

Screens and under 5's

(Screens include TV, tablets, game consoles, smartphones and computers).

The world is already driven by technology, and this will only increase in your children's lives.

Screens are not dangerous, and while the headlines about addicted children are overplayed, there are risks for some children.

While some risks are obvious (three-year-olds playing 'Call of Duty', or spending all day on a screen), there are some a little less obvious, especially for under 5's.

Sleep

Screen use before **bedtime stops** the hormone, which helps us drop into a deep sleep. If small children do not get enough sleep (10-12 hours), the hormone, essential for their physical and mental development will not be released.

If your child is not getting enough sleep; finding it difficult to go off to sleep; sleeping fitfully and waking up tired, there is a problem.

What to do – start with no screen time in the hour before sleep, which may mean no screens in the bedroom, or at least all-screens off. So, for example, if bed is at eight, no screen use from seven (even background TV). No tablet next to beds, no bedtime stories on a tablet, or a quick game on the phone before sleep.

Early habits

Small children develop habits that continue into adulthood. A fussy eater at 3, can be a fussy eater at 13, while an active child at 3 is likely to be an active child at 13. Screen habits are important

for under 5's. When screens dominate, this is a problem, but it also means they are *not doing* other activities.

If your child finds it difficult to stop playing a game, watching TV, or watching YouTube on the tablet, you have a problem. If the tablet is the last thing they touch at night, and the first in the morning. If you regularly see tears, or have furniture kicked when screens go off, there is a problem. If you notice that you are having fewer conversations with your child, or they haven't been outside for the weekend, with your child moving from tablet to TV, to game console, and back to the tablet, you have a big problem.

What to do – Make screens one of a range of activities, and not their first choice. Decide what is a reasonable amount in your house, and stick to it consistently. Make sure there are alternatives. This will lead to a habit developing where screens are a part of what they do, and not the dominant one.

Dopamine

Games such as Fortnite, Minecraft and Candy Crush are built on small successes, which give a child a dopamine buzz. The more of these they get, the more they want. Children who play these games can find themselves looking for the buzz in other activities, and if they do not get them, they will want the games even more.

Wanting to be on screens as much as they can; regularly asking "just one more"; getting upset and angry when

they have to stop, and not being interested in other types of activities, there is a problem.

If your child is flitty, moving from one activity to another and struggling to retain information and interest unless there is a reward or a buzz, this is a problem.

What to do - decide how long and how often games can be played, and strongly encourage your child to do other activities. You will know when you reach the right amount, as the fights, upsets and negotiations will reduce and stop. This will probably involve you being more active in play, and making sure there are games, and alternatives available.

Brain development

These fall into two main areas, language and learning. Background TV can reduce under 5's play and language. Under 3's find it difficult to tell the difference between fact and fiction (they will view the news and a game, the same).

If your child doesn't talk a lot and doesn't have much vocabulary, *and* is drawn to screens whenever they can be, this is a problem. If language and communication skills are slow to develop, and they are showing little interest in writing, drawing and other basic pencil activities, there is a problem.

What to do - reduce screen use and time and provide more verbal interaction

(communication and language).

Encourage them to stay on an alternative activity, and gradually increase the time they spend on these.

Children are different

When governments, or health organisations provide advice, they give standardised guidance (units of alcohol, portions of vegetables). The problem with this approach and screens, is that individuals tolerance varies, so too much can be an hour for one person, and 10 minutes for another. Rather than going for the "hours a day" approach, we have highlighted symptoms, which will tell you if your child has a problem and what you can do.

If you have two children, or more they are likely to have different amounts they can deal with, so look for the symptoms.

You are the brake

You will see from the 'what to do' sections they are all about you deciding on, and establishing the limits. This is not encouraging you to be a dominating parent, but understanding that many under 5's find screens like sweets, or cake. For some, they will eat until they are sick, so need help to establish a brake, where screens are a part of their lives, and not overwhelming.

For general further reading and references, follow the link: [Boys Development Project website](#)

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