



## Let's Talk About Screen Time

### What is screen time?

<sup>1</sup>**Screen time** is any time spent sitting in front of a screen: TV, computer, tablet, video games, cell phones or any other devices. This can be for work, school, social or recreation reasons.

It's important to recognize that since COVID, our world has changed significantly. Technology and screen time have become a normalized part of our work-life balance, using them for work, school and keeping connected to our friends, families and colleagues. In addition to the benefits of screens and technology, there are also harms and risks associated with how we use them and for how long. We need to make informed decisions on what is an appropriate or good amount of screen time for recreational use.

According to a 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation study<sup>1</sup>, 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<sup>2</sup> discourages screen-based activities for children under 2 and recommends you limit recreational screen time for children age 2-5 to less than 1 hour per day and for older children an average range of 2-4 hours per day. Avoid making television watching part of your regular daily routine.

### ***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!
- The Canadian gaming industry reported in 2020 that males aged 13-17 spent an average of 21 hours per week playing digital games<sup>2</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> Daily Media Use Among Children and Teens up Dramatically from Five Years Ago [Internet]. Kaiser Family Foundation. 2010. <https://www.kff.org/racial-equity-and-health-policy/press-release/daily-media-use-among-children-and-teens-up-dramatically-from-five-years-ago/>

<sup>2</sup> Screen time and Young Children [internet]. Canadian Pediatric Society; 2017. <https://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/behavior-and-development/screen-time-and-young-children>

## Why limit screen time?

Although in today's world, screen time may be used as a way to connect with their peers and family, children also need to look at faces. They need to interact with people and hear their voices. It's important to recognize that it also applies to parents' screen time. Children miss out on important interactions at home when parents spend a lot of time in front of a screen. When children and teens are constantly in front of a screen they tend to become disengaged with the people around them. We want our children and teens to develop in the company of other people.

Recreational 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. Some of the other risks and harms associated with excessive screen time include obesity, sleep-deprived, isolation, ailments like carpal tunnel, difficulty waking for school, and it can lead to other behavioural concerns (i.e. temper tantrums, inattentiveness, aggression, etc.). Lastly, it's important to acknowledge that screen time can also increase exposures to online harms (i.e. identity theft, children grooming and luring from predators, cyberbullying etc.).

## Educational, Social and 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.

**Social** screen time is using our devices to connect and interact directly with our peers and family through programs like Zoom and Caribu. This was particularly important during COVID when in person gatherings were no possible and school was held virtually.

**Recreational** screen time is spent in front of a screen for *fun* (such as watching movies, searching the internet, gaming or texting with friends). Although the recreational use has the potential to be the most harmful, it's important to recognize that some recreational use (i.e. gaming) is also a social interaction as well.

## How can parents limit screen time?

***You, as a parent/guardian, have an opportunity to role model the behaviour you're hoping to see***

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. Children will imitate your behaviour.

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## ***Encourage healthy behaviours***

Suggest *active* fun instead of screen time. 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. Cook together and involve your children in household tasks.

## ***Set a two-hour per day maximum rule for recreational use (for children above the age of 2)***

It's OK to set limits. For example, you could 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 use of technology parental control features.

## ***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 other 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***

When possible, try to encourage use of their electronic device (tablet, smartphone, chromebooks etc) in a high traffic area that can be easily supervised. Knowing when they are on it, will help you monitor and limit their time limits in front of a screen. Being able to see what they are doing also helps ensure they are using safe sites and are less vulnerable to risky and harmful content and predators. Have conversations with them. Check-in with them about what they are doing. Ask about what sites they are interested in. Sample the game by occasionally playing with them.

Being able to see and be involved with will also help you watch out for risky and harmful advertising & marketing. The online world is harder to regulate as the contents on the internet are expansive. Children and youth can easily access ads, commercials, social influencers and more that wouldn't be permitted in other spaces such as radio or television. Be aware of the type of pop-up advertisements on shared devices.

## Gamification of Digital Games:

The boundaries between digital gaming and gambling are becoming increasingly blurred. **Digital games** are games played on a device and may include single player games, multiplayer games, social network games, etc., and is inclusive of physical games bought from a store, as well as digital games that are purchased and downloaded online.

There are several ways in which gambling and digital gaming converge including:

- in-game mechanisms such as **loot boxes** which often cost money to purchase
- third party websites facilitating the sale, trading, and gambling of in-game items known as “**skins**” that you get from a loot box
- gambling events in digital games through simulated casinos
- the rise in **eSports** with the accompaniment of eSports betting, or
- gambling corporations sponsoring digital gaming tournaments and streamers.

Also, important to note is that all digital games contain a **Rating System** that guides who is recommended to play a given digital game. The Entertainment Software Rating Board (ESRB) is the self regulated body that rates digital games in North America. Although the rating on the front of the game may appear to be appropriate for your child to play it, checking descriptors of rating and watching some of the games being played to better understand content and judge appropriateness is recommended. Ratings can be found here for more details: [Ratings Guides, Categories, Content Descriptors | ESRB Ratings](#).

## Cyberbullying

“Cyberbullying comes in many forms, and can happen on any device, and through any online platform (games, social media sites, private messaging, etc.). It can be perpetrated by somebody who is known or somebody who is a stranger. Sometimes it only happens online, but other times it is an extension of bullying that is happening at school. It is also often the case that a person simultaneously is the aggressor and the victim.”<sup>3</sup>

## Commercial sexual exploitation of children

Be aware of who your children connect with online, what types of media they share and are asked for. Discuss healthy communication online as sometimes online platforms can be used to target children and youth into situations of commercial sexual exploitation.

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<sup>3</sup> [Home Page - A Parent Resource about Kids, Technology, and Cyberbullying \(primus.ca\)](#)

## When to get help/warning signs? When is Screen Time Too Much?

Parents often ask, “When should I worry?”. If you’re concerned about your child or youth’s recreational screen use, look for common signs:

- Are they spending over the recommended amount of screen time?
- Have you noticed a change in behaviour related to their screen use? (i.e. agitated, angry/aggressive, tense, withdrawn, nervous, isolating from friends, fearful, stressed etc.).
- Do you see emotional outbursts? Especially when you try to limit screen time?
- Do they have difficulty making friends?
- Do they have difficulty waking up in the morning because they are using a device before bed?
- Do they have difficulty concentrating and/or have they lost interest in school or other hobbies they once enjoyed?
- Is screen time use creating conflict at home?

Although seeing some of these signs may not mean that your child has issues with screen time, it’s important to talk to someone if you are worried or concerned. You can contact your family doctor or seek mental health and addictions support through the Nova Scotia Central Intake line below.

## What can you do to help Reduce Screen Time?

Bedrooms are supposed to be a place to unwind and sleep. When children have a TV or device 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.

“Sleep is a very important part of your child’s mental and physical health because it allows your child’s mind and body to rest and recover.... lack of sleep causes irritability, increased stress, forgetfulness, difficulties with learning and low motivation. Over time, it can contribute to anxiety and depression...”<sup>4</sup> For more information on the benefits of sleep and the signs and symptoms of lack of sleep, please visit the Sick Kids website at the link on the bottom of this page.

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<sup>4</sup> Sleep: Benefits and Recommended Amounts [Internet]. Sick Kids. 2020.  
<https://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/article?contentid=645&language=english>

## ***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 mealtime 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. 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.***

## **Helpful Resources:**

### ***Provincial General Mental Health & Addictions Services***

- In a crisis? **Mental Health Mobile Crisis Team** provides 24/7 telephone crisis intervention to all of Nova Scotia. Mobile response is available in most communities. For HRM call: 1-902- 429-8167 or Toll Free: 1-888-429-8167
- To speak to someone about mental health and addictions services in your local area (within Nova Scotia) call the **Provincial Central Intake Service**: 1-855-922-1122. The **right care** at the **right time** with the **right person**. A conversation to help you get the help you need.
- Kids Help Phone: Free professional counselling. Anonymous and confidential. Open 24/7. Call 1-800-668-6868 or download their free chat app on your phone or visit their website [KidsHelpPhone.ca](http://KidsHelpPhone.ca)

## **Private Mental Health & Addictions Services**

- Nova Scotia College of Social Workers  
<http://nscsw.org/about/find-a-social-worker/>
- Association of Psychologists of Nova Scotia  
<http://apns.ca/search-psychologist/>

## **Websites and online articles:**

- Canadian Pediatric Society:
  - Screen time and young children: Promoting health and development in a digital world  
<https://www.cps.ca/en/documents/position/screen-time-and-young-children>
  - <https://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/behavior-and-development/screen-time-and-young-children>
  - Digital media: Promoting healthy screen use in school-aged children and adolescent.  
<https://www.cps.ca/en/documents/position/digital-media> (includes podcast)
- American Association of Pediatrics: <https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Where-We-Stand-TV-Viewing-Time.aspx>
- World Health Organization: Guidelines on Physical Activity, Sedentary Behaviour, and Sleep for Children under 5 Years of Age  
<https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/311664/9789241550536-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>
- OECD: Children & Young People's Mental Health in the Digital Age - Shaping the Future  
<https://www.oecd.org/els/health-systems/Children-and-Young-People-Mental-Health-in-the-Digital-Age.pdf>
- YMCA Youth Gambling Awareness Program: [www.youthbet.com](http://www.youthbet.com)
- International Centre for Youth Gambling Problems and High-Risk Behaviors: [www.youthgambling.com](http://www.youthgambling.com)
- Youth, Families and Interactive Technology CAMH: [youthfamilyinteractive-onlinebrochure.pdf.pdf](http://youthfamilyinteractive-onlinebrochure.pdf.pdf) ([camh.ca](http://camh.ca))
- Parenting in a Digital Age: Understanding Kids and Technology [Internet]. Prevent. 2021. [Home Page - A Parent Resource about Kids, Technology, and Cyberbullying \(primus.ca\)](http://Home Page - A Parent Resource about Kids, Technology, and Cyberbullying (primus.ca))
- Sleep: Benefits and Recommended Amounts [Internet]. Sick Kids. 2020.  
<https://www.aboutkidshealth.ca/article?contentid=645&language=english>

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<sup>i</sup> Real Canadian Gamers Essential Facts 2020 [Internet]. Entertainment Software Association of Canada; 2020. Available from: [https://essentialfacts2020.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/RCGEF\\_en.pdf](https://essentialfacts2020.ca/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/RCGEF_en.pdf)

1.855.922.1122 Nova Scotia Central Intake Service [www.iwk.nshealth.ca](http://www.iwk.nshealth.ca)  
Fact sheet originally developed by the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario, adapted with permission.

*\*This patient/family guide should not be used to replace advice from your health care provider(s).*

*\*Please, no scented products or fragrances at the IWK.*

IWK Mental Health & Addictions Program, Halifax, NS  
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