**Children and screen time: how much is too much?**

Without question, the world our children are growing up in is very different to what we experienced. A big part of this is linked to the technological advancements which now give instant, affordable, easy access to all types of digital media and experiences. What this means is that today’s children are getting exposure to entirely new ways of thinking, learning, and living – much of which has great benefit for them when it comes to their cognitive development and future success.

School curriculum now includes tech-advanced skills including flying drones, coding and even learning how to build and use artificial intelligence. In order for your child to fully thrive, they will need to engage with technology. However, there are limits to ‘screen time’ which is critical to making sure they engage healthily – and without the detrimental effects that we’re seeing worldwide when it comes to the overuse of **TVs, smartphones, and computers.**

**Is too much screen time really bad?**

**To begin with, the** **American Academy of Paediatrics discourages all digital media use by children younger than 2 years of age, and recommends that we limit older children’s screen time usage to a maximum of 1 hour a day (ages 2-12) and a maximum of 2 hours a day (ages 12+).**

**Research from the Mayo Clinic has shown that too much time watching TV or using other types of digital media** can be detrimental to your child’s health, leading to them not getting enough physical activity (which can result in them becoming overweight or battling obesity), sleep loss and fatigue, [certain emotional, social and behaviour problems](https://www.mayoclinichealthsystem.org/hometown-health/speaking-of-health/are-video-games-and-screens-another-addiction) and impaired academic performance.

What’s also cause for concern is that as parents or caregivers, we may be underestimating how much screen time our children are getting. This is why ‘slimming down’ screen time has become such a health priority globally.

**Need help reducing your child’s screen time? Here are our Vitality tips.**

1. **Set times and curfews for screen time.**

Weekdays should be more limited when it comes to leisure screen time as your child is likely using a laptop or tablet at school and for their homework already. Also, avoid having a TV on in the background when you’re preparing or having dinner as this distraction is likely to still draw your child’s attention.

1. **It might be a new habit for the family, but try avoid TV while eating together.**

This leads to mindless eating which is linked to weight gain and also reinforces the unhealthy behaviour of associating meal times with screen time. It’s worth considering a ‘tech-free zone’ in your home – starting in the dining room or kitchen.

1. **Encourage active screen time.**

All screen time is not created equal. There are healthy ways of combining tech into your child’s life that can be beneficial. For example, download stretching or exercise classes on YouTube and do them together. You can also set games in-between screen time like commercial breaks (although less relevant now in the age of ad-less streaming) where your kids can do jumping jacks or run on the spot until their show comes back on. You can also prioritise video games that encourage physical activity like Wii game consoles.

1. **A tip for adults as well, keep TVs, smartphones and computers out of the bedroom.**

At a Vitality Conference hosted in South Africa in 2018, Arianna Huffington, known for her role promoting better health through sleep, explained that she forces herself to go tech-free before bedtime. This is to prevent disturbed sleeping patterns which leads to fatigue and burnout. Relevant to children too, we recommend that you keep the tech outside of their bedroom.

1. **Get outside.**

Outside time is an easy distraction away from the appeal of a screen. Go for family walks (we recommend a weekly 5km parkrun) and as the parent/caregiver, try to role model the preferred behaviour by leaving your phone at home too. Encourage unplugged, unstructured playtime for younger kids which helps them to get more physically active at the same time as getting in some quality family bonding.

1. **Watch your own screen time.**

Linked to the tip above, your kids watch you for guidance on social cues and often mimic your behaviours. Track your own screen time and ensure that you’re also following the health guidance on reducing time spent watching TV or on your phone or laptop. This also helps you to be present with your children. If you need a nudge with this, find programmss and apps that you can set to notify you to turn off computers, tablets, and smartphones after a given amount of time.

These strategies for managing screen time include family rules, routines, and choices – all with the aim to encourage healthier lifestyles whilst still supporting your child’s long-term learning and development.