

## Parents and carers

# Navigating screen time: tools for today's families

The right amount of screen time can depend on a range of factors such as

- your child's age and maturity
- the kind of content they are consuming
- the type of activity
- their learning needs
- your family routine and context.

## Quality screen time looks like:

- Safe experiences free from online harms, for example, cyberbullying or adult content.
- Screens used interactively or jointly with friends or family.
- Interactive digital games that have **stimulating learning content** or thinking challenges.
- Using devices as a therapy tool for children with disability (such as, communication, self-regulation and stimming).

## Harmful or low-quality screen time looks like:

- Passive scrolling, persuasive features, TV or games playing in the background.
- Frequently consuming short form videos, which reduces attention and self-control.
- Harmful content accessed through friends, influencers, online communities and/or AI generated feeds that may promote behaviours harmful to health such as self-harm, disordered eating.
- Social comparisons with highly curated and unrealistic content centred around appearance.
- Less time participating in person-to-person social activities if this is not typical for them. (Some **neurodivergent** children may primarily socialise online). Time spent online may impact in-person relationships and potentially encourage emotional dependence on technology such as AI chatbots.



## How to improve the quality of online activities

- Set up age-appropriate [parental controls](#).
- Access reviews for age-appropriate experiences, for example [Australian classification](#) and [The eSafety Guide](#).
- View and play together and use active oversight to understand how your child engages online.
- Ask questions which support your child to think.
- Show your interest and celebrate their online skills.
- Use screens to reinforce skills, plan wellbeing activities or transition into active play.

## Age-based considerations

- **Infants (0 to 2)** critical skills aren't learnt as effectively from screens.
- **Early years (0 to 5)** limited screen use, heavily guided and supervised by parents/carers.
- **Pre-school age (3 to 5)** screen time is beneficial if it is high quality and watched together. Attention may alter after watching faster paced screens. The recommended daily maximum is an hour.
- **Middle years (6 to 10)** support balance, focus on individual needs, build self-regulation and digital skills. Find a balance, so healthy activities and social connections are not impacted.
- **Adolescents** promote autonomy, digital literacy and self-monitoring. It is a peak emotional and psychological development stage. Difficulty disengaging and the desire for social rewards may lead to more frequent screen use.

## Banish boredom without screens

- Boredom increases from 8 years to mid-teenage years. Using boredom positively is a developed skill.
- Avoid dismissing their feelings of boredom and encourage your child to find their own solution.
- Help them view screen time as just one of many solutions to boredom, for example: 'OK. Next time you're bored, what's your list of three things that you might go to?'
- Neurodivergent children's experiences of boredom can be heightened, especially if their environment is not responsive or engaging to their needs and interests. If needed, consult with your child's support workers for advice and strategies specific to your child.

## Recommendations when negotiating screen time

- Set expectations around use through open, non-judgmental discussion or a [family tech agreement for under 5](#) or [5 to 8 years old](#). Talk together about where they are online, who they can game with, what games and sites they access, and when they're online.
- Make screen time predictable. For young children, specific days and times are more helpful. For young adolescents, negotiating an average over the week may be more beneficial. Develop structured times for screens with the whole family, for example, device free Friday night.
- Avoid screens for at least an hour before bedtime. Create a consistent bed routine and ensure screens and devices are not accessible during the night and not charged in bedrooms.
- Regularly review the expectations. Work with them to reflect on whether screens are a priority over other important activities, whether they feel in control of their use or if they are struggling to concentrate or feeling unsettled. For example, 'It's been a month since we set our guidelines around technology. I wanted to check in on how things are going.'

## How to initiate positive changes and effective transitions

- Focus on what you want to improve, not just what you want to remove, such as developing offline connections or more time to sleep.
- Build other offline skills and activities to meet their needs and include quality screen time they value.
- Negotiate games online and games offline the same way, by the number of games played or level attempted or reached rather than just time.
- Work together to find solutions, such as 'I want to help you figure out other ways you can relax. Let's see if together we can come up with any ideas.'
- When transitioning into screen time, buffer with other options first to reinforce the idea that screens are just one of many options and encourage self-reflection.
- Spend the final five minutes of screen time playing together to help find a natural finishing point in the game. Connect with their feelings and assist in transitioning them into their next offline, desirable activity. You might try: 'That game we saw online looked fun. Shall we go outside and see if we can do it together?'
- Any changes need to be gradual because online spaces can offer important support, guidance and help seeking. Removing devices without other support avenues can increase the risk of harm to health. If there are any concerns, always engage the support of a mental health professional and [counselling support services](#).

## Balance benefits with concerns, especially for neurodivergent children

- For many neurodivergent children, screens can help to self-regulate and can be used as a therapeutic tool to support them at various times of their day. Engaging with familiar content can help manage anxiety.
- Screen time can also foster friendships, build social skills, create opportunities to explore their interests, and provide a sense of achievement.
- Neurodivergent children may experience more online harm. [Enlist professional help](#) to ensure appropriate support.
- Observe which game or app helps them feel more connected and encourage your child to recognise their own limits if they can. Collaborate when establishing stopping points and provide several warnings before transitioning from screens.

## Warning signs to watch for and problematic use

- Our [screen time page](#) provides a comprehensive list of signs to watch out for that your child's use may be problematic.
- Problematic use is characterised by a substantial impact on a child's functioning that results in disrupted sleep, mood changes and difficulty engaging.

## Signs of readiness for smartphones

- Try to delay smartphone ownership until they have [displayed signs of readiness](#). These could include reflections on whether they can regulate their emotions around screen time rules, are responsible in other areas of their life, and interact positively with peers, extra-curricular activities or school.
- If they are not ready, set up a milestone plan with your child and discuss what you would like them to achieve.

## Model healthy screen use

- For children under 2, minimise your phone use to provide direct eye contact and interaction.
- Model healthy screen use, particularly for children under 6. Older children and adolescents respond if there is mutual reflection. For example: 'What do you think of my phone use habits? What could I do better?'

## Conversations are key

- Create regular and open conversations. Listen actively and respond without judgment and an open mind. Talk through the challenges and emphasise they can always come to you for help.
- A good time to talk could include doing an activity together, family dinner or downtime at home.

# eSafety resources

[The eSafety Guide](#)

[Social media age restrictions hub | eSafety Commissioner](#)

[Advisories and blogposts | eSafety Commissioner](#)

[Screen time](#)

[Gaming together as a family](#)

## References

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