

# Screen Time Recommendations for Kids

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Diana Khoury

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In previous generations, parents didn't have to deal with managing their children's screen time. Back in the mid 1990s, having a "portable electronic device" meant owning a Walkman or Game Boy, and at that time, only 14% of American adults had internet access (and that was through dial-up).

Since that time, things have come a long way. Fast forward 30 years, and now cell phones have game apps for infants.

Compared to the 3 hours a day school aged kids spent watching TV in 1995, children today spend an average of 6.5 hours per day in front of a screen.

What kind of impact does that change have on our kids? Because access to screens everywhere – nearly all the time – is a more recent phenomenon, the long-term research that would give us clear answers is only just starting to emerge.

Like so many questions in parenting, the results so far are complex. And the answer varies depending on your child's age.

## **Digital Learning Tools**

Not all screen time is created equal. Parents and kids alike love “Bluey” and other prosocial children's programs.

In school, digital learning tools such as Google classroom, Zoom, digital textbooks, and educational apps can offer a centralized way for students and teachers to communicate. New digital learning tools are being developed every day, and many of them show promise and have data verifying their efficacy.

Learning to navigate digital tools is becoming as important to today's youth as studying from a physical textbook was to their parents.

As they enter the workforce, graduates with digital skills already have an advantage in the job market. And as workplaces become even more technology-dependent, those digital skills are quickly becoming requirements.

## **The Impact of Screen Time on Kids**

Unrestrained access to the internet every day comes with significant risks. Roughly half of youth who spend time online are exposed to age-inappropriate content such as pornography and violence. For younger children, parental control apps can help keep a child safe online.

Whether using a computer, smartphone, tablet, or watching TV, studies have also found that too much screen time has negative impacts on a child's academic performance. Increased time spent online, especially time spent multitasking with other media platforms (app switching), correlates to lower executive functioning, poor class participation, and lower test scores.

There are also potential health impacts. Increased screen time for kids is a risk factor for developing obesity and cardiovascular disorders as well as mental health issues including anxiety and depression. Screen time also impacts sleep.

For parents, too much screen time can also have a negative impact on their health. In addition to causing physical problems like neck pain, headaches, or eye strain, it can increase a person's risk of social isolation, sleep problems, stress, poor mental health, obesity, and decreased brain functions.

But how much screen time is too much?

## **Infants Don't Need Screen Time**

Studies universally agree that there is no benefit to screen time for infants. Infants need people, not media, to help them learn.

The American Academy of Pediatrics advises against any screen time before a child is 18 months old. The World Health Organization takes a stronger stance, recommending that children under age 2 should not have any screen time.

Both organizations agree that a healthy exception would be video calls such as FaceTime with familiar adults, such as family members or friends.

## **Screen Time For Preschool Age Kids**

After age two, it's okay to mindfully introduce very limited screen time.

The CDC recommends limiting total media time for children ages 2 – 5 to no more than 30 minutes weekly, and only together with an adult, for educational purposes or physical activity.

The American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry has much looser guidelines: for children 2-5, limit non-educational screen time to about 1 hour per weekday and 3 hours per day on the weekends.

Somewhere between 30 minutes – 11 hours per week leaves families with a lot of uncertainty of what the appropriate screen limits should be.

## **Screen Time for Gradeschoolers & Teens**

It's recommended that gradeschoolers (age 6-10) limit their screen time to 1.5 hours a day or less. For middleschoolers, 2 hours or less per day of recreational (non-educational) screen time is the guideline from the American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry.

But since 2016, the American Academy of Pediatrics has not recommended a fixed amount of screen time for school aged children and teens.

Rather than setting a specific limit, encourage a child to be mindful of the quality and quantity of their screen time activities. Having a FaceTime call with grandma vs doomscrolling on a social app for an hour can have very different effects. If recreational time spent in front of a screen interferes with homework, sleep, or in person social interactions, screen time should be decreased.

## **Screen Time for Adults**

There are no official guidelines for how much screen time is recommended for adults. However, it's important for adults – parents, family members, teachers, etc. – to model healthy self-control and responsible screen use for their children.

This might include: parents not looking at the phone every time they're bored, limiting the number of hours they spend interacting with social media, not using screens during family dinners, and practicing good sleep hygiene before bed.

Demonstrating these healthy screen time behaviors consistently can help parents and their children maintain good physical and mental health, and success in school.

## **Alternatives to Screen Time**

Experts agree that less screen time is better. When possible, families should minimize unsupervised screentime in favor of real-world activities. It is tempting to use the “digital babysitter” when parents need to focus on something else, like making dinner.

But whenever possible, it's better to create opportunities for supervised play, for example, letting a toddler play with blocks or nesting cups on the floor nearby, or setting up gradeschool age children with a board game at the kitchen table.

While out buying groceries or waiting for a table at a restaurant, instead of looking at the phone, parents are encouraged to strike up a conversation with their child(ren) or ask them questions about their day.

And when making travel plans, prepare some screen-free activities in advance to help keep kids occupied on a flight or a road trip.

## **Managing Screen Time at School & Home**

Once children start school, managing screen time becomes more challenging. Parents don't always know how much time their kids are spending on electronic devices in the classroom or outside of class. In addition, after school children often need to use a computer to complete their homework.

At the same time, using technology for socializing or entertainment is increasingly appealing for youth. And contrary to popular opinion, there are both positive and negative aspects of social media use by kids and teens.

The American Academy of Pediatrics does not recommend a fixed amount of screen time for school aged children and teens.

Instead, parents should consider the quality of their child's digital activities and adjust screen rules according to the evidence of its impacts. Parents need to ensure that their child is getting enough sleep, exercise, and in-person social interaction. When screen time interferes with any of these things, it's time to cut back.

Encourage educational uses of screens and digital media activities that build creativity and connection, such as digital art tools and age-appropriate multiplayer games instead of passive media consumption or mindless scrolling.

## **Mindful Use of Screen Time at Any Age**

Each family must determine screen time rules as their child grows. But regardless of the amount, be mindful about how your child uses their screen time. Have conversations with your child about the content they consume, digital citizenship, and the family values that guide your rules.

Learn how to use parental controls and set an expectation from the youngest age that you will be involved in your child's use of media as they ease into each new device or social media platform. It's easier to loosen the reins over time than to walk back freedoms.

In addition, parents should model healthy behavior in their own media use. Prioritize in-person relationships by planning family activities and establishing screen-free family meal times.

Keep phones out of bedrooms at night (yours and theirs) and try to use social media mindfully instead of doomscrolling.

To create a personalized family media plan that helps you set appropriate rules for using different kinds of media and technology in your family, the American Academy of Pediatrics offers some guidelines.

## Where to Seek Help

If your child is experiencing anxiety, depression, impulsiveness, lack of sleep, or is falling behind in school, request an appointment with WWMG Family Medicine or our Psychology team. We're here to help.

All, Family Practice, Psychology

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