

Screen time for children

the implications for health

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In today's society we are increasingly using electronic media as a means of communication, education and recreation.

Social media is fast becoming the main method of young people keeping in touch. There has been a rapid increase in the variety of television channels and the amount of electronic film clips and data being uploaded and much of the education program is now run online on computers.

This has led to a rapid increase in the amount of screen time our children are experiencing. Many investigators have looked at how this may be affecting our children and several recommendations have been made by health authorities about optimal screen times for differing stages of the developing brain.

The newborn baby has an immature brain with a very large number of incompletely developed pathways which go on to develop full sensory awareness and motor control of the developing body. A baby will slowly learn how to control his or her body, to intentionally propel and move arms and legs, to develop an awareness of the body's position in space, and determine whether s/he is sitting, standing or walking.

In the first two years of life there is rapid maturation of the brain and nervous system and strengthening of the muscular system as the baby learns to move around, walk and talk. During this time of rapid coding and programming of the developing brain under the age of two, children should

have no screen time at all. They already have enough new sensations bombarding their learning centres from the messages coming from their own bodies, as well as their surrounding environment and through the voices of those around them. It is somewhat like a new library sorting out its filing system and reference manual, so that it can match and evaluate new experiences.



It is thought that the flickering and constant verbal noise from television can be quite unsettling to a young baby. Their eyes are drawn to the ever-changing bright lights and they can be seen to stare at the screen in a non-interactive way.

From two years of age it is recommended that children should have no more than one to two hours of television viewing each day. It is becoming more common for children of this age to be allowed to play with iPads™

and mobile phones to keep them occupied, but this really constitutes screen time and should be calculated in the recommended time usage at this age.

On commencing school, the use of computers and television will increase with the curriculum, but the recommendation remains that there should be no more than two hours of recreational screen time,

including games, videos or phone screens per day.

Increased levels of screen watching can lead to:

- increased levels of emotional distress
- anxiety and depression
- increased levels of obesity
- sleep disturbances.

We must not forget that social media, video games and computer usage are all considered to be screen usage time and should be included in the calculation of total screen time.

It is strongly recommended that television should not be used in bedrooms or at meal times or homework times. Television viewing in younger children should be co-viewing which offers the opportunity not only to monitor what is being viewed, but also provides a discussion medium for what is viewed.

With the advent of spring and summer, children should be encouraged to play outdoors and to be involved in more active play for their general fitness, as well as their balance and coordination.

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