



Information for **parents**  
from Canada's **paediatricians**

## Screen use and young children

Children under 5 years old are exposed to more screens than ever before, including televisions, computers, gaming consoles, smartphones and tablets.

Time with different screens can add up quickly, especially when screens are used both at home and childcare or school.

*The recommendations below are aimed at typically developing children. If your child has special needs, ask your health care provider for advice.*

**Screen use:** Time spent with any screen, including televisions, computers, gaming, smartphones, and tablets.

**Digital media:** Any form of media that uses electronic devices for distribution.

**Technoference:** The interruptions of routines, play, or interactions by digital media use.

### Screen use limits

Young children learn best from face-to-face interactions with caring adults. It's best to keep their screen time to a minimum:

- **For children under 2 years old**, screen use is not recommended (they do not learn from it). **The exception is video chatting with caring adults, such as extended family.**
- **For children 2 to 5 years old**, limit routine or sedentary screen use to about an hour or less per day.

### Why should I limit my child's screen use?

Children younger than 5 years old need active play and quality family time to develop important life skills like language, self-regulation, and creative thinking.

Time using screens is often a lost opportunity for your child to learn in real time: It takes time away from interacting, playing outdoors, creating or enjoying social ‘downtime’ with family. Too much screen use also increases your young child’s risk of becoming:

- Overweight
- Sleep-deprived
- Less school-ready (e.g., early reading skills, language development, social skills)
- Inattentive, aggressive, and less able to self-soothe
- Nearsighted (when objects farther away look blurry)

## How can I set screen use limits at home?

Setting limits when children are young is easier than cutting back when they’re older. As a family, agree on basic screen use rules that everyone understands and shares. Consider developing a family media plan to guide when, how and where screens can—and can’t—be used.

### Here are some other tips:

- Be a good role model with your own screen use—on *all* devices.
- Turn off devices for mealtimes, when reading with your child or when doing things together as a family.
- Turn off screens when no one is using them, *especially* background TV.
- Avoid using screens for *at least* 1 hour before bedtime and keep all screens out of your child’s bedroom. They interfere with sleep.
- Choose healthy activities – like reading, outdoor play, and crafts – instead of screen time.
- Be mindful of ‘technoference’: This happens when phones and other devices get in the way of daily life. When adults spend too much time on their devices, children may behave negatively to get attention.

## How do I choose the right apps, videos or programs for my child?

Ideally, make screen use an activity you and your child do together. Watch with your child and talk about what you’re seeing. To ensure quality content:

- Choose educational, age-appropriate and interactive programs and apps. The best educational apps will have a clear learning goal and encourage participation.
- Pay attention to messages about gender, body image, violence, diversity, and social issues when choosing content.
- Try out apps before your child uses them.
- Make sure your child watches programs you are familiar with.
- Create playlists or choose appropriate channels (i.e., on YouTube)
- Limit your child's exposure to advertising and commercial content.
- Use a media rating system to guide your viewing choices.

## Are e-books a good learning tool?

Quality, age-appropriate 'learn-to-read' apps and e-books can help with language, as long as you and your child are reading and learning together.

But even the best e-books don't help children develop skills like page-turning. The physical 'book experience' includes heavy handling, being scribbled in or chewed (board books, of course!).

## Won't my child fall behind if he isn't exposed to digital media early on?

There is no evidence to support introducing technology at an early age to improve your child's development. Young children always learn best from face-to-face interactions with caring adults. Given the choice, they almost always choose talking, playing, or being read to over using screens.

## Is it OK to use screens to calm or distract my child?

Screens might help in the moment, but if used repeatedly, over time your child won't learn how to self-soothe without them. Use parenting strategies that can help your child develop self-soothing skills, without relying on screens.

Talk to your child's doctor if you need support.

# My child gets upset when I take away screens. What can I do?

In today's world, managing screen use is an ongoing challenge. Setting shared family limits at an early age can help. In the moment, use a calm voice, acknowledge your child's frustration, and try redirecting their interest to another activity or toy.

## Additional resources

- Co-viewing with your kids: Tip sheet (MediaSmarts)  
([http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/tip-sheet/tipsheet\\_co-viewing\\_with\\_kids.pdf](http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/tip-sheet/tipsheet_co-viewing_with_kids.pdf))
- What Every Parent Should Know About Screen Time: Expert Advice (MediaSmarts)  
(<http://mediasmarts.ca/blog/what-every-parent-should-know-about-screen-time-expert-advice>)
- Young children and technology: Finding the right balance (Encyclopedia on Early Childhood Development)  
(<http://www.child-encyclopedia.com/sites/default/files/docs/coups-oeil/technology-in-early-childhood-education-info.pdf>)
- Common Sense Media (reviews games and apps)  
(<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/>)
- 24-Hour Movement Guidelines (Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology)  
(<https://csepguidelines.ca/guidelines/early-years/>)
- Calming Strategies to Use with Children (ConnectABILITY)  
(<http://connectability.ca/2010/09/23/calming-strategies-to-use-with-children/>)
- Five steps to positive parenting (Triple P Positive Parenting Program)  
(<http://www.triplep-parenting.ca/ont-en/get-started/5-steps-to-positive-parenting/>)
- Mind: Screen Time (Public Health Agency of Canada)  
(<https://www.canada.ca/en/public-health/services/publications/healthy-living/screen-time-nobodys-perfect.html>)

- CBC Kids  
(<https://www.cbc.ca/kids/>)
- Sesame Street (Sesame Workshop)  
(<https://www.sesamestreet.org/>)
- 10 no-cost, screen-free activities to play with your preschooler (American Academy of Pediatrics)  
([https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/power-of-play/Pages/10-no-cost-screen-free-activities-to-play-with-your-preschooler.aspx?\\_ga=2.45931303.2010569485.1666614495-2041283291.1663003497&\\_gl=1\\*1f93bkk\\*\\_ga\\*MjA0MTI4MzI5MS4xNjYzMDAzNDk3\\*\\_ga\\_FD9D3](https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/power-of-play/Pages/10-no-cost-screen-free-activities-to-play-with-your-preschooler.aspx?_ga=2.45931303.2010569485.1666614495-2041283291.1663003497&_gl=1*1f93bkk*_ga*MjA0MTI4MzI5MS4xNjYzMDAzNDk3*_ga_FD9D3))
- Beyond Screen Time: Help Your Kids Build Healthy Media Use Habits (American Academy of Pediatrics)  
(<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/family-life/Media/Pages/Healthy-Digital-Media-Use-Habits-for-Babies-Toddlers-Preschoolers.aspx>)

## Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Digital Health Task Force

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Last updated: March 2025



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