Screen time – helping your child find a balance

Screen time is becoming an increasingly tricky issue, with an incredible breadth of opinions and recommendations about what is best for your children.

Too much screen time can mean that a child is spending less time doing other things which could help their development, such as socialising with others, reading and playing outside etc. Equally, banning your child from ever using a screen is completely unrealistic in the digital age, and denies them the opportunity of learning skills vital for their digital literacy.

Like many things, the key is finding a balance. How this balance looks is also individual to every family and there are no quick-fix options. Here are some tips to bear in mind when coming up with your plan to find this balance between online and offline for your child, based on what we've learned from our work with families on this issue.

Screen time = a range of activities

When a child is using a screen they could be doing a huge range of things. Differentiating between these different activities will help you come up with a better plan for how much screen time you'd like your child to have.

Younger children will likely be using screens to watch videos/programmes, or to play interactive or educational games.

Passive viewing

Passive viewing, such as watching videos on YouTube, is the same as watching television. Thinking about how much time you're happy for your child to watch television will help you get an idea of how much time you're happy for your child to spend doing passive activities online.

Interactive/learning activities

Many online games can be beneficial for your child's development. For example, games such as Minecraft can help with spatial awareness, creativity and problem solving. Think about how much time you're happy for them to spend playing inside with Lego, for example, and implement a similar rule.

You know your children, and often, parental instinct will mean you'll be able to recognise if your child has been playing a game online for too long, just as you can tell when they're tired or hungry. Give them a warning telling them they'll need to get off in a certain amount of time, perhaps 5 minutes, then ask them to stop playing. Giving them something else to do will help get them to stop.

Alone / shared activity

Something else to consider is whether your child is using a screen with a parent or carer. If so, chances are it's a more interactive activity, such as a game or homework. They'll also be working on their social skills in sharing and talking about the screen-based activity, so you may be more comfortable with this, than passive viewing alone, for example.

Tweens, teens and older children will be using screens for games, homework, research, watching videos and socialising online.

It's important to **talk to your child about what they do online** and to maintain an atmosphere of openness. Knowing what they're up to on their screen will help you better set boundaries about how long they use them for.

Again, think about the different activities your teen will be doing. If your child is using their laptop to do homework, for example, you'll probably be happier with them spending longer online. Whereas, you might want them to spend less time online playing games, watching videos or chatting to friends if it starts to interfere with the rest of their life.

Socialising and gaming online

Spending hours seemingly surgically attached to a mobile device is a common teenage habit at the moment. Fear of missing out (more commonly known as Fomo) can prevent them from stepping away from their phones. Remember that it's natural and healthy for teenagers to want to spend a lot of time chatting to their friends, but that too much time spent doing this can leave teens frazzled and exhausted, especially if they're staying up late doing it.

The same goes for gaming. Some games can be so absorbing that your child can spend hours on them without realising how much time has gone by. It's important to help your child prevent developing bad habits, where they spend hours playing games, as this can start to really interfere with their day-to-day life.

Setting boundaries

Some parents limit their children's screen time by asking their children to charge their devices not in their bedroom at night, while others set a rule where after a certain time in the evening, nobody is allowed to use their devices anymore. Not allowing teens to use devices for gaming or chatting until after they've done their homework is another rule some parents set to make sure that their children find time to do everything they need to do.

Again, it's entirely up to you to decide what's best for your family.

When setting boundaries make sure you explain why they're happening, and negotiate. This will make your teen feel more empowered and less likely to break rules and act out. A very strict or stringent rule with little practical reasoning behind it is likely to be ignored by your tween or teen, and will be counter-productive in the long run. Offering compromises such as being more flexible on weekends, for example, will make them feel more in control. And, if they feel it's fair, they'll be more likely to follow your guidance.