



Llywodraeth Cymru
Welsh Government



A family guide to talking about screen time

Mae'r ddogfen yma hefyd ar gael yn Gymraeg.
This document is also available in Welsh.

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How to keep screen time healthy: a matter of balance

For many of us today, devices with screens are everywhere we look. They help us access our jobs or places of education to collaborate. They allow us to consume movies, music, TV, radio and other entertainment round the clock. And they also keep us in touch instantly from anywhere in the world via video, audio and written words using powerful social media tools.

Concern about the time children and young people in particular spend using screens has inevitably increased. Questions are being asked around screen time's influence on being able to get a good night's sleep, making time to eat properly, being physically active, and getting to school on time – all important factors in maintaining health and well-being.

This guide examines both the positive and negative sides of screen time and explores how to use modern technology in a balanced healthy way.

What do we mean by screen time?

Screen time is the amount of time spent using any device with a screen. It's a term most frequently applied to the use of interactive digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, computers or games consoles. These differ from older technology such as 'traditional' TV that's more passive, offering little opportunity to interact with content or other people.

Is there evidence that over-using screens can damage health?

Concerns about our relationship with screens and their impact on health go back decades, ever since TV expanded from the 1950s onwards. Here are some of the most frequent worries in the digital era.

- **'Screen time reduces physical activity'.**
Research on this isn't clear. However, screen time may encourage children who are inactive already to become even more sedentary.
- **'Screen time encourages unhealthy eating'.**
Yes, there is some evidence for this – compounded by well targeted adverts for high-calorie, low-nutrition snacks outside of mealtimes.

- **‘Screen time can cause physical health problems’.**

While high usage can cause sore eyes, headaches, neck, arm or finger pain, etc., there’s no firm evidence of it being responsible for long-term problems.

- **‘Screen time negatively affects sleep’.**

Research does show that screen time before bed can disrupt sleep patterns and make it harder to get to sleep in the first place. Researchers are nevertheless split on the subject.

Is there ‘good’ and ‘bad’ screen time?

Many screen time concerns come from **what** children and young people are seeing or doing when on screen rather than **how long** they’re doing it for.

They may be watching disturbing images or videos, or living out stressful relationships with others that involve arguments or bullying. Of course, the longer someone is exposed to something, the more they might be stressed by what’s going on. Autoplay, a feature that makes it hard to take a break when the next video starts in seconds, can be an aggravating factor.

Few parents, carers or teachers on the other hand would think screen time was bad if the screen were being used for homework, writing essays or undertaking research. However, there’s another angle to the ‘good’ vs. ‘bad’ screen time debate.

[Facebook says ‘passively consuming’ the News Feed will make you feel worse about yourself](#) suggests that those that spent their time just passively scrolling through their news feed felt worse than those who used it to interact with friends and family. They called these ‘meaningful interactions’.

It may therefore be helpful to move on from thinking about whether screen time stops children and young people from doing the things that keep them healthy, towards whether it allows them to do the things that improve their health and happiness. These include the [‘Five ways to well-being’](#), produced by the New Economics Foundation (NEF) on behalf of Foresight, which are to:

- connect
- be active
- take notice
- keep learning
- give.

Above all, a lifestyle that balances screen time with offline activities, rather than revolving around it, has to be healthier for everyone.

What signals should you look out for that your child's screen time is negatively affecting them?

While it can be difficult to spot when technology use becomes a problem, you'll know your child better than anyone. So, if things are getting worse at school or with friends, it may be a nudge to try and understand whether technology is part of the problem.

- **Check out peer group behaviour.**
Ask other parents or carers what their child is doing. If yours is on screen for much longer than their friends, it may be a sign to look at things more closely.
- **Keep an eye out for raised stress or worry levels.**
If you notice mood or behaviour changes, it's worth asking your child how they are. Explain that you're there to listen if they're having a difficult time, not to judge or just take their devices away. Many young people would prefer to suffer rather than lose their phone. Don't jump to blame the phone or social media itself. Instead, give them the space and support to tell you what's going on.
- **Know how well they're sleeping.**
Sleep is important for learning and behaviour, growth and staying happy. Be aware of what time young people get to sleep and if it's hard for them to wake up. The Royal College of Child Health and Paediatrics recommends no screen activities for one hour before sleep. Most young people need at least eight or nine hours a night, more when younger.

How can you get an over-tired child to sleep better?

Screen over-use can make your child tired and grumpy. So, having a useful conversation about it at the time may prove challenging. Instead, prioritise a good night's sleep first.

- **Get screens out of bedrooms** and stop high stimulation screen activities such as video games, social media and TV at least an hour before bedtime. The blue light from screens reduces our sleep hormone and delays sleep.
- **Establish a good bedtime routine** taking younger children to bed at a similar time when they're sleepy, but still awake. 30 minutes of relaxing music, with a story or a bath beforehand are especially beneficial.
- **Avoid caffeine or fizzy drinks** during the evening.

How can you best balance screen time and other, non-screen activities – both for yourselves and your child?

Children learn by example, including how they witness their parents and carers using screens. It means that efforts to better manage screen time need to involve the whole family.

Rules that everyone can abide by can make things easier. The American Academy of Pediatrics [Family Media Plan](#) is a helpful way of establishing good habits, rather than trying to work it all out in the heat of the moment.

A plan can help everyone agree:

- where and when to use phones (for example not at mealtimes or in the bedroom)
- how much sleep they need
- what media they watch
- what offline activities they'll pursue.

What approaches to managing screen time work best for younger and older children?

Younger children tend to require less explanation and often respond to firm but fair guidance about what they're allowed to do. Getting them into healthy habits when young for example, enjoying a short time on a tablet that then ends can make things easier later on.

With teenagers you need to offer reasons for changing their behaviour. Simply telling them about risks or worries can make them 'switch off' and ignore you. Make it clear you want them not just to be happy today, but to have a happy life. Even if they were a successful YouTuber or gamer, having a good balance in their life would be a healthy thing.

Have the conversation: five starter questions

Talking about issues around screen time in the family is always a good idea. So how about making a start with questions like:

- do you think I'm on my phone or using social media too much?
- do you know anyone who's actually making money from their online activities?
- do you think apps and games are designed to be addictive? And in fact, are they?
- who's most on their phone in the family?
- do you think I should start a YouTube channel?

For more resources and information about balancing screen time visit:

What works well-being

<https://whatworkswellbeing.org/blog/five-ways-to-wellbeing-in-the-uk/>

HealthyChildren.org

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx>

Online safety zone on Hwb

[Screen time overload playlist for parents and carers.](#)

Parenting. Give it time. (Welsh Government)

[Creating a balance between family time and screen time.](#)