

Screen Time Guidelines for Preschoolers **by Suzanne Slye**

Amongst the abundance of modern parenting challenges, managing screen time for young children can be particularly daunting. This issue was magnified by the acute pressure placed on families during the quarantine phase of the Covid pandemic. For many, the conundrum that is screen time continues to be problematic for families with preschool aged children.

I often receive requests from parents for guidelines on setting healthy screen time limits for their children. In response, I have gathered some information to share with you from sources such as the American Academy of Pediatrics, Mayo Clinic, and Common Sense Media. These sources are linked in this article to offer a deeper understanding of the impact screens, devices and media have on young children. The importance of creating a family screen time plan sooner rather than later is also emphasized throughout the articles researched. To quote Ben Franklin, “ ‘Tis easier to prevent bad habits than to break them.” Reinforcing healthy screen time limits -- or establishing them for the first time in very young children -- is essential to their long term health and social-emotional development. In fact, the aforementioned experts agree that “a child is never too young” for a screen time plan.

Family plans to monitor device usage are generally based on age and emotional maturity. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends the following age guidelines to set developmentally appropriate screen time limits:

- Until 18 months of age limit screen use to video chatting along with an adult (for example, with a parent who is out of town).
- Between 18 and 24 months screen time should be limited to watching educational programming with a caregiver.
- For children 2-5, limit non-educational screen time to about 1 hour per weekday and 3 hours on the weekend days.
- For ages 6 and older, encourage healthy habits and limit activities that include screens.

These parameters may be difficult to enforce at first, as we learned after the free-for-all that was Covid quarantine! Patience, consistency and, alas, parental modeling is advised to establish better screen time habits for your children. The AAP also recommends prohibiting devices during meals, outings and 30-60 minutes before bedtime. [AAP: Screen Time and Children](#)

To aid in the construction of a family screen time plan, Common Sense Media (CSM), a media education and family advocacy organization, offers beneficial advice for creating realistic, step-down limitations categorized by age and interests. This information is available here: [CSM: Screen Time Parent Concerns](#). CSM has also partnered with the AAP to create a [Family Media Toolkit](#) to guide parents through the process of creating a media usage and device plan.

Cognitive development and medical research supports the necessity for age-appropriate screen and media limitations to avoid long-term health and social consequences for children. Mayo Clinic (MC) offers a summary of contemporary research on the positive impact of device limitations and the necessity of underpinning high quality media usage habits. Excessive screen time and poor quality media exposure is linked to:

- Obesity
- Irregular sleep schedules and shorter duration of sleep
- Behavioral problems
- Loss of social skills
- Violence
- Less time for play

Imaginative play is found to be more valuable to cognitive development than “passive screen time” just as outdoor play significantly improves physical health and gross motor development. In both instances, unstructured play rather than the use of devices is recommended to augment brain development. [MC: Screen Time and Children - How to Guide Your Child](#)

While the thought of instituting screen time limitations may be daunting, remember that any curb of device usage is better than unfettered media exposure. The key phrase here is quality over quantity! Allowing children to experience boredom ultimately awakens their creativity and lays the groundwork for sustainable imaginative play. Avoiding the use of media as a behavioral distraction also affords them time to explore their own strengths and interests. As hard as it may be to consistently enforce a family screen time plan, it is essential for long term health and social-emotional development.