

# CONTROL CHILDREN'S SCREEN TIME

**G**LOBALLY, it is estimated that children spend on average seven hours a day on screens, either looking at a smartphone or tablet, watching television or playing video games.

Local research has found that up to two-thirds of Malaysian children have at least three hours of screen time daily.

Excessive screen time will impair speech development. Language development expands most rapidly in the first three years of life.

Children learn best when engaging and interacting with other people as opposed to passive viewing on screen.

Moreover, understanding the content generally does not occur until at least 2 years, meaning the child watches the screen yet learns nothing from it.

The delay in developing speech prevents effective communication by the child at home and later affects confidence and learning skills when attending kindergarten.

Excessive screen time impairs social maturation. It limits their opportunity and diminishes their interest in participating in daily interaction and exploring their surroundings.

As a result, children lack empathy and reciprocal behaviour, which normally involves learning from facial expressions and emotional responses from others.

Children who spend more time on screens demonstrate lower concentration and perform poorer in school.

The rapid images and sounds from the screen affects the child's ability to concentrate, prevents them from developing an active imagination and



Children's mental and physical growth can be affected by spending too much time with the handphone or watching television.

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stifles creativity.

Sleep can be disturbed due to the blue light from screens, which suppresses the hormone responsible for sleep, melatonin, leading to behavioural problems and poorer school performance.

Long hours staring at screens worsens short-sightedness. More and more children are being diagnosed with myopia and in need of corrective lenses.

Time spent on screens also means the child is leading a sedentary lifestyle lacking in physical activities. Added with snacking while watching TV and movies, the risk of obesity is much higher amongst these children.

Also, the possibility of developing chronic illnesses, such as diabetes, is higher in view of their unhealthy inactive lifestyle.

There have been increasing visits to child psychologists for gaming addic-

tion, formally recognised by the World Health Organisation (WHO) as a mental health condition.

A person with gaming addiction places gaming above other interests and activities, leading to difficulties in socialising, education, or other areas of functioning.

Keep meal times, bedtime, and family time free from screens. Setting some household rules and discouraging use of screens during these times

may reduce screen time in children.

Children should have screen-free playtime encouraged. A daily limit or curfew may be helpful for some households.

Promote exercise, healthy eating, and good sleep habits. Sedentary lifestyle in childhood carries on into adulthood and with it comes the negative health effects.

The WHO has several recommendations for children under 5.

For infants, let them be physically active several times a day. For those not yet mobile, this includes at least 30 minutes in prone position (tummy time) spread throughout the day while awake.

Screen time is not recommended. Have 14 to 17 hours of sleep for those aged below three months and 12 to 16 hours for those four to 11 months.

For children aged 1 to 2 years, spend at least 180 minutes daily on physical activities.

For those aged 2, screen times should be not more than one hour, less is better. Have 11 to 14 hours of sleep, including naps.

Preview shows and games before allowing your child to view or play with them. Block or filter inappropriate content. It is best to watch or play together with your child.

This may allow you not only to choose appropriate content but also enables the chance to discuss what is being watched and properly educate your child.

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