



## Screen-time Safety



Over recent years television, computer games and screens have become central to our lives. Many children can now play complex computer games before they can tie their shoelaces, and most can confidently use a touchscreen to navigate a game before they are able to read. There are many benefits to this increase in technology – the internet provides us with unlimited information in an instant, we can communicate with people far more easily and many computer games support various aspects of learning including developing dexterity. However, there are also many risks associated with screen time, and this letter is designed to help parents and carers think carefully about these.

### How much time are children spending in front of screens?

Research varies, but it is thought that children aged between 6 and 11 spend on average 3 to 4 hours a day in front of a screen, watching TV/films or playing computer games. For children who have mobile phones and tablet computers, the time is even greater. This time often doubles at the weekends or during school holidays. Even children aged 3 or younger are regularly spending long periods in front of a screen, but parents often vastly underestimate the amount of time their children spend on their various gadgets.



### Boys and Girls

Boys play computer games on average twice as much as girls; they play for longer periods and continue playing to an older age. They also tend to play games that are based around action and fighting, whereas girls tend to prefer puzzle or platform games.

### Why does it matter?

A third of children under 5 have a TV in their bedroom, and approximately 70% of 10 year olds have a mobile phone that can connect to the internet. In some cases this access is unrestricted and children are able to watch content that may not be appropriate without their parents' knowledge, either online or on television after the 9pm 'watershed'. Children are also increasingly using social networking sites when under the recommended age, such as Facebook, Snapchat and Instagram, all of which can expose children to inappropriate images, videos and language, and can enable predators to communicate with children under false pretences.

Prolonged screen time can affect children's eye health, making eyes dry or itchy and vision blurry. Using any type of screen close to bedtime can lead to sleep difficulties, as the type of light emitted by the screen tricks the brain into thinking it is daytime and makes it difficult for children to settle to sleep.

The vast majority of top-selling computer games contain violence in some form. Children who play them regularly, particularly boys, are much more likely to demonstrate aggressive behaviours, as the games teach them that violence is the solution to conflict. Reducing the time spent watching TV and playing computer games has been shown to decrease both verbal and physical aggression by up to 50%. Young children find it hard to tell the difference between fantasy and reality, so repeatedly seeing violent scenes can skew their view of the world.

## **Further risks**

Some games are now played on online platforms where players from all around the world can link up to compete. This can mean that children are exposed to inappropriate language or are entering into communication with people who may not be safe. Children who spend long periods in front of a screen are more likely to be obese as they are less physically active. They may also suffer from a language delay, and delayed physical, social and mental development through a lack of experiences, communication and interaction with the real world. Even games like Pokemon Go, which encourage children to explore outside, bring risks. Children may become so absorbed in what they are doing in the game that they stop paying full attention to their surroundings, and may stray into unsafe areas.



Furthermore, computer games bombard children's brains with constant visual and audio stimulation, as well as floods of 'feel-good' chemicals like dopamine. With prolonged exposure they become used to this, which can mean that they then struggle to maintain their attention on anything in the real world, which is boring by comparison. This clearly has a detrimental effect on children's motivation and ability to focus on learning tasks and on their ability to process information in the classroom.

## **What can parents do to reduce the risks?**

1. Limit your child's screen time. Decide on a daily or weekly amount and stick to it. Use in moderation is not harmful, and ground rules set now will make things easier as your child gets older. On most devices there are settings or apps available to limit usage to a defined period, after which children will not be able to use it. It is also sensible to ensure that children have done their reading, homework or other learning tasks before they earn time on their gadgets.
2. Be aware of your own usage. Set an example to children by having electronics-free time to connect with each other as a family. Try to put phones or tablets away at the dinner table and other times when engaging with your child. Focus on your child, not your phone!
3. Ensure all content is age appropriate. Use filters advised by your Internet Service Provider and check age ratings on games and films – they are there for a reason! Ensure that your child is not illegally using sites such as Facebook, which has a minimum user age of 13.
4. Encourage children to do a range of activities in their leisure time. Ensure they regularly get outside and are moving physically. Make sure they have opportunities to be creative with arts and crafts activities or toys such as Lego, and to play board games which help to develop social skills such as turn taking and sharing.

**Greet your child  
with a smile,  
not a mobile**

