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# Guidance on Screen Use in Children



MINISTRY OF HEALTH  
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# Summary Guidance for Parents

The use of screens and devices can bring potential benefits and harm to children. **Parents and caregivers should follow these steps to reduce the potential harm of screen use to children.**

Children under 18 months old are growing quickly. Playing, reading and interacting with caregivers are important activities that support their brain development. **Use of screens at this age takes time away from these important activities**, and can affect the children's brain development, language skills and attention span.

Your child should not be given any screen time, unless for video chatting. During video chats, parents may want to explain who is on the screen, repeat what the person is saying, describe what is happening. In addition, TV should not be turned on in the background as it causes distractions, affects your child's attention and reduces the quality of interaction your child can have with others.



## **Under 18 months old:**

- ! No screen use (unless for interactive video chatting).
- ! Do not turn on the TV in the background.

Children between 18 months and 6 years old can benefit from screen use when family members watch educational and age-appropriate content together and talk about the content. However, limit screen use to less than 1 hour a day so that there is sufficient time for other important activities that your child needs, such as sleep, play and interaction with family and friends. **Children who spend excessive time on screens may experience difficulties in attention, learning and problem-solving.** Screens should not be used just to occupy your children or to distract them. Let your child develop the habit of finding other ways to engage themselves.

**Screen use distracts your child during feeding and is not recommended as it deprives your child the opportunity to learn how to regulate food intake, develop healthy food exploration and self-feeding skills, and may increase the risk of overeating as they grow.** Use mealtimes to interact and bond with your child instead.



### **18 months to 6 years old:**

- ✓ Less than 1 hour of screen use a day outside school.
  - ! Do not use screens just to occupy or distract your child.
  - ! Do not use screens during meals and one hour before bedtime.
  
- ✓ When using screens:
  - ✓ Choose educational and age-appropriate content.
  - ✓ Watch content together and discuss the content with your child.
  
- ! Do not turn on the TV in the background.

Children between 7 and 12 years old should limit screen use to less than 2 hours a day unless it is related to schoolwork, so that there is **sufficient time for other important activities that your child needs to be healthy**, such as sleep, exercise and face-to-face interaction with friends and family.

**As children learn from what they watch, the quality of the content they are watching is important.** Make sure that your child is watching content that is appropriate for their age. Check content ratings if available. Talk to your child and engage them about the content. Safeguard your child from harmful influences and offer advice regularly.

**There is emerging evidence that the content on social media may negatively affect children's self-identity and socio-emotional well-being.** Social media services often have features that allow users to join group chats and calls, interact through likes and comments, browse and share posts or media, and follow or subscribe to channels or individuals. Major social media services require users to be at least 13 years old. Parents should not give their children access to social media services if they are below 13 years old.

**Mobile devices such as smartphones, tablets and laptops may allow children to consume digital content excessively and expose them to inappropriate online content.** Many applications and content are designed to be engaging and may encourage prolonged use. If your child needs to carry a mobile device, parents should review and ensure parental control settings are in place. Mobile devices with limited functionality and limited access to online content should be considered as an alternative.

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**It is possible that some children could become dependent on their devices**, resulting in behaviours such as neglecting school responsibilities, displaying abnormal levels of irritability and restlessness when not on the device, among others. Parents should be aware of common symptoms and take action early (more info on page 12).



**7 to 12 years old:**

- ✓ Less than 2 hours of screen use a day, unless related to schoolwork.
  - ✓ Agree on a screen use plan or timetable.
  - ! Do not use screens during meals and one hour before bedtime.
  
- ✓ When using screens:
  - ✓ Use parental control settings and check content ratings to ensure content is age appropriate.
  - ✓ Talk to your child often on what they are viewing online. Offer advice regularly.
  - ! You should not give your child access to social media services.
  - ! Do not give your child mobile devices with unrestricted access to internet and applications.
  
- ✓ If you have concerns that your child has problems with screen use
  - ✓ Speak to your child, develop and agree on a realistic screen use timetable to balance their screen use with other activities.
  - ✓ Seek help from the school, community partners or professionals, if the problem persists.



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## Overview

This advisory provides practical suggestions to families with children aged 0-12 years old on how to organise and manage their children's screen use. Guidance for different age groups is also provided to highlight key points that families should be aware of. A handy infographic for parents can be found at <https://go.gov.sg/screenadvisory-infographic>.

Organisations and healthcare professionals working with children could work with parents to develop the healthy screen use practices recommended in this advisory. This advisory is not meant to be used by organisations to set strict screen use limits or guidelines.

## Summary of Evidence Findings

The availability of screen devices and their uses have rapidly expanded over recent years. Examples of screen devices include smartphones, tablets, laptops, and televisions. Children use screens now more than ever. As children age, they increase the time that they spend on screens especially after having their own digital devices.

Children can benefit from screen use, such as when family members co-view content together and talk about what they are watching. Educational screen use among children could lead to academic gains and cognitive development if used appropriately and at the right age. Older children can also benefit from screen use by maintaining and developing friendships online, as well as engaging with educational games and resources.

There are potential downsides to screen use, particularly in children under 36 months, as it is a sensitive period of brain development. Children under the age of 18 months have difficulty absorbing information from two-dimensional screens. Excessive screen use is associated with poorer language skills and shorter attention spans in infants and toddlers. Despite limited evidence to date, there appears to be some associations between screen use and insufficient good-quality sleep, sedentary behaviours, increased obesity, poorer cognitive outcomes, and poorer mental health and well-being. These potential negative consequences are linked to the degree which screen use displaces other activities, like sleeping, playing and interacting with friends or being physically active. Longer periods of smartphone usage may increase the likelihood of ocular symptoms, including myopia,

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eye strain, and dry eye, especially in children. Screen time exposure is also associated with the development of myopia (short-sightedness) in children and adolescents. There is also emerging evidence that social media use can be associated with depressive and disordered eating symptoms, body dissatisfaction and anxiety in adolescents aged 10-19. A local study\* found that approximately one in four youths (27%) aged 15-35 years spent more than 3 hours daily on social media, and were 1.5 and 1.3 times more likely to report severe or extremely severe symptoms of depression and anxiety, respectively. One in five youths (21%) experienced cyberbullying, and were twice as likely to report severe to extremely severe symptoms of depression, anxiety, or stress compared with those who had not experienced cyberbullying. Those who had moderate to severe body image concerns were also more likely to have been cyberbullied than those without such body image concerns.

*\*National Youth Mental Health Study (NYMHS) 2024 conducted by Institute of Mental Health (IMH).*

At the moment, there is limited evidence of what constitutes a safe time limit for screen use. Instead, parental supervision and collaboration with children to adopt healthy screen habits helps to prevent uncontrolled, excessive and unhealthy screen practices. Details of the evidence review can be found in the Annex – Evidence Review of Screen Use in Childhood [June 2022 and July 2024].

***It is increasingly important to ensure that families adopt healthy screen use habits among children.***

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The screen use expert subgroup, comprising paediatricians, academics, and representatives from the Institute of Mental Health (IMH), Ministry of Health, Ministry of Education and TOUCH Community Services, formulated the following advisory based on subgroup discussions and their interpretation of the evidence.

The subgroup has taken a prudent approach in suggesting time limits for children. This guidance provides practical suggestions on how families should organise and manage their children's screen use.

Overall, the key is to minimise unhealthy screen practices and promote healthy screen use — maximising the opportunities that screen use can provide.

## Overall Guidance to Develop Healthy Screen Use in Children

- **Families should manage screen use based on the needs of an individual child.** Screen use may displace physical activities, in-person social interactions and sleep. Have a plan that balances screen use with other activities and stick to it.
- **Parents are encouraged to be present and engaged when children are using devices.** Try to have open and continual conversations with children to find out what they are doing online and provide timely advice when necessary.
- **Parents should role-model positive screen-use behaviours and habits** for their children and encourage a balance between screen use and other activities. Parents should be mindful of their own device use, and whether it interrupts interactions with their children.
- **Parents should encourage healthy screen use among their children.**

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Healthy screen use means choosing appropriate and safe screen content, engaging in active screen use, and co-viewing media with an adult...

- ✓ **Active Screen Use** involves cognitively or physically engaging in screen-based activities, such as completing homework on a computer, following an exercise or art/craft programme online, playing video games or using screens to socially connect through video chatting.
- ✓ **Co-viewing media with an adult** refers to an adult watching TV or video programmes on screens with children, and at the same time discussing with their children about what they are viewing, keeping them actively engaged.

Minimise background screen use and passive screen use...

- ✗ **Background Screen Use** is having television or devices turned on in the background even when a child is not watching them. Background screen use could lead to a decrease in high-quality interpersonal communication and shortened attention span.
- ✗ **Passive Screen Use** involves sedentary viewing and receiving information through screens without the need for interaction and thinking, often without co-viewing with an adult. Evidence shows that excessive passive screen use may hinder development of the ability to make decisions, direct attention, and interact socially.

Moderate recreational screen use

- **Recreational Screen Use** is time spent on screen behaviours that are not related to school or work. This can involve watching movies or TV, and playing video games or electronic gaming. Recreational screen time can be active, or passive. Using screens for recreational purposes can have benefits, if healthy screen practices are adopted. Recreational screen time requires a balance with other meaningful activities for the child.



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# Screen Use Guidance by Age Groups

## Guidance for children under 18 months

- ! **No screen use** unless it is for interactive video chatting.
- ! **No background screen use.**

## Guidance for children between 18 months and 6 years old

- ✓ **Limit screen use to less than 1 hour a day outside school.** Passive screen use is not recommended, to be balanced with active, interactive and educational screen use.
- ✓ **Co-view media with children where possible.** Speak and discuss with them about what they are viewing to keep them actively engaged.
- ! **Do not use screens just to occupy or distract your child.**
- ✓ **Carefully choose educational content for children and ensure that the content is age-appropriate.** This includes materials that are developmentally appropriate for children based on their age, level of maturity, social-emotional / behavioural capacities. Avoid harmful content such as those that contain references to violence, sexual behaviour, suicide, self-harm, or cyberbullying. Check content ratings if available.
- ! **No background screen use.**
- ! **Do not use screens during meals and one hour before bedtime.**

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## Guidance for children 7 to 12 years old

- ✓ **Limit screen use to less than 2 hours a day, unless related to schoolwork.** Moderate the time spent on passive recreational screen use, if necessary.
- ✓ **Develop a collaborative screen use plan or timetable** for the family to help achieve an appropriate balance between screen use and other age-appropriate activities, such as family bonding, interaction with peers, homework and exercise.
- ✓ **Be familiar with how to safeguard children from possible harmful online influences.**
  - ✓ **Have regular conversations with children** to find out what they are doing online. Educate children about potential online risks, including inappropriate content, cyberbullying, and speaking to strangers online. Provide timely advice when necessary.
  - ! **Do not give your child mobile devices with unrestricted access to the internet and applications.**
  - ✓ **Use parental control settings** to monitor and ensure children access age-appropriate content and applications. This includes materials that are developmentally appropriate for children based on their age, level of maturity, social-emotional / behavioural capacities. Avoid harmful content that contain references to violence, sexual behaviour, suicide, self-harm or cyberbullying. Check content ratings if available.
  - ! **Parents should not give your child access to social media services.** Major social media services require users to be at least 13 years old.
  - ! **Do not use screens during meals and one hour before bedtime.**
- ✓ **Take appropriate steps** if you have concerns that your child has difficulty regulating his or her screen use. – see page 12 for more information

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# Useful Links and Resources

## Annex - Evidence Review of Screen Use in Childhood

<https://go.gov.sg/moh-screenadvisory>

### Additional Parenting Resources

Check out Parent Hub (<https://go.gov.sg/parenthub>) to learn how to guide your child on cultivating healthy screen use through balancing it with other activities, role modelling and collaborative efforts.

0-2 years: <https://go.gov.sg/screentimeadvisory-0to2>

3-6 years: <https://go.gov.sg/screentimeadvisory-3to6>

7-12 years: <https://go.gov.sg/screentimeadvisory-7to12>

Use a family Screen Use Agreement to set rules and better manage your child's screen use. This helps achieve an appropriate balance between screen use and other activities, support open communications and implementation of rules on screen use within the family.

<https://go.gov.sg/screen-use-agreement>

Find out more on screen use, cyberwellness and other useful evidence-based parenting resources for kids 0-12 years.

<https://www.familiesforlife.sg/Parenting>

Find out more about strategies to guide children's digital journey, protect them from inappropriate content online and how to start a conversation with them on screen use.

<https://www.digitalforlife.gov.sg/home/learn/resources/all-resources/raising-children-in-the-digital-age>

Explore how to be good role models for your children and help them discover ways that will keep them healthy and safe in the digital world.

<https://go.gov.sg/moe-raising-a-digitally-smart-child>

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## Difficulty Regulating Screen Use – What Should Parents Do?

While spending an excessive amount of time on devices is unhealthy, this behaviour does not necessarily mean the child is addicted to device usage. There is currently no established way to diagnose whether a child is addicted to devices.

However, it is possible that a child could become dependent on their devices and present with signs that they have difficulty regulating screen use. Common signs<sup>1</sup> include

- Increasing screen time or use of devices to the extent that normal activities like school and home responsibilities are neglected;
- Constantly thinking about using devices or getting more screen time;
- Unable to reduce the use of devices;
- Unwillingness to share the device, or to return it to parents when asked;
- Telling lies about what he or she has been doing on the device, or telling lies to get more screen time;
- Having poor sleep quality and quantity;
- Displaying anti-social responses or behaviours to get more screen time;
- Having poor emotional regulation such as anger and depressive symptoms; and
- Throwing extreme tantrums when the device is taken away (i.e. displaying abnormal levels of irritability and restlessness when not on the device).

If parents notice any of the behaviours above, they are encouraged to discuss with their child on their screen use habits, and develop a realistic screen use timetable to balance their device use with other activities that the child agrees to adhere to. Review the plan regularly.

If there is no improvement and their behaviour continues to cause impairment in the child's life, the child/parent may want to seek help from the school or other community partners. Severe cases may require professional intervention and counselling.

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<sup>1</sup> The common signs indicated are adapted from the 11<sup>th</sup> Revision of the International Classification of Diseases (ICD-11), diagnostic criteria of 6C51 Gaming disorder, and Game Addiction Scale for Adolescents.

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If there is marked deterioration and significant impairment to the child's life, the child/parent should consider seeking professional help. The professionals could assess the severity of the problem and recommend appropriate interventions.

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