

## Managing Screen Time

Screen time is one of the topics that often leads to a lot of parental apologies and sentences that begin with, "I know I shouldn't, but..." Given how parents seem to say they feel about screen time, it's amazing children watch it at all, but watch it they do and watch it a lot. In many cases, children likely are watching too much and in some cases this may be resulting in various problems academically, socially, behaviourally, and so on. However, not all kids are and yet part of the problem may stem from a society that has gone so far in saying something so ubiquitous is bad that there are no reasonable guidelines for parents to look to.

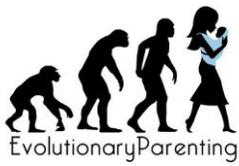
First, let us be clear that no screen time for younger kids is the ideal. It is the biological norm for children and avoiding it is definitely something to be happy about. However, this is also not the reality for many families today and I think it's important to acknowledge the individual realities for families so they can make the best choices within their own circumstances. Hopefully this review of situational factors will help families figure out if or what needs to change when it comes to screen time and how they might go about it.

### What is too much?

For screen time, obviously all day is too much, but outside of that, the problem is that that level of 'too much' is different for each child. Some kids don't seem to have a problem with a couple hours a day whereas this could make many other parents cringe at the thought of their child after that much. In many cases it will depend upon what they are watching and how they are watching (factors explored below), but even without that, knowing what to look for in your child to know when too much is too much is important. To know if your kid is watching too much, look out for the following signs:

- Asks for it all the time
- Gets really angry when it's refused and doesn't move in relatively quickly (many kids will get angry at first because it's saying 'no' to something, thus it's the duration and moving on that are more predictive)
- Loses interest in other games and activities
- Has lots of pent up energy at night
- Gets angry and irritable more often, especially later in the day

If your child is showing these signs then it's time to take a break and reset. Often kids can reset in the matter of a couple days without screen time, but be prepared to weather the storm that may come during that time. And of course, when screens do come back, limit it more than it was before.



### **When do they watch?**

Children in our society often watch at the end of the day when parents are exhausted and they have had full days out of the house, be it in daycare or preschool or school. Screens become a crucial way to just unwind at the end of that time. The problem is that when we use screen times as a means of unwinding, our children are more likely to fall into the passive watching that leads to the above problems.

Given the societal norm of children having very full days out of the house, it is natural for them to need to decompress and unwind at home at the end of that day, but screen time is the last thing they should be doing at this point. After school/daycare/preschool kids need to be active and imaginative before considering any screen time. This means that if you can, allow your child an hour (minimum) to do what he or she would like once home. Play is ideal and if you can get your kid outside in fresh air to run around, even better. I do understand that some families need to get home and parents need to get right to work on dinner and other chores. In this case, have a strict no-screen time then, but also no-homework and no-chores time for your kids. Just have them do whatever it is that they are happy doing that doesn't involve a screen.

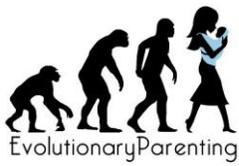
For children that are home all day, you may face the opposite problem of kids who want to watch first thing in the day. The biggest problem here is that this can often lead to a desire to watch all day and nothing else happening except long bouts of screen time. If this is the case, then you need to avoid screen time first thing; however, if your days are busy enough and your child is out and about and watches something first thing then is off and running the rest of the day, there's no problem.

As odd as it is, in general the best practice is to avoid screens when your kids seem to want them most. It's one of those cases where if they are craving it, it's probably not what's best for them at that moment. And of course, avoid screens within the last 90 minutes before bed as this can have a negative impact on sleep, but if you do find screens are used then, try to use a blue light filter and make sure the content is something your children know well and won't cause nightmares or sleep troubles.

### **What do they watch?**

There is a large difference between watching a show that doesn't educate and watching something that engages and gets your child active physically, artistically, or academically. In many cases, the shows that engage actually provide our children with ideas and knowledge that can lead to even greater discoveries and engagements. We should not be afraid of our kids watching shows that stimulate their curiosity so long as they are getting even more time to actually follow this creativity.

I consider shows to fit into one of three categories. The first category is the 'rather useless' category. These are the shows that offer very little to our children in terms of anything. Frankly, most tween shows fall into this category as they may be amusing and funny, but our children don't learn anything of substance and what they do pick up from the shows may be even worse.



The second category is the 'educational' one. Clearly there are tons of educational shows today and any show that actually provides information for kids in a fun way counts. I think of things like The Magic School Bus or Octonauts and so on in this category. These may not stimulate our children (though they might), but watching them will also provide them with some forms of information we're happy for them to have and are wonderful when we need a break or the kids are sick and watching more screens than usual or generally if a child is watching alone.

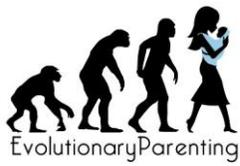
The third category is the 'stimulating' one. These consist of shows or videos that actually get our kids talking and thinking about new ideas. This can happen in a couple ways. It can happen because the topics are interesting and kids can go further with them. A lot of artistic videos on YouTube would meet this criteria as kids try to follow along and are not just watching, but engaging as well. The second way is via engagement with an adult. Watching a show with your child and talking about the topics and any larger ideas can make a 'rather useless' or 'educational' show become 'stimulating'. In our house we turned the family time of watching Ultimate Beastmaster (oh yes) into a variety of lessons on geography, history, health, and physicality, including having to set up our very own versions of the obstacle course for the kids after. Importantly, for anything to be stimulating, it's not just watching but taking the content one step further, whatever that looks like.

### **How do they watch?**

Kids don't watch TV the same, and the same kids don't watch different shows the same. This goes back to the issue of the types of shows or screen times that kids can have and the impact on them. Some children are actively mentally engaged when watching and taking in what is being said (active watching). This is fine and is a wonderful way to learn information. However, some children can watch for an hour and barely register what is going on (passive watching). This often goes back to the timing and what has happened previously in the day to result in the need to just 'space out' and thus most people passively watch once in a while, but for some kids watching this way is the norm and that is the concern.

If your child is one who doesn't actively watch, then you may be best shutting down screen time or severely limiting it. At this stage it's not offering anything valuable to your child and he or she would be better off playing independently, reading, or doing something else. For these children, it may be hard to move away from screens if they have readily used them as a form of decompressing and zoning out, but it is important for their development that they be given this time and likely you'll see in time a change in their overall behaviour and enjoying of other activities.

Screen time doesn't have to be something to apologize for if you're using it to educate and stimulate your children. The variety of what is out there is amazing and our children have opportunities to see things we never could. It's really about being smart of how we use screens, viewing them as a tool instead of a babysitter.



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