

Managing screen time for the family

There was a time, not that long ago, that screen time for children meant time spent in front of the TV or desktop computer. It was easy for parents to monitor just how long children spent in front of screens, because they had to be in a specific location for screen use.

Today, however, screens are everywhere. A child can watch TV on even the shortest car trip, and play a game on a cell phone as she rides in the cart during a shopping trip. A phone or tablet can be used as a way to entertain, calm, distract or pass the time.

In addition to this increased accessibility, more and more apps are being created and marketed as educational tools for preschoolers. It can be hard for parents to know how much is too much.

The Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS), recommends that children under 2 should

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have no exposure to screens, and that children between 2-5 years old should have a limit of no more than one hour per day.

Experts are particularly concerned about this early age group for several reasons.

Overuse of screens can have a negative effect on language development. Children need

to hear and practice language in a back and forth manner while engaged in play or other activities with their parents. While educational apps may ask questions and reward correct answers, the opportunity to practice language in a natural setting is lost.

When very young children become accustomed to prolonged routine screen use, it becomes habit forming and can replace other more positive habits like being physically active.

The parent-child bond that develops in the early years is the foundation for this relationship in the future. Screen time can often replace time that would otherwise be spent involving children in day to day routine activities.

If your child is already using screens, cutting back may be difficult. You can begin by becoming more aware of

when and how you rely on screens.

Watch or play with your child. Take time to relate what is on the screen to the child's own life experiences.

Use screens sparingly as a distraction. There is no denying that screens are effective in keeping children busy, but as time goes on it can become harder for children to find other ways to cope with down time.

Set limits on screen use and follow them. Using a timer can be helpful as it is easy to

lose track of time. You might want to choose a specific time of day for screen use so that it can be part of the regular routine rather than a filler at any time.

It is important to set good habits in the early years, but it is equally if not more important to continue to be aware of screen use as children get older.

As children grow, help them find a healthy balance. School work, extra-curricular activities, and time spent with family and friends should not

be affected by screen time.

Try not to use screen time as a reward.

Set limits on screen use with house rules to be followed by all family members. For example; no screens during meals or family time.

Give everyone a chance to unwind and have a good night's sleep by shutting off all screens at least an hour before going to bed.

Be aware of your own screen use and set a healthy example for your children

