

Reducing Screen Time

Reviewed August 2014

Screen time is any time spent sitting in front of a screen: TV, computer, tablet, video games, cell phones or any other devices.

According to a 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation study, children aged 8 to 18 years old spend 7 hours and 38 minutes a day, on average, using the TV, computer and playing video games.

The Canadian Paediatric Society discourages screen-based activities for children under 2. Limit television watching to less than 1 to 2 hours per day for older children. Avoid making television watching part of your regular daily routine.

Why limit screen time?

Children ages two and under need to look at faces. They need to interact with people and hear voices. Children don't get these important interactions when they are given a screen to keep them busy. They also miss them when their parents spend a lot of time in front of a screen. Screen time also gets in the way of activities that are needed for their growing bodies and brains. This includes physical activity and guided discovery with parents.

When children and teens are constantly in front of a screen, they are not doing any physical activity. They're not participating in face to face interactions. They tend to become disengaged with the people around them. We want our children and teens to develop in the company of other people!

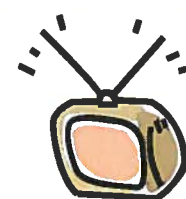
Educational vs. Recreational Screen Time

Educational screen time is using a device for *school* or *work*. It is hard to put a limit on educational screen time. This is because children have school projects needing research and time on the computer. But be aware and monitor this time, too.

Recreational screen time is spent in front of a screen for *fun* (such as watching movies, searching the internet or texting with friends).

Children who watch too much television:

- Carry a much higher risk for childhood obesity
- Have less energy
- Have a harder time in school
- Are more exposed to advertisements



Did you know?!

- The average family has 23 tech devices!
- Children under 5 are more likely to know how to play a computer game than tie their shoes!

How can parents limit screen time?

Be a good role model

Children follow what their parents do. If *you* follow the rules you set for screen time, your kids are more likely to as well. They will notice when you're not following the rules. They won't be afraid to point it out. If you answer your phone at the dinner table, or text while you drive, your kids will see that behaviour as acceptable. They will follow suit. Remember: *Monkey see, monkey do.*



Encourage healthy behaviours

Suggest *active* fun instead of screen time. Maybe go for a walk as a family. Encourage your children to try out a new hobby or sport. Give your children the things they need to do other activities (such as books, art supplies or board games). Play with your kids.

Set a two hour maximum rule

You're the parent. Set a rule that your children cannot spend more than two recreational hours in front of a screen. You could also set limited TV viewing times. For example, one show before school and one show after school. You must also **enforce** the rules that you set. Otherwise children will ignore the rules. You can reduce conflict about time limits by setting timers. This reminds children of how much screen time they have, and how to spend it.



Make a rule for turning off electronics before bedtime

Using electronics stimulates the brain. When electronic devices are used before bed, it makes it difficult for the brain to unwind. Also, *blue-light* is given off by cell phones, TVs and i-devices. Researchers have found that *blue-light* suppresses the major hormone *melatonin*. Melatonin regulates the sleep-wake cycle. When melatonin is reduced, it is much harder to fall asleep at night. Have your children turn off electronics two hours before bedtime. Encourage them to read, or do a quiet activity before bed.



Constant supervision

Keep the family computer in a high traffic area that can be easily supervised. You will be better able to limit their time in front of a screen. You can monitor what they are doing on the computer. You need to know what your child is doing on-line. Have conversations with them. Check-in with them about what they are doing. Ask about what sites they are interested in.



No TVs or devices in the bedrooms

Bedrooms are supposed to be a place to unwind and sleep. When children have a TV in their bedroom, parents aren't able to supervise what is being watched. Or when it is being watched. Kids who have TVs in their rooms tend to watch 1.5 hours more TV than those who don't. Having a TV in their room also keeps them from spending time with the family. Parents should have charging stations *outside* the bedroom to park devices for the night. It's a good idea to do this as soon as your child gets a device. This way, children accept this practice.



Teach kids how to use technology in a healthy way

Parents need to teach your kids how to use technology in a healthy way. Tell them how much time they have. Let them choose how they want to spend it. This helps them learn how to manage their screen time and use technology in a healthy way. Technology is here to stay. It's a great life skill to know how to use it properly.



Create a screen free meal time

Make meal time family time. This is a great time to talk to everyone in the family. It's a way to be involved in children's lives. Shut off TVs in or around the dining area. Don't allow cell phones or tablets at the table. This includes parents, too! Check-in with your kids about their day. Stay connected. Social skills are slowly vanishing in some children. Some have a hard time making eye contact and face to face interactions. Use this time to practice proper social skills and develop a closer connection.



Be active during screen time

When you do watch TV or play on the computer, try being active as you do it. You could stretch, do some yoga, walk on a treadmill or lift weights while watching TV. You could challenge everyone in the family to see who can do the most jumping jacks during certain commercials. Or even for the entire commercial break. Get moving!



Get involved.

Watch, play with and listen to your child. Talk to your children about your own beliefs and values. Teach your children about stereotypes and violent images in the media. Learn about the Canadian and American ratings systems for television, music, movies and video games. Ratings can help you choose appropriate media for your child. Preview media to see if they are okay. Help your children and teens make good choices about media. Make decisions *as a family* about the use of media and technology.



Technology is a wonderful tool for everyone. Teaching your kids how to use it in a healthy way will give them a useful life-long skill.

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