



Too much time on screens? Screen time effects and guidelines for children and young people



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In Australia, screen time spent on TV, e-games, digital tablets and smartphones is a regular part of children and young people's lives. Parents report that excessive screen time is the top health concern they have for their children, and they are worried that their children spend too much time on electronic devices.^{1,2} This short article provides an

overview of the national guidelines for screen time, the effects of excessive screen time and how practitioners can support families to reduce screen time.

What are the national guidelines for screen time?

Guidelines for screen time can be found in the Australian **24-hour movement guidelines** for the early years (birth through to five years) and children and young people (5-17 years) (introduced in 2018). These guidelines were developed from systematic reviews of the evidence about the effects of physical activity, sleep and sedentary time (including screen time) on children's development, health and wellbeing.^{3,4,5} For screen time, the guidelines recommend:

- no screen time for children younger than two years
- no more than one hour per day for children aged 2-5 years
- no more than two hours of sedentary recreational screen time per day for children and young people aged 5-17 years (not including schoolwork).

Most Australian children spend more time on screens than is recommended. Estimates from primary research suggest only 17-23% of preschoolers and 15% of 5-12 year olds meet screen-time guidelines.^{6,7,8} Screen time has also been shown to increase between the ages of 10 and 14, especially among boys. The types of screen-time that increased was electronic gaming for boys and TV, computer use and social networking for girls.⁹

During the COVID-19 lockdowns, families reported that they spent more time watching TV and movies than before and that children were spending 35 minutes more time on screens a day on the weekends.^{10,11}

What is the evidence on the effects of excessive screen time?

For children younger than five years, there is strong evidence that screen time has negative effects on:

- weight
- motor and cognitive development
- social and psychological wellbeing.^{5,12}

Screen time in this age group may be associated with the following problems in later childhood:

- emotional problems in girls
- family functioning for both boys and girls.¹³

For children and young people aged 5-17 years, screen time may have negative effects on:

- weight and diet (especially from TV viewing)

- behavioural problems, anxiety, hyperactivity, attention, self-esteem and psychosocial health.^{[12](#)}

For this age group, some research links screen time with depressive symptoms.^{[12](#)} However, other research suggests there is limited evidence linking screen time to mental health problems.^{[14](#)}

The type of screen time, and how it is used, affects outcomes for children and young people. For instance, watching TV may result in less physical activity and children being more disengaged or less attentive, and may negatively affect family functioning.^{[15,16](#)} However, internet use and electronic gaming may support skills such as stress management.^{[17](#)}

Studies do not always agree about the effects of excessive screen time, likely because of differences in their methods. However, research suggests that excessive screen time in children, especially young children, is likely to lead to unhealthy outcomes in the short and longer term. In addition to the time spent on screens, it is also important to consider the type of screen time and how it is used.

How can practitioners support families to reduce excessive screen time?

Evidence suggests the following strategies may help practitioners support families to minimise excessive screen time:

Practitioners can encourage organisations and each other to:

- be aware of, and share, the [24-hour movement](#) guidelines to encourage balancing the day with different activities and avoid focusing on specific behaviours in isolation^{[15,18](#)}
- collaborate between organisations to achieve results (e.g. health and movement organisations collaborating with schools or youth-based organisations).^{[18](#)}

Practitioners can support parents to:

- limit their own screen time. There is a strong relationship between parents' screen time and that of their children.^{[19,20](#)}
- co-participate – where parents and children take part in screen time together and engage in conversations about the content. This encourages spontaneous opportunities for learning and practising language skills, and helps mediate the content being viewed.^{[21](#)}
- set time and content rules around screen use. This is associated with lower levels of screen time.^{[19,21](#)} Supportive rather than controlling styles of communicating rules may be beneficial.^{[22](#)}
- find ways to balance their child's day with other activities such as physical activity and play to support their physical and mental health. ^{[23](#)} This could include scooter riding, dancing, running, climbing or going to the park with friends.

- encourage children to self-regulate screen time. Personal recognition of the consequences of excessive screen time, giving them a sense of autonomy over their choices and involving them in decision making are important for this strategy to be effective.^{15,24}

Conclusion

Excessive screen time can lead to poor health and developmental outcomes. Where possible, practitioners can support parents to keep their children's screen time within the recommended levels, engage in more supportive screen behaviours (such as parents and children using screens together) and encourage children to take part in other activities, such as physical activity.

Further reading and related resources

- [Physical activity and exercise guidelines](#)
The Department of Health website provides 24-hour movement guidelines for all ages.
- [Collection of physical activity and sedentary behaviour dissemination resources](#)
These Department of Health brochures, fact sheets and posters based on the 24-hour movement guidelines can be shared with families to build awareness.
- [Australian 24-hour movement guidelines for children \(5-12 years\) and young people \(13-17 years\): An integration of physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep](#)
This Department of Health report details the evidence underpinning the 24-hour movement guidelines for children and young people.
- [Children's screen time](#)
This Longitudinal Study of Australian Children chapter reports on Australian children's screen time.
- [Managing screen time](#)
This raisingchildren.net.au webpage outlines strategies to help parents reduce screen time in their children aged 3-11 years.
- [Growing up Digital Australia](#)
This research by the Gonski Institute of Education (UNSW) provides an overview of the impact of digital technology on Australian children.

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