Screen Smarts: Healthy Habits in a Digital World

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The widespread use of screens, particularly smartphones, is believed to impact both youth and adults, with potential effects ranging from mental and physical health issues to impaired brain development and social skills. While screens are often blamed for these problems, they are also credited with positive outcomes like keeping youth safe and connected with family. Despite thousands of studies, clear answers are still lacking due to challenges in measuring screen use and variations among individuals. However, past research on media like television and video games shows that children can learn behaviors such as aggression and stereotypes from what they see. Screen time can also displace important activities like family time, outdoor play, and schoolwork. While we await more conclusive research, existing knowledge from earlier media studies can guide parenting, education, and policy decisions. This factsheet will focus on screen time as a whole, including all types of screen usage, the impact it has, and tips on how to monitor it.

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, healthy screen time limits vary by age. On average, youth between the ages of 8-12 in the United States spend 4-6 hour a day watching or using screens, and teenagers spend up to 9 hours. While screens do entertain, teach, and keep our youth occupied, too much use could have a negative impact on them.

Youth that are exposed to more screen time use than recommended may experience the following:

- Sleep problems
- Lower grades in school
- Reading fewer books
- Less time with family and friends
- Not enough time spent outdoors
- Weight problems - not enough physical activity
- Mood problems
- Poor self-image
- Fear of missing out

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends the following screen time limits:

- Youth under age 2: No screen time
- Youth age 2 - 12: One hour per day
- Teenagers and adults: Two hours per day

Some research suggests that adults should limit their screen time outside of work to less than two hours per day, while others recommend limiting total screen time to eight hours a day for work plus two to four hours for entertainment. Spending seven hours or more on screens daily could potentially harm your eyes. Remember, the youth in your household are watching you. How can you set a good example with your screen time usage?

These screen time limits may seem unrealistic, but there is research! A study conducted by the National Institutes of Health found that youth who spent more than two hours a day on electronic devices scored lower on thinking and language tests. Those with more than seven hours of screen time experienced thinning of the brain's cortex, which is related to critical thinking and reasoning.

Sources: American Academy of Pediatrics, American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, Harvard Medical School, NIH

How about mobile devices? When is the "right" time to give youth a mobile device?

You guessed it, there is no "right" time to give youth a mobile device. The age will look different for every youth. Research recommends that parents should wait to give their child a phone until they are mature enough to regulate their use and not allow it to distract them from sleep, homework, family time, and playing and socializing with others in the real world. Parents must also be aware that once their child has a phone they may be exposed to cyberbullying, body shaming, discrimination and racism, violence, pornography, predatory advertising, and other content they may not want their child to experience. I recommend having conversations about these topics before giving your child access to a mobile device!

I also that parents establish rules about screen use, such as limiting time on screens, limiting the shows they are allowed to watch, and applications they are allowed to use on their mobile devices. Think about establishing phone-free activities (i.e. eating meals together as a family, doing homework, and sleeping) and creating phone-free spaces, like bedrooms.

Managing screen use could be challenging, research recommends...

As mentioned above, parents with infants or young children should avoid screens altogether. It is important to understand that young children benefit from more face-to-face time with their parents and other family members. This means it is also important for parents to limit their own screen use when they are with their youth. If you have more than one child, be sure to enforce rules with screen usage with everyone to establish good behavior and consistency with the youth in the household. I recommend thinking about what activities you can do with your child(ren) that you both enjoy that void screen use. This could mean walking, riding bikes, playing board games, etc.
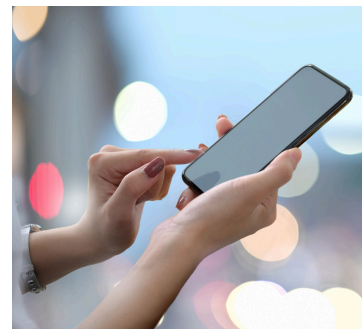
Are there ways to monitor screen time on a mobile device?

Yes, there are parental controls and applications to help parents and guardians enact some of these limits. Studies recommend Apple's Screen Time is the best option for iOS households, while Google Family Link is best for Android households with kids under age 13. Qustodio is a great option for Android households with youth aged 13 and older. Remember, it's OK to take away a mobile device if the youth does not demonstrate sufficient responsibility to follow the rules that have been communicated.

Screens are here to stay and they can offer many positives. However, it is never too early to develop a screen-time plan with your family. Let your children share their ideas and concerns.

HELPFUL TIPS

Below are a few helpful tips to help you navigate monitoring screen time!

- Familiarize yourself with programming to make sure it is age-appropriate.
- Talk to your child about what they are seeing. Point out good behavior, such as cooperation, friendship, and concern for others. Make connections to meaningful events or places of interest.

- Teach children about online privacy and safety.
- Actively decide when your child is ready for a personal device.
- Encourage using screens in ways that build creativity and connection with family and friends.
- Consider your child or teen's maturity and habits. The right plan for one family may not be a good fit for another.

- Be aware of advertising and how it influences choices.
- Encourage your child to learn other activities such as sports, music, art, and hobbies that do not involve screens.
- Set a good example with your own safe and healthy screen habits.