

**Three Minute Article for Parents**

## Managing excessive screen time in children and adolescents

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Screen time in children and adolescents has increased over the years, more so since the pandemic. Excessive screen usage can lead to developmental delays, inattention, sleep disturbances, aggression, deterioration in academic performance and mental health problems like depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. Furthermore, a sedentary lifestyle associated with excessive use of screens can lead to obesity, as well as increased risks for developing hypertension and heart diseases. However, given the importance of screens in the modern age, complete abstinence from screens may be impractical. Hence, promoting healthy screen usage is vital in the current scenario to prevent problems related to its inappropriate usage.

Not all children who use screens develop problems. Children from single-parent families and those in families with poor parent-child relationships and a lack of family connectedness are more vulnerable to developing such complications. In addition, children with access to a higher number of electronic devices at home, those who are allowed to have screens in their bedrooms and children using digital media while having meals are also at a higher risk of developing issues related to screen usage. Furthermore, not having enough off-line interests also contributes to children spending more time on screens. Through observational learning, parental digital media use is also associated with higher screen use in children. Moreover, research shows that the type of activity depicted on screens determines whether a child develops problems with screen usage. For example, the usage of screens for educational purposes has shown a positive impact on academic performance, whereas watching television or playing video games has a negative effect.

Parents have a seminal role in managing their children's screen time. Parents are the ones who decide on the number of electronic devices in the household and when and how children access these devices. Therefore, parents need to be aware of the recommendations on age-appropriate rules and limits around screen usage<sup>1</sup> as given below:

- Children 18 months and under should not be allowed to use any electronic media, including television.

- Pre-schoolers should spend no more than one hour per day on screens.
- For school-aged children, parents should ensure that electronic media do not displace other important activities such as sleep, exercise and family meals. It is necessary to ensure that children do not use screens during meals and stop screen use one hour before bedtime. Electronic media should not be allowed in children's bedrooms.
- Encourage children to do more productive activities online.
- Watch television together with your children, to ensure that children watch appropriate content.
- Familiarize yourself with technology to monitor children's screen usage and restrict inappropriate content.
- Promote hobbies, extracurricular activities and face-to-face social interactions, to ensure that children have suitable off-line activities.
- Spend quality time with your children and work on improving parent-child relationships.
- Be mindful of parental use of screens, to set a positive example for your children.

### Reference

1. Rohanachandra Y. Excessive screen use in children and adolescents: Impact, risk factors and interventions. *Sri Lanka Journal of Child Health* 2022; **51**(2): 175-81.  
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