How To Reduce Screen Time Exposure For Your Child

What is screen time?

Screen time refers to the time spent on electronic devices with screens.

Examples of screen devices:

- Television screens
- Desktop computers, laptops
- Video or handheld game consoles
- Mobile devices (e.g. smartphones and tablets)

While some screen time can be educational, it is easy to go overboard. Some caregivers may use screen time to 'babysit' their young children so they are able to do their daily chores.

Caregivers should also be mindful of 'background screen time'. This is when the screen is switched on in the background or being watched by others, while your child is doing another non-screen activity.

What are the professional recommendations on screen time for children?

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that children below 18 months avoid use of screen media other than video chatting. For those between 18 months and 2 years, any media should be of high quality, and parents should watch these programmes with their children to help them understand the content. For children 2 to 5 years, screen usage should be limited to 1 hour a day of high-quality programmes, with adult's supervision.

Why is too much screen time harmful?

Excessive screen time exposure has been associated with various medical and developmental problems including the following:

Behavioural problems	Short attention span, aggression, violence, bullying, and risk taking behaviours are increased in all age groups
Irregular sleep	Difficulty falling asleep, disturbed sleep routines, and nightmares in all age groups leading to sleep deprivation
Language, cognitive and motor delays	Excessive screen exposure to babies has been linked to language, cognitive and motor delays in young children
Poor academic performance	School-age children who have TVs in their bedrooms do poorer in exams than those who do not have TVs in their bedrooms
Obesity	Poor eating habits and reduction in physical activity contribute to unhealthy weight gain in all age groups

How do you limit screen time?

- Place firm limits on screen time depending on your child's age.
- Arrange for media-free times together such as dinner or driving, and provide media-free locations at home like the bedroom or common areas.
- Agree on a daily screen time limit within your family and other caregivers such as grandparents or nannies, and adhere to it.
- Explain to your child about screen time limit, and consequences if the limit is exceeded (e.g. no screen time at all the next day).
- Set a good example when your child is present. Limit your own screen time and avoid watching or playing violent or other inappropriate content when your child is present.
- Eliminate unnecessary background screen time. Turn off the TV to reduce sensory overload and distractions to your child's attention.
- Discourage repetitive viewings of the same show. Children can easily repeat a programme on video sharing websites. Switch off the screen after 1 episode of the programme.
- Do not let your child eat while watching a screen device. This includes during their regular meals and snacks.
- Keep screen devices out of the bedroom to enable you to monitor the content that your child is being exposed to. It also helps reduce your child's screen time.
- Avoid any screen time 1 hour before bedtime. This allows your child's sleep hormone (melatonin) to rise naturally, and for you to do a bedtime routine such as reading a story or singing a lullaby, to promote parent-child bonding.
- Avoid purchasing more devices than you need. It is not necessary for your child to own his own TV, smartphone or tablet. He can access your device for a limited time. Having a password on your screen device will prevent unauthorised use.

What else should I be mindful of regarding my child's use of screen devices?

- Check the appropriateness of the content that your child is watching. Where necessary, refer to movie ratings or online reviews.
- Look for media choices that are educational or promote social values. Be firm about not allowing content that is age-inappropriate.
- View and discuss programmes together with your child. Talk about what you see, such as family values, violence or drug abuse.

How else can I entertain my child without the use of a screen device?

Screen time is generally a solitary and passive activity. However, young children need to learn to interact socially, communicate with others, perform physical exercise, develop imaginative play, think creatively and engage in multi-sensory exploration.

For children under 2 years of age, it is important for caregivers to sit down and play interactively with them. Play make-believe, peekaboo, hide-and-seek, and get your child to imitate you doing nursery rhyme actions and songs.

For older children, offer fun alternatives such as reading, story-telling, role-playing or dressing up, building blocks, doing jigsaw puzzles or arts and crafts and outdoor activities like hide-and-seek or sports like ball games and swimming.

Source: KK Women's and Children's Hospital and Health Promotion Board

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