

Screen time: Overview

By SickKids staff

Find out how much screen time your child should have each day and how screen time affects your child's health and wellbeing.

Key points

- Screen time is the amount of time your child spends using a device that has a screen such as a TV, computer, games console, tablet or smartphone.
- The recommended amount of screen time depends on a child's age. Children under two should not have any screen time and those under aged five and under should have less than two hours a day.
- Spending too much time in front of a screen can negatively impact your child's mental health. Signs include feeling sad, overly tired, withdrawn or uninterested in other activities.



What is screen time?

Screen time is the amount of time your child spends using a device that has a screen. It includes time spent watching television, browsing the internet, using a cell phone and playing video games. But regardless of the device, most screen time limits a child's opportunities to get active outside the home. Over time, this low level of [physical activity](#) can threaten their health.

The technology children have access to today is changing their world and providing them with endless opportunities. The downside is that it is very easy for children (and even adults) to experience an overload of information and forget about other fun and healthy activities.

Recent research from the Healthy Active Living and Obesity Research Group in the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario indicates that Canadian school-aged children spend 65 to 80 percent of their waking hours engaging in sedentary behaviour. Another study found that Canadian children and youth aged six to 19 spend 62 percent of their waking hours being sedentary.

Together, these studies show that most young children engage in activities that involve little physical movement or use of energy. This pattern can be partly explained by the increasing amount of screen time in our daily lives.

How screen time affects physical and mental health

Screen time has been linked to lower levels of physical fitness and problems with mental health and social development.

- Children who spend more time in front of a screen tend to have higher obesity rates than children who spend less time in front of a screen.
- Children and teens who watch more than two hours of TV a day have lower scores of self-esteem.
- Higher levels of screen time have been linked to lower school performance, partly because those who watch more TV tend to spend less time on homework.
- Screen time can sometimes encourage unhealthy eating habits. For instance, if your child is distracted by a television show or video game while they eat, they may not be able to recognize when they are full. It is also easy for your child to associate screen time with enjoying a favourite food.

While active video games are advertised as a good way to encourage physical activity, children and teens quickly learn how to play using minimal gestures (for example using wrist movement only). This greatly reduces the amount of energy they use.

How much screen time is ‘too much’?

Daily screen time recommendations largely depend on the age of the child. The Canadian Paediatric Society and the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology (CSEP) recommend the following daily limits.

- Children under age two: no screen time
- Children aged two to four: less than one hour a day of screen time
- Children and teens aged 5 to 17: maximum of two hours a day of recreational screen time (watching television, messaging friends or playing computer games)

Screen time is an important and unavoidable part of your child's life, especially as they get older. For instance, older children may need to spend more time on a computer to complete homework or on their phone to stay in touch with friends. There are also different types of screen time: using a phone or computer to video call a family member has a different effect on a developing brain than watching a stream of videos.

Associations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics have considered the growing presence of technology from the early years. Rather than set daily limits by age group, its recommendations now focus on the role of parents to set limits, use their judgment about the quality of screen time and model healthy behaviour. It is likely that more research into screen time will be needed as technology continues to evolve.

How to calculate your child's current daily screen time

Calculate the time your child spends looking at a screen on a normal day by adding up the time on the activities in the table below from when your child wakes up until they go to bed. When you have the total time, you can decide if you need to [set limits on screen time](#) and encourage your child to spend more time on other activities.

Screen time activity	Examples
Watching television	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Watching cartoons, reality shows, sports, documentaries, news, game shows, talk shows, movies
Using the internet	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Watching videosWatching streamed TV shows or moviesInstant messagingDownloading musicPlaying online gamesUsing social media websites and apps
Using a computer or tablet	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reading or writing documentsPlaying a computer gameCreating a drawing in a computer programBrowsing or editing photosListening to or organizing music filesWriting computer programs
Using a cell phone or smart watch	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Reading and writing text messagesPlaying gamesUsing appsListening to music
Playing games	<ul style="list-style-type: none">Using a gaming stationUsing a children's camera with built-in games

How to tell if your child has too much screen time

Screen time becomes unhealthy when your child is glued to a screen for most of the day. If your child's screen time falls outside the recommended limits for their age, you may notice some telltale signs.

Children and teens who spend too much time in front of a screen may seem:

- lonely
- sad
- overly tired
- stressed or fearful
- isolated from friends or family
- withdrawn
- nervous
- agitated or tense
- aggressive or angry.

They may also experience emotional outbursts and have difficulties making and keeping friends.

Some children also have difficulties concentrating and lose interest in school, following rules or doing other activities. The lack of physical activity that results from too much screen time can also cause frequent back pain, headaches or stomach aches.

Some of these issues may have causes other than excessive screen time. See your child's doctor if you have any concerns about your child's physical or mental health.

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