

CHAPTER 1

Monitoring screen time in the age of distraction



In the space of a decade, Australians have enthusiastically embraced digital technology, and they continue to do so at an ever increasing rate – ranking us among the world's most prolific internet users.

Figures from the Australian Bureau of Statistics show that 7.7 million Australian households (86 per cent) have internet access from home, and 13.5 million have an internet subscription.

When it comes to young people, digital technology is nearing saturation point. Frequently referred to as 'digital natives', this is a generation of children and adolescents who have never known life without computers or the internet. For these young people, the virtual world is a familiar place that they find easy to navigate. It's an integral part of their education, entertainment and social lives.

As their children discover the lure of the internet, parents throughout the world are facing some tricky questions. How much screen time is too much? What are the potential risks? How are screens affecting attention spans and brain development? Most importantly, how do I manage screen time effectively?

Unfortunately, no one-size-fits-all solution is possible for these issues. We can, however, offer some tips to help parents navigate these previously uncharted territories, focusing mainly on young children.

Are screens inherently bad?

While experts recommend certain guidelines for parents to follow in relation to screen time, it's important for us all to remember that the technologies we're so accustomed to using are still relatively new, meaning the research surrounding them is in its infancy (especially where the long-term impacts are concerned). Therefore, whenever possible, parents should aim to stay abreast of the leading research and resources to ensure they're making informed decisions.

One variable that often complicates matters is age because, as children grow older, their need for the internet and devices expands to include academic, leisure and social activities. The average preschooler, for example, should have significantly less interaction with screens than the average teenager, but they can still benefit from having some dedicated screen time in their

daily routine. Even this may seem contrary to advice you've heard elsewhere. Not too long ago child health-care specialists would have strongly discouraged parents from allowing their preschool-aged children to have any interactions with screens whatsoever; however, the latest research suggests that the *quality* of their screen time matters most – not necessarily the *quantity*. Of course, managing both effectively is the best that any parent can be expected to do.

What this means is that half an hour of low-quality screen time is arguably worse than one hour of high-quality screen time. Of course, determining the quality of screen time can present its own obstacles, so parents should find a reputable source of app and TV show reviews and regularly consult it. We highly recommend Common Sense Media (www.commonsensemedia.org) as a great place to start.

The most common objection you'll hear to allowing a toddler to use a screen is that it's 'baby-sitting for lazy parents'. No doubt you've seen a small child throwing a tantrum in a public space only to be appeased by the offering of Mum or Dad's smartphone. Yet anyone who has raised children knows how hard it can be to complete a task like cooking dinner with a small child demanding your attention, and it's not unreasonable to need a method of distracting them from time to time. Furthermore, it's not necessarily fair to state that a three year old using a digital device is inherently bad, because these experiences have the potential to be positive and beneficial. We need to avoid letting our fear and scepticism of technology hold us back from realising its potential value.

Remember, we've been here before. Historically, we've always been afraid of new technologies – people feared trains, cars and televisions, for example. Yet, we've always found ways to embrace and safely utilise these technologies despite the potential risks associated with them.

What are the potential risks of too much screen time?

Some common parental concerns are associated with screen times in early childhood. While many of these fears are legitimate and justified, child media expert (and Vice President at PBS KIDS Digital in the US) Sara DeWitt wants to show parents that screens can also provide unique opportunities

for young children to develop and grow. Here we look at some of the more prevalent concerns about children and screen times, and some of DeWitt's counterarguments:

- **Screens are passive:** While children being sedentary while using devices, especially with poor posture, can present major health problems, many apps, games and TV shows actively encourage children to get up and move. Digital technologies are able to prompt embodied and active learning.
- **Playing games is a waste of time:** 'Play is the work of the child.' Maria Montessori's famous words remind us that young children learn through playing. Screens can encourage visceral learning by allowing children to follow their instincts and navigate new terrains, elicit information from them and encourage interaction. While screen games should be balanced with outdoor play and face-to-face interaction with other children, they are certainly beneficial. In fact, certain experts believe that having children connect with digital games can teach us more about their cognitive learning than a standardised test can.
- **Screens disrupt childhood:** This fear is natural for those of us whose childhood was internet free; comparing the memories of our own childhood to the realities of childhoods today can be quite alarming. If you grew up playing outdoors with only the contents of your imagination to entertain you, you may feel children playing games indoors is simply wrong. This is when the matter of balance becomes particularly important. Children should be encouraged to explore their imagination and interact with nature without a screen, but they can also connect with devices without it necessarily being detrimental to their experience of childhood – especially given that they are growing up within a digital world and require digital literacy from a young age.
- **Screens will isolate me from my child:** This fear likely comes from a place of guilt. As with anything enjoyable, children have a tendency to covet things that can be bad for them (such as sugar, TV or gaming consoles) in excess. Having your child glued to their screen may create the impression that they're being isolated from

you, but that doesn't mean this feeling of isolation is guaranteed. And screens can also foster connection. Parents of preschoolers should try to actively engage in screen time with their child, either by taking an interest in what they're doing or by doing it with them. In fact, studies have suggested that the greatest benefit of digital learning comes when watching high-quality programming is combined with talking about it with a parent.

Of course, other risks associated with young children using internet-capable technologies include exposure to harmful content, unwanted contact from strangers, and excessive stimulation leading to behavioural and cognitive problems. However, these risks can all be mitigated through ensuring that your child is only able to access recommended, high-quality apps and games, and by having continuous parental oversight and involvement – covered in more detail later in this chapter. First, the following section discusses in more detail some of the potential risks from too much screen time – for children and adults.





Distractions, multi-tasking and time management

The average attention span for both children and adults seems to have deteriorated since the introduction of smartphones. Becoming distracted by the infinite information contained within our digital devices is so easy, and we often feel a sense of urgency to reply to messages immediately.

This phenomena impacts on adults as much as it does children, if not more. Technology experts are seeing increasing evidence of modern parents offering ‘continuous partial attention’ to their children – that is, where they are always partially distracted by technology and so never giving their child their full attention. This can be hugely disruptive to parent-child interaction, and detrimental to a child’s emotional cueing system, which is the basis of most human learning and responsive communication. In fact, according to early childhood educator and writer Erika Christakis, ‘more than screen obsessed young children, we should be concerned about tuned-out parents’.

While the cost of modern child care has seen a dramatic increase in the percentage of stay-at-home parents (a number now greater than it was in the 1960s, when considerably fewer women were in the workforce), the

quality of parent-child interaction can be decidedly low quality. Parents nowadays are more physically present in their children's lives than ever before, but they're often considerably less emotionally attuned.

This poses great risk to young people, because they are not only growing up in a world where they themselves are distracted by their digital devices, but also witnessing and learning this behaviour first-hand from their parents.

Children being digitally distracted has the potential to expose them to significant harm. It not only impacts their academic performance, physical wellbeing, quality of sleep, and ability to engage in healthy interpersonal relationships, but smartphone use has also been implicated in car accidents, avoidable injury, and other potentially fatal mishaps and risky behaviours.

Multi-tasking is a key component of continuous partial attention behaviours, because it contributes to the 'partial' aspect. While the human brain has always been capable of focusing on more than one thing in any given moment, smartphones have redefined the way that we assign our attention to certain actions. It's now fairly commonplace to see people having passive face-to-face conversations over coffee while simultaneously scrolling through their phones, or watching a TV show while also maintaining a messenger conversation. Many of these behaviours are, to a degree, benign, but when people feel compelled to reply to a text while driving, or become too engrossed by a game to look up before walking onto a busy road, there can be dire consequences.

Furthermore, continuously participating in multiple activities passively can lead to information overload, and be detrimental to a young person's attention span. This, in turn, can impair their cognitive development, and hamper their ability to focus properly in class. In fact, excessive stimulation from screens has been linked to increased ADHD behaviours in young people.

Never being able to provide any one thing or person with undivided attention also has wider, societal implications. Constantly needing to be plugged in to our devices isn't conducive to a productive working environment or healthy relationship, and constantly ambling around different



landscapes with ours eyes pointed down is hugely disruptive to the human experience.

Furthermore, having the internet in the palm of our hands has led to less active knowledge seeking, because many of us rely on the instant gratification of typing queries into Google. While the long-term implications of this behaviour are not yet understood, we need to ensure we are not raising children in a world where they're never taught to follow their imagination, explore their curiosities, or find the spark of inspiration. What this means is that we need to encourage children to dedicate their attention to a single task, instead of allowing them to constantly receive information from different sources. And we need to demonstrate this focus and curiosity ourselves. We also all need to remember to occasionally be more mindful when we have idle time on our hands, instead of filling them with digital media.

A quick word on brain development

David Finkelhor, director of the Crimes Against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire, has the following to say about prevention education and risk management:

What works in prevention education is simple, clear-cut messages about easily enacted kinds of behaviors; wear a bicycle helmet, put on your seatbelt, don't smoke cigarettes ... the relationship between engaging in the recommended behavior and being safe is clear-cut.

This kind of clear messaging and guidelines is even more important for children. When children are young they aren't bound by the same social etiquette that adults are, because they simply don't possess the same cognitive capacity. While adults consider aspects such as subtext, context and connotations when they communicate, young children simply state what they see. And, for the most part, a small child's ability to speak their mind freely and with little regard for consequences is harmless – perhaps even endearing. In their minds, pointing at an overweight person and exclaiming that they're fat is not necessarily different from pointing at a kitten and exclaiming that it's cute.

While you would, of course, expect your child to know better by the time they are in school, parents regularly overestimate their child's ability to comprehend consequences and evaluate risk. But while the human brain is capable of processing a large amount of information, this means developing its full potential takes quite a long time.

While teens and pre-teens have the capacity to demonstrate impressive insights and maturity that is far beyond their years, they do not have fully developed frontal lobes – the part of the brain that helps human beings make judgements, measure risk and solve problems. For most people, the frontal lobe becomes fully functional in their mid-twenties.

So while it might sometimes be tempting to yell, 'What on earth were you thinking?!' when your child does something foolish or reckless, sometimes the answer is simply that they weren't – and through no fault of their own. This is why it so important for parents to help their children develop a strong moral compass and the ability to self-regulate.

So how can you manage screen time effectively?

Again, a simple answer to this question isn't possible, but we do have some widely agreed upon guidelines.

Researchers and academics widely believe that children under the age of three should have little to no interaction with electronic devices, and the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) strictly advises parents against allowing children younger than 18 months old to use digital devices – with the exception of video-chatting with distant friends and family members. This is largely because children of this age benefit more from interaction than entertainment.

They further advise parents of 18 to 24 month olds that any introduction to digital media should be a collaborative parent-child exercise. Toddlers learn best when they play together with others, and parents should, therefore, avoid letting them use electronic devices by themselves for extended periods of time.

The AAP also believes for children between two and five years, screen time is acceptable so long as it is accompanied by stringent time limits and an expectation that time will be spent on other, real-world activities.

They advise parents to ‘limit screen use to no more than 1 hour (per day) of high-quality programming’.

Generally speaking, in order for it to be considered ‘high-quality’, a young child’s screen time should include:

- **A strong learning component:** Apps and shows that educate rather than simply entertain are most beneficial.
- **Interaction:** Apps or videos that elicit answers from children and provide instructions to move physically (for example, flap your wings like a bird) can aid learning while still enabling children to play and experience childhood.
- **Parental involvement:** Apps or shows that prompt conversations between children and their parents will aid learning and social development.
- **Video calls with distant friends and family members:** Social media apps such as Skype or FaceTime are examples of how digital media can be truly beneficial for young children, because it allows them to have interactive conversations with grandparents, distant relatives and friends.

