

Managing time spent on online
activity including gaming

Introduction

According to the data, children ages 8-12 spend 4-6 hours a day using screens, while teens spend up to 9 hours a day.



What is screen time, and why does it matter?

Screen time refers to the amount of time a person spends interacting with electronic screens, such as smartphones, tablets, computers, TVs, and other digital devices.



Screen time can be both productive and recreational –can contribute positively to work, learning, and communication.

Striking a balance between screen time and time away from devices is the healthiest approach.

What are the risks of high screen time?



- Disruption to sleeping patterns: staying up late on social media or to watch TV; the blue light screens emit can interfere with the production of melatonin, a hormone that regulates sleep.



- Eye strain and discomfort: prolonged screen time can lead to dry eyes, headaches, and blurred vision



- Obesity, poor posture and musculoskeletal problems leading to neck, shoulder, and back pain: more time on screens generally means a more sedentary lifestyle.



- Mental health issues: particularly that linked to social media – can contribute to feelings of loneliness, anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.



- Academic and work performance: too much screen time can distract from professional, academic, or even personal responsibilities – leading to decreased concentration, performance, and productivity.

What are the specific risks for young people and children?

- Excessive screen time has long been linked with negative effects on a child's developing brain, including their attention span, memory, ability to concentrate and how they behave.
- One study showed that children who spent more than 2 hours a day on screens scored lower on thinking and language tests. Worse still, children with more than 7 hours of daily screen time experienced a thinning of the cortex – the part of the brain responsible for reasoning and critical thinking.



Practical steps to managing screen time

- Setting limits: establish daily or weekly screen time limits for your household
- Prioritising offline activities: encourage outdoor activities and non-screen-related pursuits, such as reading or family board game evenings.
- Create 'tech-free zones': designate areas in your home where screens aren't allowed, such as the dining table or in bedrooms.
- Get notification smart: disable non-essential smartphone notifications to reduce the urge to constantly check devices.
- Use screen time tracking apps- providing insights into your ongoing smartphone usage and reminding you to take breaks.
- Establish a screen-free bedtime ritual: create a relaxing bedtime routine such as reading a book or meditating.
- Be a good role model!

Gaming online

Young people don't like it when parents:

- do not recognise the ways in which gaming is helping, and instead approach the conversation as if gaming is 'bad'
- minimise or dismiss the fact that gaming is important to them
- focus on the fact that the time spent gaming could be spent on schoolwork, rather than also thinking about other interests they might enjoy
- ban gaming instead of looking for a compromise, without recognising that this can cut them off from their friends

Young people would like parents to:

- start by finding out what their experience is, rather than assuming gaming is 'bad'
- ask them what they enjoy about gaming and what they get out of it, and show interest in what they have to say
- recognise that gaming is a social thing they do with their friends
- think about ways to make gaming more sociable if they are worried because their child spends lots of time gaming alone
- try to find out what else is going on that might be causing them to game so much, rather than assuming gaming is the problem
- look for a compromise

Talking to your child about gaming and mental health

- Start with 'I' sentences e.g. "I have noticed that...."
- Starting a conversation while doing an activity together can also help your child to relax by making it feel like less of a 'big chat'.



Additional ideas

- Try writing a family agreement
- Follow through on consequences
- Set limits that help with sleep
- Agree the best way to end a gaming session
- Ask if there is a game they can play with you
- Avoid arguments when emotions are running high
- Make it clear that you are coming from a place of love and care



Childnet Family Agreement

A great way to start positive family conversations around online safety, and to agree clear expectations and boundaries.

Start by discussing the questions that are most relevant to your family.

Getting started

- What do we enjoy doing online?
- What apps, games and websites do we use the most?
- Do we already have any rules about use of tech we want to include in our family agreement?

Managing time online

- How does it feel when we use tech for too long?
- How do we know when our screen use is interfering with family life?
- What can we do to help avoid overusing tech?

Sharing

- What should we check before posting images and videos online?
- Do we know how to use privacy settings and what makes a strong password?
- How can we use features like livestreaming and disappearing content safely?

Online content

- How do we decide which websites, apps, games and devices are okay for us to use?
- What can we do if we see something online which seems unreliable or untrustworthy?
- How can we stop ourselves accidentally spending money in a game or app?

Communicating online

- Who can we talk, chat or play games with online? Just family? Friends? Anyone?
- How can we keep ourselves safe if we are communicating with people who we only know online?
- How can we look after our friends when we are online?

If things go wrong

- What can we do if we feel uncomfortable or upset by anything we see or hear online?
- What should we do if someone we only know online asks us for photos, a video call, to meet up or to share personal information?
- Do we know how to find the report and block buttons on the websites, apps and games we use?

To finish...

- How could parental controls help our family?
- What should happen if one of us breaks the family agreement?
- When should we review our family agreement?

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Examples for different ages:

Our agreement: (Under 11s)

I will use my tablet for ____ mins a day.

I will make sure the children's favourite games are bookmarked for them to get to easily.

Our agreement: (Pre-teens)

I will tell mum and dad when I see something that worries me.

I will put parental controls in place but review it as the children grow up.

Our agreement: (Teenagers)

I will make sure all my social networking sites are private.

I won't post photos of our children without their permission.

Childnet Family Agreement

Now it is time to write your agreement.

Our agreement:

Who is responsible
for this?

What happens if someone doesn't follow the agreement?

Date:

Review date:

Signatures:



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When should you be worried about gaming/screen time?



These are some signs that a young person is finding it hard to control the way they're gaming:

- they feel regularly exhausted and disengaged
- they're struggling to concentrate at school
- they prioritise gaming over important daily activities like sleeping, eating and washing
- they're only socialising online and finding in-person interactions difficult to manage or enjoy
- they no longer keep up with other interests they used to enjoy
- they're finding it difficult to think or talk about much else

What can you do if you are worried?

If your child is regularly experiencing these things and it's been going on for a while, they may need professional support to change the situation.

It's a good idea to seek professional advice if your child is:

- Finding it difficult and distressing to end a gaming session. This might include experiencing feelings of anger, aggression (towards themselves or others), agitation and anxiety that are hard for them to manage when they do finally stop.
- Using drugs to prolong gaming sessions.

Professionals that may be able to help

- School
- GP
- Norfolk Family Hubs
- Young Minds Parent Helpline 0808 802 5544
- Just One Norfolk - Call on 0300 300 0123 or text 07520 631590 with any questions or concerns about your child's health, wellbeing or development.



Finally

While screen time can be both good and bad, what it needs to be is managed. A structured, reasonable approach to screen time that works for the whole family – one that balances education alongside entertainment, and evolves as the child grows – is the most effective strategy to keeping everyone happy, and to staying safe online.

Further information and Resources

- <https://www.childnet.com/resources/supporting-young-people-with-send/digital-wellbeing/>
- <https://www.youngminds.org.uk/parent/parents-a-z-mental-health-guide/gaming/>
- <https://ygam.org/>