Screen Addiction In Children | How Much Device Time Is Too Much?

Screen addiction in children is a growing epidemic. A growing number of parents are using devices in order to calm and entertain their young children, yet are perhaps unaware of the potential harm that excessive screen time can have on a developing brain.

While children who consume a lot of electronic media tend to develop multitasking capabilities, they can run the risk of losing their ability to focus. Concentration is a critical component in problem-solving and learning, and an inability to focus for prolonged periods of time can be hugely detrimental to a child's academic performance and overall cognitive development (1).

During early childhood, children need to learn about the world through interacting with it. As they grow older, digital devices can act as beneficial learning resources, but the key is to strike a balance between on-and-offline learning and recreational activities. Furthermore, parents need to be committed to monitoring their children's online activities; not only because the Internet can expose them to a range of different risks, but also to ensure that they're spending their time on high-quality programs and apps.

On face value, this may all seem relatively straightforward, but it can actually be very difficult for parents to navigate. We all want what is best for our children, but it can be hard to know what is best when all of the available advice and content is contradictory.

To help parents to feel educated and empowered about how to prevent screen addiction in children, we've consolidated research from a range of reputable sources. This article seeks to answer the questions that every modern parent has been forced to ask, such as: how young is too young? And how much is too much?

Preventing Screen Addiction in Children | What A Healthy 24 Hours Looks Like

On its own, screen time is not inherently bad for young children. Due to scary headlines about Internet Gaming Disorder and smartphone addictions, parents tend to fear recreational screen time and view it as a bad habit. Yet playing on digital devices or gaming consoles is not inherently bad for young children to do, and it's often corresponding factors that cause harm.

Unhealthy childhood screen habits can have negative physical and psychological effects. Children who are more likely to be vulnerable to these effects include infants and toddlers, and children who do not get sufficient sleep or spend too much time being sedentary.

New Zealand's Government, Ministry of Education and Sport, and Ministry of Health worked together to issue a report (4) outlining what a healthy 24 hours looks like for school-aged children (5-17 years).

The report identified that, in the average day, growing children need:

- 9 to 11 hours of uninterrupted sleep for 5-to-13-year-olds, and 8 to 10 hours for those aged 14-to-17-years-old – ideally with a consistent sleep and wake time
- A total accumulation of at least 1 hour of physical activity (moderate to vigorous)
- Regular movement and extended periods of being upright instead of seated

So where does that leave us? Can we assume that, so long as children are getting enough sleep and exercise, it doesn't matter how much time they otherwise spend being glued to their devices?

The short answer is no. While research into screen addiction is still relatively new and far from definitive, it's universally recognised that doing any one thing in excess can have potentially negative consequences. This, of course, brings us back to the same question – how much device time is too much?
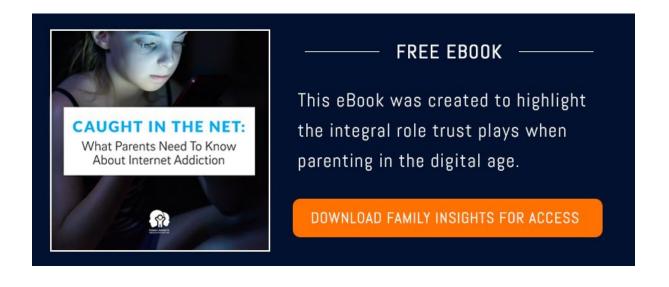
How Much Device Time Is Too Much?

In order to address the matter of how to ration screen time, parents need to be mindful of age. The point at which parents need to be most vigilant is early childhood, as this is a critical phase in development and learning. Then, as children grow older, screens become more commonplace in their day-to-day lives. To help parents to understand recommended age-based allocations, we've summarised the key research findings below:

0-4 years-old: There's a fairly unified belief amongst researchers and academics that children under 3 should have little to no interaction with electronic devices. The American Academy of Pediatrics strictly advise parents against allowing children younger than 18-months-old to use digital devices; with the exception of video-chatting with distant friends and family members (2). This is largely because "(young) children need interaction, not entertainment" (3).

They further advise parents of 18-to-24-month-olds that any introduction to digital media should be a collaborative parent-child exercise. Toddlers learn best when they play together with others, and parents should, therefore, avoid letting them use electronic devices by themselves.

Dr. Kimberly Young, founder of the Center for Internet Addiction, believes that infants under the age of 3 will suffer developmentally from any screen time at all (1). However, the AAP believes that, for children between 2-to-5-years-of-age, screen time is acceptable so long as it is accompanied by stringent time limits; "limit screen use to no more than 1 hour (per day) of high-quality programming" (2). Where possible, parents should co-view and co-play with their children, and ensure that all activities they participate have a learning component.

5-15 years-old: As children get older their device usage will be extended to include mandatory, school-related screen time. When it comes to 21st Century learning, it's difficult to avoid technology, and it's highly probable that your child will need to have access to a desktop computer and/or tablet in order to participate in their in-class activities and to complete their homework. Therefore, enforced screen-time allocations may need to be extended in order to include school work (although, digital devices are full of distractions, so it may be necessary to monitor their productivity).

Research indicates that parents should not allow their school-aged children more than 2 hours per day of recreational screen time. Unlike in toddlers and preschool-aged children, parents do not necessarily need to be directly involved in their school-aged-child's screen time activities, so long as they are aware of where they're spending their time and actively managing any risks that could arise.

While this may seem low for teenagers, when combined with screen time for academic purposes (which invariably increases with age) the total amount of time spent being sedentary behind a screen can add up drastically. Excessive screen time can negatively impact a young person's mental and physical well-being, especially when it encroaches on sleep time and physical activity.

16-18 years old: During adolescence, monitoring screen time can become problematic. Teenagers often start to spend more time away from home, and it's difficult to know what they're doing with their time.

Generally speaking, so long as your teenager is still getting sufficient sleep and spending some time each day being physically active, social, and mobile, then they're unlikely to experience any of the significant health issues associated with screen addiction. (After all, plenty of healthy adults will spend upwards of 8-hours-a-day behind a computer screen.) However, despite behind on the cusp of early adulthood, 16 to 18-year-olds do still require mentorship and support as they refine their own self-regulation skills. It's therefore worthwhile having regular

conversations with your teen about their media consumption and encouraging them to unplug for a period of time each day.

You may actually find that, for older teens, enforcing a daily minimum of mindful screen-free-time is easier and more effective than a screen-time maximum; and it could teach them healthy habits to take with them into adulthood.

6 Simple Steps To Minimise Screen Addiction In Children

Parents can help their children to develop a healthy relationship with technology by taking the following steps:

1. Remind your child that having a digital device is a privilege, not a right. If they act in a way that indicates they're not responsible enough to be entrusted with a device, it will be taken away.
2. Set aside some time each day for device-free family bonding. You may want to consider joining the Device Free Dinner challenge set by Common Sense Media which encourages all family members to unplug and interact over a meal.
3. Establish ground rules regarding which forms of technology your child is allowed to use, when and where it's appropriate, and how you will monitor usage.
4. When establishing technology rules, you should also agree on how to reward good behaviour, and how to penalise bad behaviour.
5. Model the behaviours that you want to see in your child.
6. Finally, support your child in achieving a healthy balance of screen time and real world time by encouraging them to participate in a regular physical activity, read books, and explore the contents of their imagination.

Today's children are growing up in a digital world and it is our duty as parents to ensure that technology plays a positive role in their lives – but this can be challenging for parents who didn't grow up as digital citizens themselves. The Wangle Family Insites parental control app locks to children's phones and helps

parents to understand device information such as most used apps, time spent gaming, on social media, or messaging, and even recent GPS locations. Not only does the app help parents to manage and prevent screen addiction in children, but it also sends detailed alerts when a threat is identified, along with qualified advice on how to respond.

References:

1. Dr. Kimberly Young, Center for Internet Addiction.

2. The American Academy of Pediatrics, Where we stand: Screen time

3. Cam Adair Escaping video game addiction.

4. New Zealand Government, Physical activity guidelines for children and young people.