

Screen Time Guidelines*



(for parents of children aged 0-8 yrs)

You're here!



You obviously already recognise that something isn't quite right about the role screens are playing in childhood today, and that's a crucial first step, so... **congratulations!**

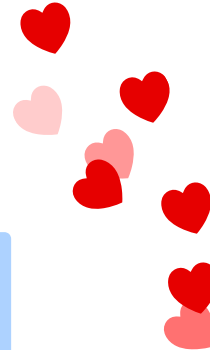
A growing body of research shows that a screen-based childhood can impact kid's development in multiple ways, including their attention, emotional regulation, sleep, mental health, social skills, and overall wellbeing.

For **young children in particular**, the early years are an important time for building real-world connection, relating and self-regulation. And yet the research is telling us that **these skills don't develop well in screen-dominant environments.**

But the picture isn't black and white. Not all screen use is harmful, and not all 'screens' are equal. **What matters is how, when, and how much** kids engage with screens.

This guide will clarify that nuance, and give you **practical, everyday ways** to set healthy limits around screen use without resorting to conflict, bribery, or constant negotiation.

* These guidelines are drawn from 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

Quantity



Ages 0 – 2: No screen time at all (except video calls 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);



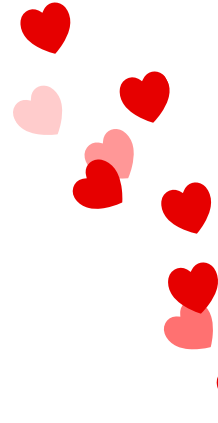
Ages 5 – 8+: A maximum of 2 hours of ('high-quality') screen time per day (this includes the 'extra' time it can take for children to *actually* get off, but excludes school homework time).

Quality

'High-quality' screen content 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*.]

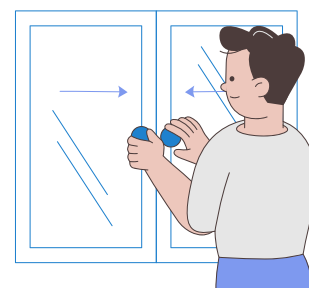
Note: Public health officials generally agree with Australian government laws around restricting **social media** account ownership for under 16s.



Usage Recommendations

Shape your home environment:

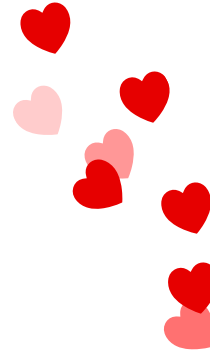
- Minimise or eliminate visual cues and reminders of screens in your home (e.g. put phones and iPads away in cupboards, close laptops and cover with a book when not using, conceal TV screens or cover with a cloth/sarong);
- Avoid allowing screens of any kind in bedrooms (in early childhood and throughout 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:

- 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 think ... *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.

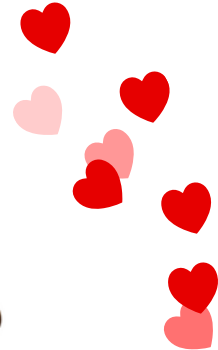
Support smooth transitions on and off screens:

- 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 in doing that themselves;

Be intentional about your own usage:

- Model healthy screen use yourself (e.g. put your phone out of sight at mealtimes, turn your notifications off, and 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 (not so great) 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 that about your behaviour.





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