connection with other children and adults 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 for children under 5 years. Programs and games should be selected and monitored by parents and not include violence
- two hours maximum of recreational screen time for children 5–18 years. This is in addition to screen use for school.

Tips for reducing screen time

It is likely that many children spend more time in front of screens than parents realise, especially with so many new screens that entertain. It might seem like a big task to reduce the amount of time children spend in front of screens, but every small step is a move in the right direction. Fifteen minutes less screen time a day can soon get you to your goal.



It helps to involve your children in planning how to reduce viewing time. Finding fun ways that make it easier for them to cut back will also help.

Your plan for reducing screen time 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 and how it will benefit them and the whole family
- involving them in setting goals to bring all screen time within the recommended amounts for their age
- using TV guides to plan what they want to watch and turning the TV off after the agreed program
- recording programs that run over their time limit. They can watch these at another time and fast-forward advertisements to reduce viewing time. If their favourite program comes on during daylight hours, recording it means they can be active outdoors while the program is on and watch it later
- not having the TV running in the background. Only switch it on when it is an agreed viewing time
- not having the TV or other screens on while getting ready for school, during mealtimes and while homework is being done. Turning off one hour before bed allows children to wind down before sleep
- not having TVs in bedrooms, and keeping screen devices out of bedrooms after lights out

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Having at least one screen-free day a week can get the whole family doing something together. You might want to take turns in planning your family screen-free day.

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- making a list with your child of other fun activities they can do, including family activities. Help them develop new interests. Encourage a physical or creative activity when they say 'I'm bored'
- involving children in helping to prepare meals if they are used to watching TV 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 toward forming new screen time habits.

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

It can take time to change habits. You may need to supervise time limits until children get used to the can be very focussed on what they are doing. Expect resistance but be consistent and stick to the agreed plan.

Risk of injury

Children are at risk of injury when they use technology frequently, and these can be more serious and difficult to treat than injuries to adults. Injuries 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) resulting from repeating the same movements over and over. Keyboard and mouse use are a common cause of RSI which can be very painful and take some time to heal
- hearing problems from listening to loud music through headphones for long periods. Limit the amount of time these are used and keep the volume to a reasonable level. Encourage your child to take frequent listening breaks. You can use child-friendly headphones with a volume-limiting device. You can also download a noise meter app to their phone or tablet which can help them monitor usage and volume. For more information visit Know Your Noise website. If you have any concerns about your child's hearing, see a hearing specialist.

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 longer periods, a separate keyboard can help prevent wrist and arm problems.

The good news is that children who are active and fit and involved in whole-body activities every day are less likely to be injured when using technology.

Mobile phones

Injuries can be caused by holding phones between the neck and shoulder. Using the same fingers, especially thumbs, all the time when texting or swiping a touch screen can cause injury.

It is very important that young people don't use a mobile phone when driving a car or walking where there is 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 movement, 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.





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 children play. 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 in locations outside the home, or in 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.

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

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

Want more information?

Office of the eSafety Commissioner

Information on online safety for parents (iParent) and women (eSafetyWomen), children and young people. Provides a guide to games, apps and social networking 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 your hearing health. Review of noise apps <http://knowyournoise.nal.gov.au>

Australian Mobile Telecommunications Association

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

Motor Accident Commission

Road safety information, including mobile phone distraction www.mac.sa.gov.au

American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)/ Healthy children

A US website with the AAP recommended screen times and a useful 'Family media plan' template www.healthychildren.org

Australian Council on Children and the Media

Phone 1800 700 357
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

Parenting SA

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

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)

Information on child health and parenting www.cyh.com

Raising Children Network

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



**Government of
South Australia**

Parenting SA

A partnership between the Department for Education and Child Development and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660
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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Revised:03/2017.