

Strategies for Reducing Screen Time

Research and experience show that screen time have an adverse affect on children's development. To ensure proper development and success in school, Waldorf education recommends no screen time for children under the age of seven years old, and minimal screen time entering primary school.

Too much screen time can be linked to:

Behavioral problems. Elementary students who spend more than two hours a day watching TV, playing video games or using a computer or smartphone are more likely to have emotional, social and attention problems. Also, exposure to video games is linked with an increased possibility of attention problems in children.

Social problems. Screen time is related to reduced imagination, and less ability to engage in social, collaborative play. It provides one-dimensional models of the human being, or models of human beings which are unrealistic, e.g. cartoons or superheroes.

Limited imagination and less time for play. Excessive screen time leaves less time for active, creative play. This impairs children's social behaviors and their imagination. Instead of stimulating their imagination to be entertained with simple toys, they are left requiring more and more television telling them what to think in order to be entertained.

Irregular sleep. The more time spent watching on a screen, the more likely children are to have trouble falling asleep or have an irregular sleep schedule. Sleep loss can lead to fatigue and increased snacking.

Impaired academic performance. Elementary students who have TVs or other screens in their bedrooms tend to perform worse on tests than do those who don't.

Violence. Too much exposure to violence through media can desensitize children to violence. As a result, children might learn to accept violent behavior as a normal way to solve problems.

Obesity. The more TV and video your child watches, the greater his or her risk is of becoming overweight. Having a TV or other electronics in a child's bedroom increases this risk as well. Children can also develop an appetite for junk food promoted in ads, as well as overeat while watching on electronics.

Here are simple steps to reduce screen time:

Reduce your own screen time. Your child imitates you and learns their values from you. If you model being present in the moment with them, they will also value this behavior.

Eliminate background TV. If the TV is turned on — even if it's just in the background — it's likely to draw your child's attention. If you're not actively watching a show, turn it off.

Strategies for Reducing Screen Time, continued

Keep TVs, smartphones and computers out of the bedroom. Children who have electronics in their bedrooms watch more than children who don't have these in their bedrooms. Monitor your child's screen time and the websites he or she is visiting by keeping TVs and computers in a common area in your house.

Don't eat in front of a screen. Allowing your child to eat or snack in front of electronic devices increases his or her screen time, and reduces their awareness of their food. It can encourage them to be picky eaters. And the habit encourages mindless munching, which can lead to weight gain.

When your child has screen time, make it as engaging as possible:

Plan what your child views. Seek quality videos or programming. Good examples include programs featuring real nature, people and animals instead of animation, and programs that are a bit longer and slower to encourage increasing attention span. Preview the content prior to letting your child view it. Don't allow your child to play with your devices unsupervised.

Watch with your child. Whenever possible, watch programs together and talk about what you see. If you see a junk food ad or violence, explain that just because it's on TV doesn't mean it's good for you.

Avoid multi-tasking while you watch. If you are going to watch TV, create a calm and focused environment around it. Give it your full attention for the length of the program, and then stop when it is done and move on to other things.

Set clear boundaries on screen time and stick to them. Set a clear rhythm of watching a single program attentively from start to finish, and then stopping when it is over. Avoid irritable conversations with children afterward negotiating for "just one more episode" by setting clear expectations of one at a time, and sticking to it.

Eliminate YouTube and video games. Fast-paced programming like the content on YouTube, video games, and short-format programs (e.g. Peppa Pig, Paw Patrol, most of YouTube) reduce attention span by presenting short clips and promoting binge watching. Such programs are designed to provide an addictive experience and should be avoided as content for your child.

Avoid commercials. Commercials are designed to make you want things you may not need. This is a confusing experience for children, who do not yet have enough experience to make good judgements about such things. Record programs and watch them later. This will allow you to fast-forward through commercials selling toys, junk food and other products. When watching live programs, use the mute button during commercials.

Compiled by Dina Robbins, with many great ideas from an article by Jill Christensen.