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A parent's guide to sc

I If there's one area of parenting that consistently makes me wonder whether I'm doing what's best for my teenage son, it's screen time. Am I a bad mother for letting him play the online games he loves so much? Or are there actual benefits to his doing so? How much screen time should I allow?

If you, too, have sleepless nights over screen time, let's find answers by exploring what the latest research tells us.

Recent studies on screen time have created a nuanced picture for parents to consider. According to a comprehensive review published in the *Journal of Paediatrics* (Twenge & Campbell, 2018), moderate use of screens can have cognitive and social benefits for children. The key, however, is moderation. Screens can be valuable tools for learning and social interaction, but excessive use may have adverse effects.

Dr Jenny Radesky, a develop-mental behavioural paediatrician at the University of Michigan's CS Mott Children's Hospital, empha-sises the importance of content and context in screen time. In a 2016 interview with the American Academy of Paediatrics, she

With ample free time on their hands during holidays, children often turn to screens for entertainment and connection. Dalena van der Westhuizen, cognitive development specialist and co-founder of BrainAbility, explores the latest research on both the positive and negative effects of screen time on kids

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explained that interactive and educational content, used in moderation, can positively contribute to a child's development.

A tool for learning and connection

Screens have become essential tools for education and connection. Many educational apps and online platforms offer engaging content that can supplement traditional learning methods and a study published in the *Journal of the American Association (JAMA) Paediatrics* (Primack *et al*, 2017) found that online gaming, played in moderation and with (known and trusted) friends, can enhance social skills and foster a sense of community.

Online games often require collaboration, strategic thinking, planning and problem-solving – all valuable skills that are transferable to real-world scenarios. The sense of achievement gained from successfully completing

a challenging level or working as a team can boost a child's confidence and self-esteem. In contrast to what we often think as parents, online gaming and screen time can actually be beneficial!

Health risks and behavioural issues

While there seem to be clear benefits to screen time, excessive usage poses risks. Prolonged exposure to screens, particularly before bedtime, can disrupt sleep patterns and lead to inadequate rest, impacting a child's overall well-being. The *JAMA* (Hutton *et al*, 2019) highlights a potential link between excessive screen time and delays in cognitive development in preschool-aged children.

Behavioural issues such as increased irritability and difficulty focusing have also been associated with extended screen time.

Dr Dimitri Christakis, Director of the Centre for Child Health, Behaviour and Development at the Seattle Children's Research Institute, stresses the need for balance. In a 2021 interview with the Harvard Health Blog, he suggested that parents prioritise non-screen activities, such as reading, outdoor play and face-to-face interactions.

As parents, our challenge lies in striking a balance that maximises the benefits of screen time while mitigating potential risks. More importantly, we need to set clear limits on screen time and establish tech-free zones, especially during mealtimes and before bedtime.

Online gaming can be a positive experience when done in moderation and with an awareness of the content to ensure that it's age-appropriate and aligns with your family values.

Guidelines on striking the right balance

Reputable organisations like the World Health Organisation and the American Academy of Paediatrics provide these guidelines to help parents manage their children's screen time:

- *Children younger than 18 months:* Avoid the use of screen media other than video calls.

- *Children aged 18-24 months:* If you choose to introduce digital media, go for high-quality programming/apps and watch the content with your child to help them understand what they're seeing.

- *Children aged two to five years:* Limit screen time to one hour per day of high-quality programming, co-viewed with the child to help them understand the content.

- *Children aged six years and older:* The emphasis shifts to ensuring an adequate balance between screen time and healthy behaviours. Establish consistent limits on the amount and type of media and ensure that it doesn't interfere with adequate sleep, physical activity, studying and reading.

These recommendations consistently highlight the importance of age-appropriate content, parental involvement and maintaining a balance between screen time and other essential aspects of a child's development, irrespective of their age.

This holiday season and beyond, let's use these guidelines and the knowledge we now have about the advantages of online gaming and moderate screen time to harness its potential for growth and learning.

"**Ensure that it doesn't interfere with adequate sleep, physical activity, studying and sleeping.**"