

Safe use of technology

For children today, TVs, computers, gaming devices, mobile phones and tablets are part of everyday life. Screen technology is a big part of how they learn, socialise and have fun.

There are health risks for children when they spend excessive amounts of time in front of screens, or use devices inappropriately. Parents can help children stay safe and healthy as they get the most from these technologies. It is important that children develop healthy screen habits early, and have a balance of activities in their life.

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Children and screens

Screens of all types and sizes have become a part of life for many families. They provide quick access to information, entertainment and connection with family and friends.

Children's use of computers, gaming devices, tablets and mobile phones means they are spending more time in front of screens than ever before. The amount of time they watch TV has not reduced.

This extra screen time has come at the cost of other things which are important for children's healthy development. More time on screens means children are spending less time:

- being physically active which helps maintain a healthy weight and build a strong healthy body
- in free play where they use their imagination to learn about the world

- interacting with others which helps build social skills.

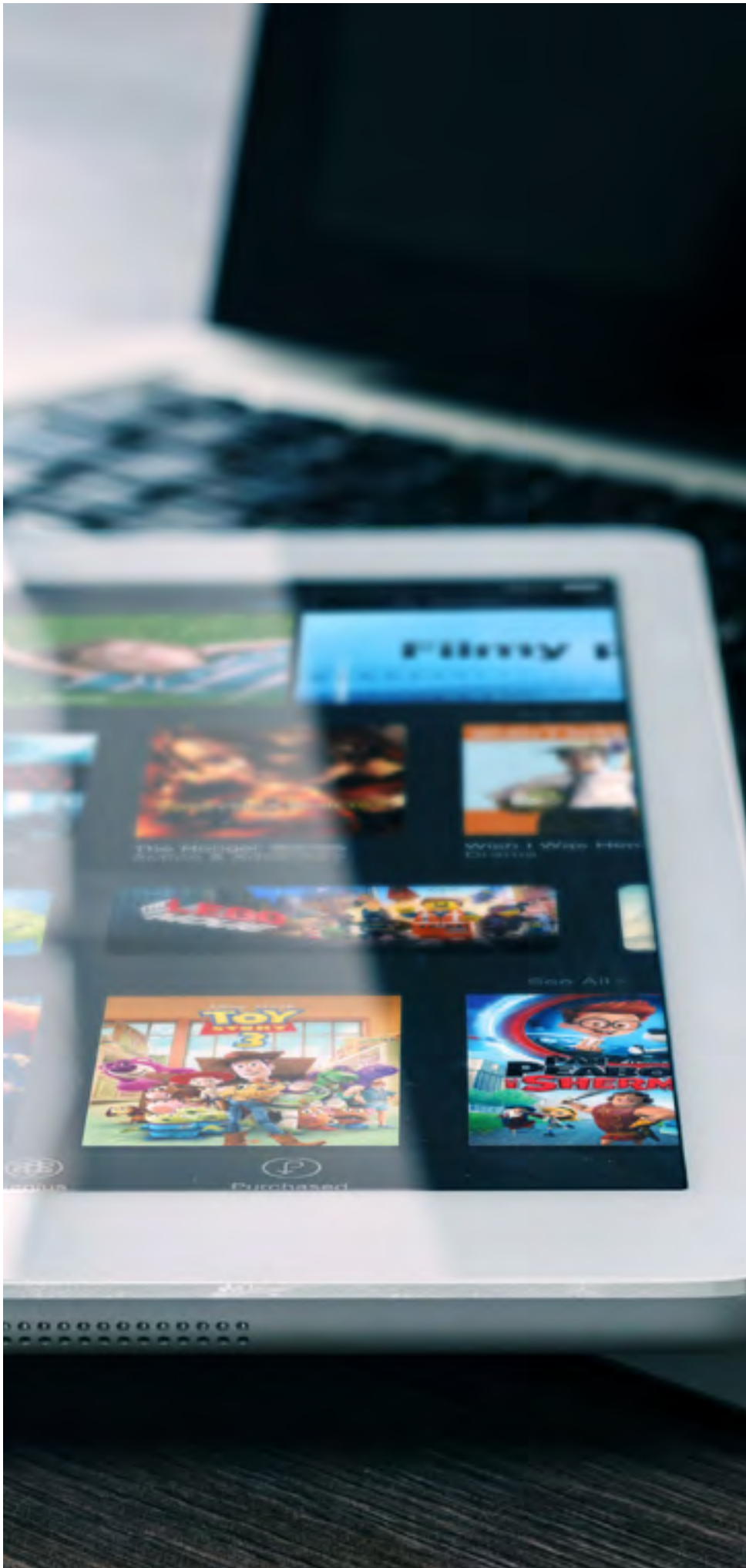
For parents struggling to fit in the demands of work and family, screens can be an easy and affordable way to keep children occupied. It is important however to remember that families are a major influence on how children use their time. The habits children learn early in life are likely to continue into adulthood.

Help children learn that free time doesn't always mean screen time. Having lots of other activities they enjoy helps children have balance in their life and a range of skills and interests.



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Screen time

Too much screen time for children has been linked to:

Overweight and obesity

Screen time encourages children to sit or lie down for long periods. This increases their risk of overweight and obesity. Sitting still for long periods also increases their risk of cardiovascular disease and diabetes. It is important to break up long periods of sitting by getting up and moving around. If the screen is a TV, children are exposed to more advertising, especially for energy-dense foods. Children often consume more snack foods or sugary drinks when watching TV. The risk for overweight and obesity is increased if the TV is in their bedroom.

Sleep problems

A 2013 study in South Australia showed that more than 70% of young people don't get enough sleep on school nights due to overuse of electronic media. Use is even higher on weekends. Going to bed later, taking longer to go into a deep sleep, and sleep being interrupted by devices are all part of the problem. This can have a big impact on physical and mental health, eating habits and children's learning at school.

Behaviour and attention problems

Research shows that for every hour of TV children watch each day, their risk of developing attention-related problems increases by 10%.

Accepting violence as a normal way to solve problems

Children can become desensitised to violence if they see it often.

Recommended screen times

Recommendations¹ for children's daily use of all screens, including TVs, computers, tablets, phone screens and games are:

No screen time for children under 2 years

This is an important time for children's brain growth. Interactive play and connection with other children and adults is the best way for them to learn language skills, to learn to think creatively and problem-solve, and develop fine motor skills. Passive media viewing may keep toddlers entertained but it doesn't teach these important skills.

One hour maximum for children under 5 years

Programs and games should be selected and monitored by parents and not include violence.

Two hours maximum of recreational screen time for children 5–18 years

This is in addition to screen use for school.

Tips for reducing screen time

It is likely that many children spend more time in front of screens than parents realise, especially with so many new screens that entertain. It might seem like a big task to reduce the amount of time children spend in front of screens, but every small step is a move in the right direction. Fifteen minutes less screen time a day can soon get you to your goal.

It helps to involve your children in planning how to reduce viewing time. Finding fun ways that make it easier for them to cut back will also help.

Your plan for reducing screen time could include:

- noting how much time each child currently spends on all screens every day
- talking with them about why it is important to limit screen time and how it will benefit them and the whole family
- involving them in setting goals to bring all screen time within the recommended amounts for their age
- using TV guides to plan what they want to watch and turning the TV off after the agreed program
- recording programs that run over their time limit — they can watch these at another time and fast-forward advertisements to reduce viewing time. If their favourite program comes on during daylight hours, recording it means they can be active outdoors while the program is on and watch it later
- not having the TV running in the background — only switch it on when it is an agreed viewing time
- not having the TV or other screens on while getting ready for school, during mealtimes and while homework is being done. Turning off one hour before bed allows children to wind down before sleep
- not having TVs in bedrooms, and keeping screen devices out of bedrooms after lights out
- making a list with your child of other fun activities they can do, including family activities. Help them develop new interests. Encourage a physical or creative activity when they say 'I'm bored'. If they are used to watching TV while you prepare dinner, they might want to help with the meal instead
- acknowledging success as children take steps toward forming new screen time habits.

It is also important to be a good role model and look at ways you can reduce your own screen time. Children are less likely to resist making changes if they see you doing it too.

It can take time to change habits. You may need to supervise time limits until children get used to the changes — they can be very focused on what they are doing. Expect resistance but be consistent and stick to the agreed plan.

¹ *Australia's Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines*, Australian Government

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Risk of injury

Children are at risk of injury when they use technology frequently, including:

- neck problems from leaning forward to view screens, rounded shoulders from slouching, or hip problems from sitting at an angle
- muscle soreness, headache, back pain or fatigue
- repetitive strain injury (RSI) resulting from repeating the same movements over and over. Keyboard and mouse use are a common cause of RSI which can be very painful and take some time to heal.

Injuries to children can be more serious and difficult to treat than injuries to adults.

The good news is that children who are active and fit and involved in whole-body activities every day are less likely to be injured when using technology.

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Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

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Computers

Help prevent injury by making sure children:

- have short rather than long computer sessions, take regular breaks and stretch, including hands, wrists and arms. Stop computer use if it hurts
- don't bang the keys hard. It is best to type with both hands, and learning to touch type is even better
- use a proper computer desk with a drop-down keyboard to reduce strain on the arms and shoulders. Adjust chair height so their forearms and thighs are parallel to the floor. Use a stool to support your child's feet if needed. Ensure hands and wrists are level over the keyboard. Make sure upper arms are vertical and their head and hips are facing in the same direction. Adjust the screen so they are looking straight at it, or slightly downwards. Make sure their chin is tucked in and not pushing forward.

If your child is using a laptop or notepad computer for longer periods, a separate keyboard can help prevent wrist and arm problems.

Mobile phones

Injuries can be caused by holding phones between the neck and shoulder. Using the same fingers, especially thumbs, all the time when texting or swiping a touch screen can cause injury.

It is very important that young people don't use a mobile phone when driving a car or walking where there is traffic. Accidents related to mobile phone use are increasing.

Gaming devices

There is a risk of physical injury with frequent gaming, in particular to the hands and wrists, neck and back. Games which involve lots of fast or repetitive hand movement, or game controllers which involve over-extending or over-use of the thumbs or any other body part may increase your child's risk of RSI.

Children may also develop eye strain, dizziness or even nausea from constantly focusing on a screen.

It can help to:

- make sure children warm up and stretch when playing interactive games with lots of physical movement. It is important they don't play for long periods without a break
- limit the amount of time spent playing games, and also when children play. Some multiplayer online games happen in different time zones which can mean young people are gaming when they should be sleeping
- watch out for signs of injury as children may be reluctant to tell you in case you limit their game use.



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