

Screen time and digital media: Advice for parents of school-aged children and teens

Highlights

- 'Screen time' refers to time spent with any screen, including smart phones, tablets, television, video games, computers or wearable technology.
- 'Digital media' refers to content transmitted over the Internet or computer networks on all devices.

Many Canadian parents are concerned about how much time children spend using media. According to recent research from MediaSmarts, parents report that about 36% of their 10- to 13-year-olds spend 3 hours or more per day using digital devices for reasons unrelated to school work. That's at least 21 hours a week!

When kids are on their devices, they are usually not learning, interacting with friends and family, playing, or enjoying the outdoors. Solitary screen time also increases the chance that they'll be exposed to negative or harmful content.

So what can parents do? Actually, quite a bit. The key is to pay attention, get involved, and model positive media habits. Here are some specific suggestions, along with additional resources to explore in more detail.

MANAGE screen use through plans, rules, and limits.

- Make and regularly review or revise a Family Media Plan, including individualized time and content limits.
- Consider asking your child or teen to give you their phone at a certain time at the end of the day so they aren't interrupted with phone calls or text messages during family time.

- Be present and engaged when screens are used and, whenever possible, watch together and talk about the content.
- Discourage media multitasking, especially during homework.
- Learn about parental controls and privacy settings.
- Obtain your child's or teen's passwords and login information for devices and social media accounts, to help ensure safety online and to follow online profiles and activities if concerns arise.
- Speak with children and teens about acceptable and unacceptable online behaviours.

Encourage **MEANINGFUL** screen use, so that time spent online serves a purpose.

- Make sure daily routines come first: face-to-face interactions, sleep, and physical activity.
- Encourage your child to watch programs that help teach, such as shows about nature, science, the arts, music or history.
- Help children and teens to choose content that's appropriate for their age and stage.
- Be a part of your children's media lives. For example, join in during video game play and ask about their experiences and encounters online.
- Ask your child's school, after school program or child care centre whether they have a plan for digital literacy and screen use.

MODEL healthy screen use, because your kids are watching you.

- Review your own media habits: Plan time for hobbies, outdoor play and activities.
- Never text or use headphones while driving, walking, jogging or biking.
- Encourage daily "screen-free" times, especially for family meals and socializing.
- Turn screens off when not in use, including background TV.
- Avoid screens at least 1 hour before bedtime, and keep recreational screens out of bedrooms.

How much is too much?

Watch for signs that screen use is becoming a problem, such as:

- Your child complains about being bored or unhappy without access to technology.
- Oppositional behaviour when you set limits on screen time.
- Screen use is interfering with sleep, school or face-to-face interactions.
- Screen time is interfering with offline play, physical activities or socializing with friends and family.
- Negative emotions after interacting online, playing video games or while texting.

Talk to your child's doctor if these signs persist, or if they interfere with family life.

Additional resources

- 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>)
- Co-viewing with your kids: Tip sheet (MediaSmarts)
(http://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/tip-sheet/tipsheet_co-viewing_with_kids.pdf)
- CommonSense Media (reviews games and apps)
(<https://www.commonsensemedia.org/>)
- Managing School-Related Sedentary Behaviour (Sedentary Behaviour Research Network)
(<https://phecanada.ca/sites/default/files/content/docs/sbrn-infographic-en-printable.pdf>)
- My Privacy, My Choice, My Life: A resource for children and teens about online privacy (Office of the Privacy Commissioner of Canada)
(<https://www.priv.gc.ca/en/about-the-opc/what-we-do/awareness-campaigns-and-events/privacy-education-for-kids/>)

Reviewed by the following CPS committees

- Digital Health Task Force

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