How do I manage screen time?

With so much of our lives moving to online formats for education, work and social and extracurricular activities, it’s natural for parents/carers and carers to be thinking about how much time their children are spending in front of screens and how we can help them establish healthy technology habits.

A moderate amount of screen time can have positive impacts on wellbeing, depending on the type of activities your child is doing. While your child is unable to meet their friends in person, it’s important to maintain their social connections as it’s a crucial part of wellbeing. Parents/carers of older children and young people may need to consider that online gaming with friends may be an important way for maintaining social connections during this time.

You may find it useful to break screen time up into different categories – such as educational, active, leisure and social – to help you decide how much of each is suitable for your child and your family.
Remember that most schools are not expecting home learning to cover a normal school day, from 9am to 3pm, so make sure you take lots of breaks and be kind to yourself. We know this is a stressful and uncertain time for many people, and children will be different in how they adapt to home learning. Don’t feel as if you’re doing it alone; let your child's teachers/educators know if your child is struggling or needs help with anything.

STRATEGIES THAT MAY BE HELPFUL IN BREAKING UP THE DAY AND MANAGING SCREEN TIME:

AIM FOR SHORT BURSTS OF SCREEN TIME LEARNING AND PLAN REGULAR BREAKS

Many children will already be familiar with taking brain breaks at school and know what works for them. Aim to take short mental breaks that help your child to get moving or to relax them, so they come back to their learning feeling energised and able to focus. If you’re working from home and trying to homeschool, you may find that having regular brain breaks with your child improves your focus, too. Here are some ideas for brain breaks:

• Play some music and dance along to 2–3 songs with your child
• Do some stretches
• Do a series of star jumps
• Create a family push-up challenge
• Set up a mini scavenger hunt around the house
• Kick a ball in the backyard
• Play I-spy for objects outside the window
• Colour in
• Water indoor plants together

The number of brain breaks and how long each one is will depend on your child’s needs and ability to focus. But in general, primary-aged students may need a short brain break every 10–20 minutes and high school-aged students every 25–30 minutes.

GET ACTIVE

Encourage exercise throughout the day:

• Use screen time exercise
  – Do any exercise activities that many teachers/educators have added their online lessons.
  – Watch child-friendly exercise videos on YouTube that you and your child may enjoy doing together (eg Go Noodle, Cosmic Kids, PE with Joe).
• Get your children out of the house
  – Get out of the house and exercise while still sticking to social distancing rules.
  – Go for a long walk or a bike ride in the middle of the school day.

GET CREATIVE

Use technology to work on creative projects:

• Have your children film and edit a movie to show to the family.
• Use apps that allow your child to create amazing drawings and artwork.
• Have your child research a topic that interests them and create a presentation to share with the family.

USE DEVICES

Access audio content that you can listen to together:

• Listen to age-appropriate audiobooks from your local library.
• Listen to child-friendly podcasts on different topics (eg ABC Australia has several).

SWITCH OFF

Provide alternative activities to screen time so that young children can have valuable unstructured playtime:

• Get crafty with playdough and Lego, do puzzles, cook together, play in the backyard, involve the family in a card game.
• Encourage young people to do activities they enjoy that don’t require technology.
• Recruit younger children as household helpers as they love to feel as if they’re helping, and older children may enjoy earning pocket money or other rewards for completing chores.
• Request printed materials from your child's school for a pen-and-paper task – ask if a printed pack is available for home learning.
STRATEGIES FOR SETTING LIMITS ON SCREEN TIME:

If you already have limits in place, you may consider if they need to be renegotiated to take into account activities that have now moved online. For example, you may want to limit the time your child is spending on video games but allow for extra screen time for activities that have educational or social benefits. Here are some tips:

- Be clear on the limits on screen time you are setting, for example, allocate a set amount of time each day for gaming.
- Assume that most children and young people will need help adhering to limits.
- Allocate screen time at the same time each day, for example 5pm – 6pm.
- Negotiate with your child at the start of the day to determine when they’ll have their screen time. This option works well if your family needs some flexibility around when screen time will occur.

STRATEGIES THAT MAY ENCOURAGE YOUR CHILDREN TO DISCONNECT FROM TECHNOLOGY:

- PROVIDE REMINDERS
  Remind them about 5–10 minutes before you want them to get off technology. Most children will need a second reminder at around two minutes.

- USE A TIMER
  Some children may find it helpful to have a timer set with an alarm at these intervals or a clock they can see.

- CHOOSE LOGICAL TIMES FOR THEM TO FINISH WHAT THEY’RE DOING
  For example, consider saying “When this YouTube video ends, you need to stop using the iPad and brush your teeth”. Or “When you have finished attempting the next level of your game, please stop and help me with the dishes”.

- GIVE CLEAR INSTRUCTIONS
  Provide short, clear instructions about what you want them to do next and allow them time to comply. So, let’s say you have given your 10- and 2- minute reminders, let them know that “it’s time for you to turn off this game and sit at the table for dinner”.

- CONNECT BEFORE DISCONNECTING
  Some children really struggle to disengage from what they’re doing, even when we give them reminders. Try a strategy of connection before disconnection. This means taking a genuine interest in what your child is doing before reminding them they need to finish. From example, before letting them know that it’s time to wrap up, ask them about a character in their game or something about what they are watching.

- Make them earn screen time, and use it as a reward for completing tasks or doing exercise, for example:
  - completing household chores, finishing schoolwork or reading for 20 minutes
  - matching the amount of screen time to how much exercise they do (eg 45 minutes of screen time after 45 minutes of exercise).

- Use star charts for good behaviours – children may be able to earn stars towards extra screen time.

- Set limits on how screens will be used at different times, for example:
  - no texting during family mealtimes
  - no screens at least 30 minutes before bedtime
  - no screens at certain times of the day.

It’s important for parents/carers to stick to these limits and model these behaviours. Some families have found it helpful to use a ‘technology box’ where everyone places their devices during screen-free times.

- PRAISE YOUR CHILD WHEN THEY COMPLY WITH THE LIMITS
  Reward children with genuine praise when they’re able to disconnect and avoid generic phrases such as good job or well done. The idea is to use praise that is clear, concrete and specific about the behaviour you’re happy they are doing. For example:
  - “Thank you so much for turning off the iPad when your screen time was up.”
  - “I’m so impressed that you were able to finish your PlayStation game when I asked you to.”

  Children can also feel disappointed or frustrated about having to stop something they’re really engaged with and enjoying, so it can also help to try to acknowledge how they’re feeling when you give praise:
  - “I know how disappointed you feel when you have to stop playing a game on Xbox, but I’m really proud of you for finishing when I asked you to.”
  - “I know how hard you find getting off the iPad when you’re enjoying it, so thank you for listening to me.”
  - “I know it can feel frustrating when you want to keep playing, so thank you so much for finishing when I asked you to come to dinner.”

- APPLY NATURAL CONSEQUENCES FOR NONCOMPLIANCE
  Once you have set limits that work for your family, given them reminders, tried multiple strategies and your child is still really struggling to disconnect, you can try giving them a natural consequence to encourage them to comply. So, in this case, losing screen time may be appropriate. Often, parents/carers may say, “OK, no screen time tomorrow” or “the whole week”. Taking away a huge chunk of screen time is usually impossible to enforce. Instead, try letting them know that you are going to start a timer and that however long it takes them to finish will be taken off their screen time tomorrow. Then, make sure you take that time off, whether it be 15 seconds or 20 minutes.
USE PARENTAL CONTROLS

Parental controls are features that may be included in computer and video games, mobile phones devices and software that allow you to restrict the access of content to your children. Consider these strategies:

- Set time restrictions on how long your child can use a device or gaming console.
- Choose to limit the apps your child can use on certain devices.
- Receive a notification on your phone for approving new apps that your child is trying to download.
- Add bonus screen time that your child earns.

Most brands’ products provide user-friendly information online about how to set parental controls on devices.

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IPHONE AND IPAD

Allows time restrictions or limiting specific apps, and parental control over downloads and purchases.

support.apple.com/en-au/HT201304

ANDROID

Allows restrictions on time and access to content.

support.google.com/googleplay/answer/1075738?hl=en

XBOX

Allows parents/carers to set time limits and controls on which games can be played.


NINTENDO SWITCH

Allows restriction of which games your child can play and who they can communicate with, and restricts their ability to post pictures to social media.

nintendo.com.au/nintendo-switch/parentalcontrols

PLAYSTATION

support.playstation.com/s/article/PS4-Parental-Controls?language=en_US

WII

nintendo.com.au/p parental-controls-wii

WINDOWS-BASED PC AND XBOX ONE


This site is probably the most user-friendly and covers a range of these products, but it’s not the official site for the products.

esrb.org/about/settingcontrols.jsp

HEAD TO HEALTH (AUSTRALIAN GOVERNMENT)

headtohealth.gov.au/covid-19-support

BEYOND BLUE

Coronavirus Mental Wellbeing Support Service
T: 1800 512 348

A dedicated COVID-19 online forum is available for people to share their concerns and connect online to support one another.

coronavirus.beyondblue.org.au

REACH OUT

Online youth forums and online parents forums for COVID-19 offer peer support in safe and established online communities.

au.reachout.com

MINDSPOT CLINIC

T: 1800 61 44 34
E: contact@minds pot.org.au

minds pot.org.au

HEADSPACE

headspace.org.au

AUSTRALIAN PSYCHOLOGICAL SOCIETY

psychology.org.au/FindAPsychologist

In an emergency, dial 000.