

Screen Time - Getting the Balance Right

By Faye Williamson

The Department of Health defines screen time as time spent using electronic media such as TV, seated electronic games, portable devices and computers.

So, how much screen time is too much for our children?

Australia's Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines (released by the Australian Government) recommend:

- Children aged less than 2 years should not have any screen time
- Children aged between 2 and 5 should be limited to less than an hour a day
- Children aged between 5 and 12 should limit screen time, for entertainment purposes, to two hours a day.

Why reduce screen time?

Positive associations between TV viewing and levels of overweight and obesity have been shown in numerous studies.

Compared to children who have less than 2 hours of screen time a day, children who have more are more likely to:

- be overweight
- be less physically active
- drink more sugary drinks
- snack on foods high in sugar, salt and fat
- have fewer social interactions.

“Children aged less than 2 years should not have any screen time”

A study of preschoolers (ages 1-4) performed by the American Academy of paediatrics showed that a child's risk of being overweight increased by six percent for every hour of television watched per day. If that child had a TV in his or her bedroom, the odds of being overweight jumped an additional thirty-one percent for every hour watched.

Current screen time behaviours

According to the National Australian Children's Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey – South Australian Findings show:

- South Australia has a significantly higher amount of screen time (peaking at 4.5 hours/day for 13-14 year olds) than the National average (peaking at 4 hours/day for 13-14 year olds)

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- Significant differences in screen time exist across different socio economic bands. Children of the lowest SES quartile accumulate 30-50 mins more screen time than children of higher SES. In addition High SES children have 30 min/day more school-related time and 20 min/day more sport than low SES children
- Screen time is highest in holidays and on weekends. Adolescents spent an extra 100 mins/day in front of the screen on weekends and public holidays
- Boys accumulate about 40 mins/day more screen time than girls
- Screen time rises rapidly until the ages of 13-14 then declines slowly
- 75% of screen time is TV at age 9 dropping to 60% by age 16.

Other research shows that:

- Obese children watch more TV and accumulate more screen time than non-obese children
- Watching TV for 2 hrs per day during childhood and adolescence has been shown to attribute to 17% of adults overweight
- The peak time for TV watching for 10-13 year olds is 7pm at night followed by the time from 4pm to 7pm and with another peak at 7am.

Determinants of screen time

Families are important influencers on how children use their time. Having a parent who watches more than 2 hours of TV per day and co-viewing with parents are strong predictors of adolescents watching TV.

Nowadays parents feel they are time-poor, working longer hours and spending less time with their children, resulting in screen time as a potential 'baby-sitter'.

The physical home environment can make an impact with TVs in bedrooms being a main concern.

Humans can also be creatures of habit, if children begin watching TV during pre-school years, these patterns are more likely to persist into childhood and adolescence.

Recommendations for parents and caregivers

- Pay attention to how much time children spend using all screen based media
- Do not put TV's in children's bedrooms
- Eliminate background TV
 - Limit TV on School Days
 - Identify Non-screen, in home activities that are enjoyable to children
 - No TV in eating areas. ■

For more information visit <http://www.health.gov.au/>

