

Screen time Guidelines

(for parents of children
aged 0-8 years)



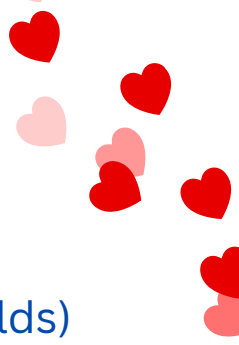
The following guidelines are based on those published by research and childhood wellbeing organisations such as: *Sydney Children's Hospitals Network; Australian Institute of Family Studies; The Raising Children Network, and The Anxious Generation Movement, amongst others.*

Exposure recommendations (for 0-8 year olds)

- **Ages 0 – 2:** No screen time (except video chatting with family);
- **Ages 2 – 5:** A maximum of 1 hour of (high-quality*) screen time per day (preferably involving co-viewing with an adult or caregiver on a large screen in a common living area);
- **Ages 5 – 8+:** A maximum of 2 hours of (high-quality*) screen time per day (including the 'extra' time it often takes for children to *actually* get off, but excluding school homework time).

* **'High-quality' screen content** for children is educational, creative, non-addictive, and viewed in a way that encourages, rather than replaces, active, social interactions. It often involves characters within a 'story' which has a narrative 'arc' (i.e. a beginning, middle and end), or it can be specialised learning apps or apps that promote certain skills and traits like creativity and kindness. [Examples of high-quality shows and apps include *Bluey, Monument Valley, Toca Boca, and Octonauts.*]

'Low-quality' screen content tends to involve high-dopamine, addictive, and rapid-fire reward-based content that has no clear beginning or end. Low-quality engagement style involves 'mindless' viewing or scrolling, particularly on social media platforms or platforms that have 'autoplay' features (e.g. YouTube). Content and viewing styles that place minimal cognitive demands on the viewer are often called 'passive' viewing. Some children's shows are also regarded as 'low-quality' as their characters model poor behaviour (e.g. brattish, entitled etc). [Examples of low-quality shows and apps include *CoComelon, Caillou, Peppa Pig and Roblox.*]



Usage recommendations (for 0-8 year olds)

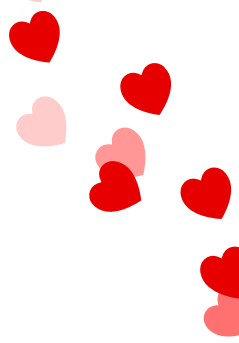
Shape your home environment:

- Minimise or eliminate visual cues and reminders of screens in your home (e.g. put phones and iPads away in cupboards, close laptops and cover with a book when not using, conceal TV screens or cover with a cloth/sarong);
- Avoid allowing screens of any kind in bedrooms (in early childhood and throughout childhood);
- Try to have a designated place where your child has screen time, preferably not the same place where they play with toys or read books as this can create an environmental ‘reminder’ of their screen time;

Create predictable routines around screen use:

- Avoid allowing screens at ‘random’ times, as this increases your child’s craving for it (- this is because when screen time is given randomly, children never know when that moment might arise,... *and it could be right now!* so they can develop a sort of background sense of anticipation that’s present throughout the day);
- Instead, have a designated time when your child knows they’ll be allowed screens (you can include them in deciding when this will be but then stick to that time);
- Even when your child is young you can point to a clock to remind them of the schedule - *‘Remember that when that long hand reaches the...’* etc. This also conveys the idea that the decision is not yours but the clock’s!
- Avoid your child being on a screen of any kind during the hour before bedtime;





Set clear limits and boundaries:

- Install parental controls on all devices (limiting the types of content your child can access);
- Avoid framing screen time as a 'reward', as this heightens its value unnecessarily;
- Don't give in to your child's nagging for screen time... NOT EVEN ONCE! (or they will nag forever thereafter because they'll be thinking ... *if it worked once it could work again!*)
- Although if you do decide to 'give in', make it clear you're allowing screen time for some other reason, e.g. *"Now, because it's 5 o'clock and we'll be eating dinner in half an hour, you can have 30 minutes of screens before helping me set the table"*. By doing this you will reduce the chances your child will think their nagging was successful.

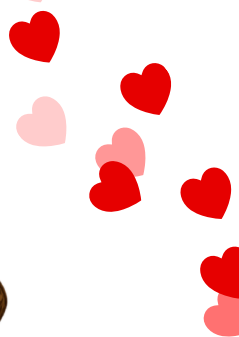
Support smooth transitions on and off screens:

- Before they start, clearly state the endpoint, *"You can play until bath time"*;
- Before they start, help them visualise what comes next, *"After this we're walking the dog!"*;
- Give reminders when screen time is coming to an end, *"Now in 5 minutes we're switching off so you need to start winding down what you're doing..."*
- Insist that they reply *"Ok Daddy/Ok Mummy"* so you have their implicit agreement about the finish time (this little trick is more powerful than you would think it is);
- When finishing, gently but firmly insist time is up and help them shift their attention by drawing their gaze to something else: the clock, the dog, snacks waiting on the table etc.
- At finish time, you can also soften the transition by briefly showing interest in what they've been doing, then offer to help them switch the device off or ask them to demonstrate how competent they are to do that themselves;

Be intentional about your own use:

- Model healthy screen use yourself (e.g. put your phone away at mealtimes, turn your notifications off, designate device-free family times);
- Help your child develop some self-awareness by having regular family conversations about screen use and how it's often paired with certain behaviours;
- Model self-awareness by, for instance, reflecting (admitting!) that when you're on your phone, you sometimes don't notice that your child is trying to get your attention, and that you don't like it when that happens.





Increase the value of non-screen time:

- Limiting screen time is one thing (and it can be hard, painful work), but increasing the value of everything else in your child's life can be an easier and more effective way of helping your child appreciate that *the real world* is as rewarding (in fact much more so!) than the digital world;
- What they want most in the world is your full, loving attention, so spend at least 30 minutes each day genuinely *connecting* with your child, making them feel *seen* and *known* by you (try plonking them on your lap facing you, and start chatting ... They might be fidgety to start with, but if you can be fully present, they'll soon 'dial in' and connect).



- Ensure your child engages in at least 60 minutes of moderate to vigorous exercise every day;
- Facilitate plenty of in-person opportunities for your child to interact with friends and family;

- Provide opportunities to engage in *real* (rather than pretend) family tasks every day, (e.g. setting the table, folding washing, feeding pets) and frame these as their 'contributions' to family life and the needs of others, so that your child feels valued in your home;



Screen time alternatives:

- Listening to audiobooks & kids' podcasts;
- Drawing, colouring, crafts;
- Building with blocks, Lego or tiles;
- Playing pretend (dress-ups, dolls, cars);
- Puzzles or simple problem-solving toys;
- Sensory play (with playdough, water, sand);
- Looking through books independently;
- Outdoor play (running, climbing, exploring)

For more evidence-informed parenting guidance, visit our website
www.happyheartsparenting.org

Please Note: I am not a licensed therapist or mental health professional. The guidelines shared here are based on my review of existing recommendations concerning screen time usage in childhood, and are not intended to be a substitute for professional mental health services, therapy, or clinical advice. Jess Kingsford (Ph.D)