



Taking a balanced approach to screen time during the winter months

During the cold winter months, we tend to spend more time indoors and with young children in the house, it can be a challenge to keep everyone entertained.

The routine use of technology for learning and leisure is now taken for granted. Meanwhile, the number of young children who regularly access touchscreen devices is increasingly rapidly.

In an online survey of parents of 715 young children aged between 6 and 36 months, researchers at Birkbeck Baby Lab found that 51% of children aged 6-11 months used a touchscreen device daily, with the figure rising to 92% for children aged 26-36 months.

What does the guidance say?

In the UK, there is currently no detailed guidance for screen time for babies and toddlers. The NHS and National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) do however recommend an upper limit of two hours a day for all children as a precautionary approach. In contrast, the American Academy of Paediatrics guidelines recommend a 'zero' screen time rule for children under 18 months old and for two- to five-year-olds, one hour a day.

The lack of clear guidance – and the indisputable fact that most pre-schoolers spend significantly more than the recommended time looking at screens – can leave parents and carers feeling confused and guilty.

To screen or not to screen

The Alliance has been working with Birkbeck and Bath Universities for several years on the first UK scientific studies to investigate how children aged between 6-36 months use touch screen devices and how these may impact on their development.

Studies are ongoing but there are some both positive and negative findings emerging including that the age when toddlers first scroll a touchscreen is related to how early they can perform precise actions with their hands, such as stacking blocks, but also that high-frequency use of touchscreens is associated with sleep problems.

It can be difficult, therefore, for parents and carers to know what to do for the best. In the absence of clear guidance, experts tend to agree on the following:

- There is no clear evidence that says screen time harms children
- Play safe – be aware of online safety guidance to keep your children safe online:
 - [Keeping children safe online | NSPCC](#)
 - [Child Safety Online: A practical guide for parents and carers - GOV.UK \(www.gov.uk\)](#)
- Children copy adult behaviour: if you are distracted or unavailable to your child because you are on your mobile device, they will be distracted by screens too.
- Build in quality family time together where

- mobile devices are not allowed during the day, particularly at mealtimes.
- Try to avoid blue light screen time before bedtime.
- Avoid placing an outright ban on touch-screen devices but try to limit the time spent on them.
- Play online games together so you can interact with your child and support the positive learning that may be happening.
- Check that the content of games, apps or other online media is suitable for children. Consider whether or not they have an educational purpose.
- Be aware of 'meaningless screen time' where children lose all sense of time and disconnect from the world around them. Do something active with your child instead, even if it is going out for a walk.
- Encourage outdoor activities to boost serotonin (the 'feel good' chemical)
- Be aware of the benefits that screen time may have for your child – perhaps it helps them to settle, or calms them if they are upset.

Remember touchscreen and mobile devices are here to stay and have positive benefits, but without further scientific research we cannot assume anything.

Taking a balanced approach can help your family stay entertained this winter.