



# 5 things to know about screen time and early childhood (and what you can do to support children's development and learning)



ECE resources

With the increasing presence of technology and screens in adults' lives, it is important to consider the effects of screen time on child development, particularly in the early years. Below are five key things to know about screen time for young children, together with evidence-based recommendations to support children's development in this age of screen time.

## 1. Screen time is linked to delays in developmental milestones.

Recent research demonstrates a direct association between the amount of screen time that children are exposed to at ages two and three and their development at three and five years, with greater screen time at two and three years of age associated with delays in meeting developmental milestones such as language development and the development of fine motor skills at three and five years of age.

### What you can do:

**Make sure children have time for unstructured play**, which is repeatedly shown to help children develop imagination, creativity, decision making, and problem solving. The importance of play is well recognised in the research community, as it contributes to the cognitive, physical, social, and emotional wellbeing of children throughout their development.

## 2. A majority of young children's screen time exceeds paediatric guidelines.

Paediatricians recommend no screen time before the age of two, and a maximum of one hour a day of high-quality programming from two years old. A recent report indicates that children aged 8 and younger spend an average of 2 hours and 19 minutes a day with screen media. <sup>1</sup>

### What you can do:

**Monitor your own screen time and lead by example.** Young children are like sponges, absorbing information and mimicking behaviour that they hear and see their parents and others doing around them. Therefore, it is important to limit your own media use, particularly when you are around children. This will make you more available to and connected with children as you are present to interact and bond with them.

## 3. The presence of technology has reduced children's sleep, as well as the amount of time adults spend reading to them.

Engagement with technology such as smartphones, tablets, and laptops has been found to reduce the amount of sleep that children are getting, as well as the amount of time parents and caregivers spend reading to young children, both of which are strong predictors of positive child outcomes. Devices create distractions for parents, particularly as they make them susceptible to work demands outside of the office. Parents may also choose to offer their children a device in lieu of reading to them.

### What you can do:

**Limit screen time before sleep.** Light-emitting devices disrupt circadian rhythms, causing difficulty sleeping. This is key for adults as well as young children! Websites like the American Academy of

Pediatrics' HealthyChildren.org/MediaUsePlan offer help in designing a media plan to suit the needs of individual families.

**Read to and actively engage with children.** Infants develop their emotional attachment style by experiencing the facial expressions of their parents and other significant caregivers. Reading together with children plays an important role in developing emotional bonds as well as encouraging language development and literacy.

#### 4. Screens are too often used as babysitters or pacifiers, inhibiting children's ability to learn to self-regulate.

Digital devices are often used as tools to placate children. However, this limits children's ability to learn how to be alone, to play independently, and to calm down. While digital devices can be effective in keeping children calm and quiet, it is important that children are taught how to identify and handle strong emotions, and to come up with activities to manage boredom (or indeed embrace boredom as an important state).

##### What you can do:

**Scaffold the behaviour you want to encourage.** For example, if a child is prone to acting out when they no longer have a device in hand, or the screen is turned off, scaffolding might involve practising transitioning away from the screen. Furthermore, encourage children to engage in independent (but supervised) play.

#### 5. Tablet apps may not be as educational as originally claimed, and some may distract from learning.

For example, research demonstrates that enhancements on e-readers and tablets interfere with children's comprehension and ability to follow a story. Screen time is no substitute for one-on-one interaction and teaching. Research also demonstrates greater gains in language development when children interact with and are taught by caregivers with whom they have a close bond.

##### What you can do:

**Engage in face-to-face communication and teaching with children.** Engaging in face-to-face communication is critical for language development. Research shows that it is the two-way communication that improves language skills, rather than passive listening or one-way interaction with a tablet or smartphone screen.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Rideout (2017).

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