

Establishing healthy screen-time habits can be tricky. DIANA TIMMINS discovers how to manage children in the digital age.

Digi-kids



PHOTOGRAPHY: TIMMINS



Most of us remember our digi-free childhood of playing Uno and charades, climbing trees and window-gazing while singing to the radio on road trips. Times have changed with technology advancements, and like it or not, we are pretty much forced to embrace it. Our children are growing up in an ever-evolving digital world, which has an assortment of pros and cons. As parents, it is our right and responsibility to monitor technology use within our family network, ensuring moderate screen-time is balanced with essential and developmental green-time.

Modern research by the Australian Institute of Family Studies revealed that 64 per cent of 4,000 monitored children exceeded screen-time guidelines set by the Australian Department of Health. Widely considered out-dated and unrealistic, these guidelines that stipulate maximum screen-time based on age were modelled on those issued by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in 2001, before screen-time prevalence in educational settings. Despite the AAP's revision in 2015, Australian recommendations are not scheduled to follow suit, which concerns many industry experts, including Dr Kristy Goodwin, author of *Raising Your Child in a Digital World* (\$29.99, Finch Publishing).

“Australian guidelines need to be revised because they are based on research which looks at passive use of technology (primarily television and videos), and focus exclusively on how much as opposed to also considering what, when and how kids use screens. They class all screen-time equally, but 30 minutes chatting to Grandma on Skype is very different to 30 minutes watching age-inappropriate YouTube clips. Quality trumps quantity when it comes to screens,” says Goodwin.

INFANTS: 0–2 YEARS

A child's first two years involve many developmental milestones, as 85 per cent of brain formation occurs throughout this time. Infants are unable to make sense of images on two-dimensional screens, which means they learn most effectively from hands-on experiences. Clinical psychologist Andrew Fuller describes this formative period as ‘How to Do Life 101’, during which technology is anything but advantageous.

“These early years are when we make sense of the world; how our bodies move, whether we feel loved, how to interact with others, who to trust, how to calm down,” says Fuller. “If screen-time takes away from human interaction during this time, it is detrimental to these skills.”

Some experts recommend zero screen



WHERE POSSIBLE, PARENTS SHOULD CO-VIEW AND NOT RELY ON TECHNOLOGY AS A DIGITAL PACIFIER

Another study published by the AAP in 2004 linked early television exposure with attention problems at age seven. So while the effects may not be immediately apparent, excessive screen-time may come back to bite us. In saying that, Goodwin assures that small amounts are unlikely to cause harm.

“I recommend no more than 15 minutes daily for newborns to two-year-olds. Where possible, parents should co-view and not rely on technology as a digital pacifier, as we don’t want children forming a dependence on technology or learning to emotionally regulate with screens. Kids have basic developmental needs and the concern with children under two years is that screen-time can displace other essential developmental activities,” says Goodwin.

time for newborns to two-year-olds, but is this realistic for a modern, multi-tasking mum? Even back in 2006, before mainstream use of touchscreen devices, 61 per cent of infants under two were reportedly exposed to daily viewing. Nowadays, there is greater pressure with baby iPads, fandangle fake phones and interactive DVDs claiming to acquire intelligence.

“It is difficult for parents to achieve complete digital abstinence. There are a preponderance of apps, websites and devices marketed towards this age group. However, there is no research to show

there are cognitive or developmental advantages of prematurely dunking kids in the digital stream. Many of these products are based on neuro-myths and don’t offer developmental benefits,” advises Goodwin.

Expert in child development Dr Michael Nagel busts such neuro-myths in *Nurturing a Healthy Mind* (\$29.99, Exisle Publishing), stating: “In one particular study, researchers noted that while daily reading with a parent can be associated with a seven-point increase in language scores across various measures, each hour of daily baby DVD viewing was associated with a 17-point decrease.”



PRE-SCHOOLERS: 2–5 YEARS

Children aged two to five years old are recommended no more than one hour of screen-time per day, but it appears our kids are getting much more than this. The 2014 Australian Physical Activity Report Card revealed that only 26 per cent of Australian children aged two to four met these guidelines. On the upside, moderate educational screen-time for pre-schoolers can have its merits; providing new learning opportunities like creating digital storybooks or responding to questions on interactive programs. There are, of course, downsides of excessive use.

“When kids use screens there is an opportunity cost, so they may not spend enough time sleeping, playing, interacting and being physically active. If children aren’t using digital devices in healthy ways, there are risks associated with musculoskeletal problems and visual and auditory development,” says Goodwin.

Screen-time content is just as important as consumption. Nagel shares findings from another study that weighed up educational content of *Dora the Explorer* with *Teletubbies*; watching *Dora* led to increased vocabulary and expressive language skills while similar exposure

to *Teletubbies* resulted in a decrease in both areas.

Many well-intentioned parents fall into the habit of offering screen-time as a reward – or even a mild case of bribery. Who hasn’t resorted to YouTube cartoons or digital games to pacify public meltdowns and entertain little ones when they’re out and about? While most of us have, Goodwin discourages this behaviour for numerous reasons.

“Bribes don’t teach respect, responsibility and how to effectively, emotionally regulate; they cultivate a sense of entitlement,” she says. “They work short term and have limited effectiveness. You will soon be forced into negotiating, because kids will insist they are entitled to screen-time if they perform certain tasks. To develop healthy habits, we want kids to see technology as a privilege and not a right that they can demand.”

So, what are we to do with stropky little ones while we’re grocery shopping? Fuller offers a very effective and simple solution: talk to them! “Are we living in a world in which machines are more important than people? Are we becoming conversationally impoverished? The

FORMULATE A FAMILY PLAN

Ever noticed families out to dinner sitting in silence as parents scroll through smartphones and headphone-clad kids tap away at tablets? Mirror neurons mean children emulate parents too. This is somewhat troubling considering a recent RUOK study revealed approximately 46 hours of weekly downtime is spent screen-gazing, and only six hours socialising with family and friends. To ensure devices don’t dominate quality time, Goodwin recommends establishing a family media management plan addressing:

- **HOW MUCH:** consider whether screen-time content is supporting or stifling development, and what activities it may be replacing (remember: green-time before screen-time!). Apps like Moment Family and BreakFree can help track usage.
- **WHERE:** confine usage to high-traffic areas like the kitchen or lounge room, and make the dinner table, bathrooms and bedrooms screen-free zones. Entertain little ones out and about with books, colouring implements and engaging games like I Spy.
- **WHEN:** avoid overstimulating screen-time before school and at least 90 minutes before sleep. Establish a secure place where all devices remain overnight.
- **WHAT:** provide clear instruction about what apps, websites, video games and television shows are allowed. Utilise parental controls like OurPact and KoalaSafe.
- **WITH WHOM:** as countless apps and games allow online chatting, stranger danger understanding is imperative. Keep a list of which programs can be played, and most importantly, with whom.

sports commentary (like ingredients to be purchased for dinner plans) that parents hopefully still do as they shop with toddlers helps them link and give meaning to words,” says Fuller.

PRIMARY AGED: 5–12 YEARS

The recommendation of two hours maximum screen-time for primary-aged children is commonly surpassed, especially since becoming integrated into educational systems. As technology is used as a tool at school rather than a toy, leisure time is of most concern, particularly when you consider the

addictive nature of video games involving vengeful characters punching on and blowing things up.

“Virtual violence can be a problem for a few reasons,” says Goodwin. “Firstly, video games elicit an active response; children are not passively observing violence, but instead actively participating. Also, violence is often rewarded by advancing or progressing. Mirror neurons (brain cells) predispose children to emulate characters’ actions, meaning they may become aggressive during play or activities.”

Numerous studies suggest gaming obsession may damage brain structure and function, including shrinkage of grey matter in which important processing and cognitive functioning takes place, and compromise white matter integrity which may interrupt vital neural communication. A neurotransmitter called dopamine is also believed to be released while gaming, which enhances urges and compulsive playing similar to drug cravings.


To be fair, video games of a more educational nature may in fact promote creativity and problem solving, particularly Minecraft: Education Edition (think digital Lego), which has been successfully utilised within schools worldwide. Goodwin identifies other benefits of educational screen-time, which allow children to understand abstract concepts – particularly maths and science – in a direct way through animations, videos and online demonstrations. Instant feedback from apps and websites also allows children to rectify mistakes or misconceptions in their thinking.



All this said, Fuller again returns to the main message that human interaction ultimately trumps electronic media. “During primary-aged years, experience rules in terms of learning. In my book *Unlocking your Child’s Genius* (\$27.99, Finch Publishing), I talk about a formula: experience plus reflection equals learning,” he says. “This means giving kids a range of experiences, and having a conversation about it afterwards promotes learning. I’m not sure there is an app for that!”

The occasional rainy day screen-time marathons are forgivable, but how do we realistically set consistently clear boundaries? Goodwin suggests calculating suitable screen-time by imagining a child’s life as a glass jar. Within this jar are seven blocks, each representing an essential developmental



component: language, relationships, sleep, physical movement, executive function skills, nutrition and play. If all blocks are regularly in place, then screen-time may fill the empty space.

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WARNING SIGNS

Warning signs of unhealthy screen-time habits include:

- Technology dominating leisure time
- Inability to remain still without gadgets
- Socially withdrawing
- Poor sleeping habits
- Withdrawing from previously enjoyed activities
- Restlessness, moodiness, depression or irritability
- Concealing extent of use
- Technology used for longer periods to achieve the same level of satisfaction
- Using technology to cope with or avoid psychological problems
- Compromised school performance ■

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