

How to Know if Screens Are a Problem

By Dr Justin Coulson

For years, one of the most common questions I've been asked is "How much screen time is too much?"

I've found the guidelines from official sources unhelpful. And I've disagreed with them more often than not. However...

From the people who brought you "an hour or less per day," we now have...new screen guidelines! The *American Academy of Pediatrics* updated its guidance last month, and the biggest change? No more emphasis on "screen time."

Instead, we've got a much more comprehensive - and, admittedly, less straightforward - set of recommendations. The focus has shifted from counting minutes to understanding how screens fit into your child's whole life.

The 5 Cs Framework (For School-Aged Kids)

The AAP now recommends thinking about five key areas:

Child: Your child's unique strengths and challenges are becoming clear. Whether they're great at art, struggle with attention, or are obsessed with science facts, carve out time to build on these interests beyond screens. If your child is neurodivergent they are more likely to be screen-obsessed. Be mindful of this in the way that your kids have access to and use of screens.

Content: Many kids love video games and YouTube at this age but can easily access inappropriate content (violent, sexual, or rude). Use *Common Sense Media* to check reviews, set up parental controls (they're not perfect but help), and watch shows or play games together to see if you like the messages.

Calm: Many kids want a mental break after school - that's fine. Just ensure it doesn't crowd out homework, family meals, or other activities. Put devices away at bedtime and teach techniques like deep breathing or quiet music to help them wind down.

Crowding Out: Video games and YouTube are designed for extended use - hours at a time. Talk about balancing screen time so there's enough time to sleep, read, play sports, do homework, and chat with family and friends in analogue mode (face to face). Model putting your own phone down at meals, bedtime, and in the car.

Communication: This is prime time for conversations about advertising, privacy, right vs. wrong. Regular open-minded talks build critical thinking and become the "voice in their head". Let them know they can tell you about anything creepy or negative they see online.

What About You?

The new guidelines recognise that parents need support too. Screen use isn't just a kid problem—it's a family one.

Think about how you'd score on this quick check (0=Never, 4=Very Often):

How often do you stay on a screen even though you say you'll stop?

How often does screen time cost you sleep?

How often do you neglect things you should be doing because you prefer screens?

How often do you feel restless or irritated when you can't be on screens?

If you're scoring high, you're not alone. The AAP now calls on tech companies to create safety features as default settings and policymakers to invest in real-world spaces - because healthy media use isn't solely parents' responsibility.

The Bottom Line

Screens and parenting are inseparably intertwined. Kids want to game, chat, consume, and be on their screens endlessly (and honestly, so do we as their parents).

But the stakes are high. Getting screen usage right matters enormously.

Consider your child. Consider the context. Consider the content. But also consider whether they're creating, connecting, or just consuming.

These guidelines are messier than "one hour a day," but they're more honest. Creating a healthy digital life for your family is about balance, not a timer. Start with one C that resonates most, and build from there.



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