

How Much Screen Time Is Too Much for Children?

The negative effects of screen time on child development is becoming a growing issue. Research suggests that too much exposure to technology may hinder children in their developmental years, impacting their ability to communicate, process emotions, maintain attention and achieve quality sleep.

The Impact of Screen Time on Child Development

In a modern world, it's difficult to avoid the use of technology. The average adult will spend 34 years of their life looking at screens – with [a recent poll](#) suggesting people spend nearly 5,000 hours a year using technology.

We spoke to **Systemic Psychotherapist Michelle Newman Brown**, on the effects of too much screen time on child development. Michelle is the Senior Director of our Therapeutic Services, with over 30 years of experience working with children and young people.

How Much Screen Time Is Too Much?

Many parents and caregivers turn to screens to help keep younger children entertained. The use of colourful cartoons and catchy tunes as a ‘babysitter’ nearly [doubled during the COVID-19 pandemic](#), as many parents sought to keep the kids busy during month after month of lockdowns.

Nowadays, [61% of 5-15 year olds have their own tablet](#), and 55% their own smartphone. But how much screen time is too much?

While there are no definitive answers, experts advise children should be limited to [no more than two hours of screen time](#) a day. However, children under 18 months should have a [zero screen time rule](#) (with the exception of the occasional video call), while for children aged two to five years old, the recommended limit is one hour a day.

Of course, there are also many benefits to technology for children and young people. As Michelle Newman Brown tells us, ‘there are educational components to many electronic devices,’ including [access to a wealth of information](#) that enables them to learn, explore and grow.

Still, Michelle recommends ‘finding ways of enabling our young people to spend less of their time using technology,’ as ‘young people need a rich and broad means of developing their brains’ – something that too much screen usage can interfere with.

How Screen Time Impacts Child Development

Children develop skills through playing and interacting with the world around them, improving cognitive abilities such as problem-solving and self-expression. Spending too much time on screens can inhibit their engagement with their environment, which is why providing off-screen experiences is critical.

If children fail to engage properly with the environment around them, they may experience delays in their development that can impact them later in life.

Decreased attention span

Did you know that boredom can actually be good for you? Technology and social media can make passing the time easy, capturing our attention and (sometimes) resulting in us spending hours on electronic devices. Yet, allowing the brain to be bored can actually be positive, stimulating our creativity and problem-solving and allowing our brains to recharge. Social media, among other things, [can alter our attention span](#). The quick, instant gratification associated with the use of screens can influence the brain’s ability to focus on things that might be less stimulating.

Children who are exposed to too much screen time at a young age can suffer from a decrease in attention span. Being constantly stimulated by screens means children [forget how to rely on themselves or others for entertainment](#), discouraging them from using their imagination and engaging with the environment around them.

Sleep disturbances

Getting enough sleep is essential when it comes to child development. Sleep is crucial for maintaining mental and physical health, affecting everything from [children's cognitive performance](#), to their learning, to their mood. When children are exposed to too much screen time, their sleep can suffer. This is because electronic screens emit blue light, a type of light that can [suppress melatonin levels and delay sleepiness](#).

Technology should be limited, especially in the hours before bedtime, allowing enough time for children's brains to wind down before bed.

Emotional development

Screens are increasingly being used to replace in-person interaction, with technological tools like Microsoft Teams, Zoom and Facetime being used more and more in our day-to-day lives. More time spent in front of screens means less time spent interacting, playing and engaging with their peers. Children learn to navigate interpersonal relationships from a young age; a lack of face-to-face interaction reduces children's ability to read faces, meaning they may struggle to understand and interpret non-verbal cues.

This can lead to [problems with regulating behaviour and emotions](#), including a decreased level of empathy, as well as increased levels of frustration – contributing to arrested social development.

As Michelle says, the developmental impact of too much screen time can 'hinder opportunities for understanding and conceptualising as adults,' making it more difficult to form meaningful relationships as children mature.

Too Much Screen Time Symptoms

There are some physical indicators that may indicate your child or young person has been spending too much time in front of a screen.

Symptoms of too much screen time include:

- Headache
- Sore or dry eyes
- Light sensitivity
- Blurry vision
- Decreased cognitive function
- Mood swings
- Weight gain
- Overstimulation

In particular, overstimulation is one of the [most common indicators of too much screen time](#). If your child is exhibiting aggression, unusual crying bouts, irritability, meltdowns or oppositional behaviour that all seem out of character – it's possible that they're overstimulated.

If you notice your young person displaying some of these symptoms, it might be time to think about their screen exposure.

Managing Screen Time

It can be difficult to set boundaries when it comes to electronics, as so much of our lives involve the use of them, and many parents and caregivers [report feeling distressed or worried](#) when it came to reducing screen time.

As Michelle explains, 'focusing too much on one thing has a restricting capacity when it comes to child development.' A broad range of experiences are essential for healthy brain development, which is why it's important to find balance.

Some basic guidelines when it comes to managing screen time include:

No screens during mealtimes

Screens can make children less mindful or conscious of eating, which might lead to a range of food-related challenges such as disordered eating, bingeing [or even obesity](#).

No screens in the bedroom

Preventing screens from being used in the bedroom will help to eliminate some of the sleep problems associated with screen usage, as well as ensuring that screen usage can be monitored.

Make use of parental controls

Many screen devices come with that allow you to [limit your child's usage](#) and the kind of content they can access online.

Communicate openly

Be open and transparent about your expectations when it comes to technology usage. Set some clear boundaries and explain the reasons behind them. Consistency is also key when establishing a routine for screen usage.

Provide alternative activities

Try to organise some other exciting [activities to keep your child entertained](#) – like crafts, painting, or scavenger hunts – that encourage them to engage with something other than screens.

Remember, not all screen usage is bad. There are many benefits to screen usage when it comes to parenting – such as educational content that helps children learn and grow, or social sites that keep them connected with their friends.

The important thing is to find balance. Part of this involves understanding the screen time recommendations for your child's age and finding an agreement that works for both you and your child.

Further Resources

Looking for more information on how to promote healthy development in your child and keep them safe using screens? Take a look at our list of resources below!

- [How Does Social Media Affect Teenagers, and is it Positive?](#)
- [How to Encourage Your Child to Read for Pleasure](#)
- [5 Reasons Why Your Child Won't Sleep At Night](#)

At Compass, we work hard to provide our children and young people with everything they need for healthy, positive upbringing.

Our foster carers benefit from an extensive array of training, including how to promote child development and safeguard them online. [Get in touch](#) with us if you'd like to find out more about fostering with Compass.