Balancing Screen Time

from Y Teulu Cyfan team - Flintshire

We are a team based in Flintshire, helping parents with lots of different challenges, including behavioural issues and practical things too. We love seeing how making small changes can bring big results. It's amazing to see parents growing in confidence and feeling able to take control of situations they might previously have felt were too tricky.

Technology is a part of all our lives and most of the time it helps make our lives a little easier.

Times have changed and we're all experiencing more time at home and we have a more blended learning approach in our schools.

Screens and devices are becoming part of our and our children's lives more and more. Our team will share useful and reassuring information and tips that will help parents and their children balance their screen time at home.

The benefits of screen time

It's important to say that screen time is a part of our society, and that's not going to change. The availability is huge these days compared to, say, 20 years ago. And that's fine. We're not demonising technology here.

There's plenty of good things to say about screen time; it can be educational, informative, and a great way of staying in touch with friends and family who live far away. The key is managing it.

It only becomes an issue if you, or your child become dependent on it. It should be something everyone enjoys, not something everyone needs. That goes for parents as well as children.

How screen time can affect children

Too much screen time can affect children's behaviour, sleep and concentration. For example, the more time they spend on their iPad, phone or computer, the less time they're spending running around outside, letting off steam or interacting with friends and family.

Whether you're a child or an adult, if you're continually in front of a screen, you're not burning energy; you're not getting fresh air and you're probably missing out on other things you'd enjoy.

Too much exposure to electronic screens can cause reduced blinking rates, which can lead to eye strain and vision problems in the future. Also, aches and pains from being in the same position for too long, and the 'glow' from the screens can affect sleep patterns.

… and as we know, if the children are spending too much time looking at the screen, it means they are not communicating with you and the rest of the family, which is so important.

How much is too much when it comes to screen time?

With screens practically everywhere, it can be difficult to manage screen time.

Screen time can be valuable, for example as a fun, educational tool or as a way to stay in touch with friends or family. It only becomes an issue if the child has unlimited access to their screen, or if the parent uses screen time as a way of 'managing' the child's behaviour. When a child is having a tantrum, it's tempting to give in to them if what they want is access to their screen!

In terms of knowing 'how much is too much', I think as a parent, you instinctively know if you're starting to rely a little bit too much on screen time.

It's not just children who can become too dependent on screen time. If you have a busy life, it's often the easiest and quickest way to keep your child be quiet so you can get on with what you need to do. Perhaps you've had a very stressful day and you feel you 'just can't deal' with a tantrum now. So, you give in, and let them have their screen. It's these 'screen time traps' you need to watch out for.

Technology shouldn't be a short-term fix or a 'band aid' solution to a tricky situation.

Top Signs of too much screen time:

If you're worried your child is becoming too dependent on screen time, there are some signs you can look out for:

1. Have they stopped doing things they used to enjoy?
2. Would your child choose screen time over any other fun activity?
3. Is it difficult to get their attention when they're on their screen, do they ignore you?
4. Do they act out of character if you take the screen away?

If any of these signs ring a bell, it's time to reduce and balance the amount screen time.

Reducing screen time

If you think you need to work towards cutting back on your child's screen time, avoid using negative words. You want your child to feel it's a good thing, because essentially, less screen time means you are giving them more of your time. By using words like 'limiting' screen you're putting a negative on it.

It's not about taking something away, it's about substituting it with something even better, that in the long run will be better for you and your child. Talk to your child. Find out what they like and ask for suggestions on some fun things you can do together!

If your child has a tantrum when you start to reduce their screen time – tantrums are normal and will happen. The important thing is to not give into it. Try not just take the screen away, but explain why you're doing it and why it's a good thing. If you tell your child 'Right, I'm taking your iPad away because you're on it too much' they may not understand and can push back. But, if you tell them you're going to do something better instead, you'll get a much better response.

Limiting your own screen time

If you think you need to work towards cutting back on your child's screen time, you may need to check that you're not spending too much time on your own screen too. You can't limit their screen time and be scrolling through Facebook at the same time – you need the same rules across the board. Make putting screen time aside something you all do. Children will model and pick up on your own behaviour too.

Top Tips on managing screen time:

Setting limits on screen time in a technology obsessed world isn't easy. Here are a few of our top tips on how to limit screen time, with as little stress as possible:

1. Be a role model.

Try to reduce habits like having the TV on in the background and reduce the time you spend on your own devices, especially when your children are around.

2. Create technology-free zones in your house.

Have areas in your home where screens are 'banned', whatever your age. Maybe bedrooms or the dining room can be reserved for meals and sleep / play only!

3. Avoid screens an hour before bed.

The Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health advises that children should avoid screens an hour before bed to help sleep.

4. Make it a reward.

Talk to your child and together, find different things you enjoy together as a family. Schedule time for screen time and make it a reward. For example, tell your child they can earn screen time 'points' by helping you with chores, or by making sure they get their things ready for school the night before. Screen time can be a reward for completing their morning routine with 5 minutes to spare.

5. Spend quality time together.

Go for a walk in the park, take the dog out, collect leaves, give them something they can be responsible for like a bit of the garden they can 'own'. If you need to stay indoors, have some gloopy, messy play where you all let your hair down a bit. Think about what you would enjoy doing. Can your child join in and can you develop or discover shared interests?

6. Agree on the screen time and consequences.

Talk about and agree on how long screen time is allowed – including the consequence if this is not followed. For example, if after the time agreed your child refuses to stop, then the consequence could be no more screen time for the rest of the day / week.

And remember you are doing the best you can.

For more information and advice on screen time visit: gov.wales/giveittime

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