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Look
both
ways

**Practical parenting
in the age of screen**

Contents

Introduction

This is the age of the screen. We know this – because politicians urge parents to set limits on screen time, broadsheet papers launch campaigns and minor celebrities smash up their children's tablets. We know this also because of our own screen use and that of our children and teenagers. Are the headlines accurate, are we all binging on our screens or are there some good things that can come from this age of screen?

We wanted to explore what was really going on for families across the UK. We questioned what parents thought about their children's screen use – probing what was good about it for children as well as what was challenging for parents. We asked the children how much time they really spent with their devices and how much they told their parents. We have considered how families navigate the complexities of using screens as a baby-sitters for younger children, whilst employing tactics to wrestle older children away from devices.

We found that parents absolutely recognised the creative and technical benefits of raising screen savvy children – as an intrinsic good and educational, and as a tool to develop skills which would be useful in the workplace. We saw that parental concerns and mitigations varied by age of child – as you would expect – and that socio-economic factors also had a role, particularly in the long summer holiday.

Whilst much of the public debate about screen use has focused solely on time spent – parents are more concerned about how time is spent - as they make judgements based on activity and content as much as time. Within these nuanced debates parents are also trying to work out which approach to take – whether to use a rules based approach - and risk becoming an eternal enforcer or whether to take usage on trust. What was clear was that some parents, especially of older children resented being put in the position of having to always fight for attention or demand time away from tech -so the lure of technology, it's persuasive design, is hugely challenging.

Parents are trying to look both ways – to explore the benefits, whilst mitigating the risks, manage their own behaviour to role model for their children, and consider the implications of using tech to gain some time for themselves whilst not wanting to set a poor example for older children. This is genuinely hard and is here to stay.

Methodology

Methodology

All participants were carefully screened to ensure they met the required criteria to take part and were suitable for this research.

An integrated approach was undertaken:

- **Quantitative survey to provide robust data**
    - 20 minute online quantitative survey completed by 2,022 parents of children aged 4–16 years old in the UK
    - Nationally representative sample from a consumer access panel (conducted 10th – 17th July 2018)

- **Qualitative online community**
    - 1 week with 32 parents and 32 children aged 6–16 years (conducted 10th – 17th July 2018)
    - Recruited from North, South and Midlands locations across England and Scotland and Wales

This report covers the following;

- Screen time: what this mean for parents and children

- Providing parents with support: channels and information needs

The following terms are used in the research and throughout this report;

| Definitions	
Screen time	*Time spent using devices such as mobile phones, laptops, tablets, TV or games consoles*

Research was conducted by Trinity McQueen. They are MRS Company Partners and members of the Association of Qualitative Researchers (AQR). Fieldwork services are aligned to and follow the IQCS and ISO20252 quality standards.
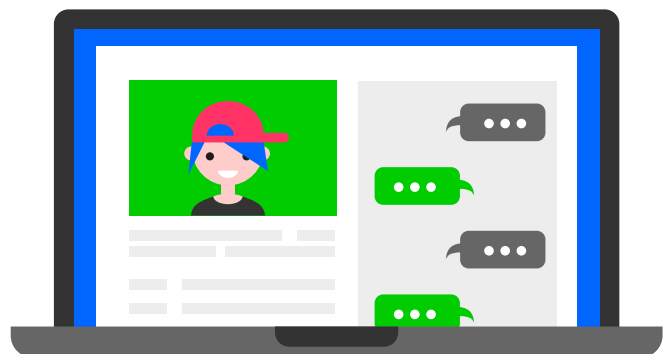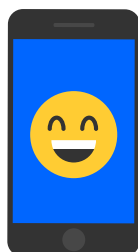
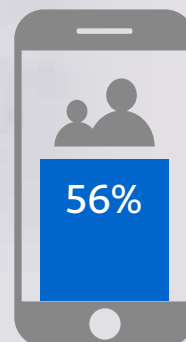# Screen time – what it means for parents and children

Managing screen time can be a daily battle for parents

It is no surprise that managing the amount of time children spend using devices is a battle for parents.

47%
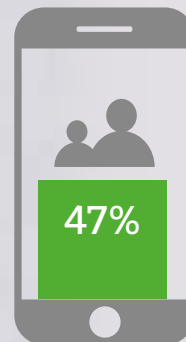
of parents say they are concerned about the amount of time their child spends online

56%

of parents feel their child asks to use devices more often than they would like.

"It's really easy to tell when they've had too much. Trying to get them to do another activity is akin to pulling a dog away from its dinner"

Our research finds that around half of parents **(47%)** say they are concerned about the amount of time their child spends online and over half **(56%)** feel their child asks to use devices more often than they would like.

Although the words 'screen time' are not typically part of parents' vocabulary, the description of screen time, is something parents deal with daily. This research uncovered the reality of what screen time really looks like and found that parents only see part of their children's real screen time – despite thinking they know what is happening.

Children push the boundaries

Use more than allowed

*"My Mum sets a limit of 4 hours on a weekend **but Mum and Dad were out and about today so I got longer**"*

Sneak phone into areas in the home

*"Mum has hidden my phone as I hid it under my pillow last night and **she found me on it at 10 o'clock and I got told off**"*

Parents feel left behind

Children want to protect their own world from parents

*"My daughter disappears in her bedroom with **her iPhone on the go talking to friends whilst on her iPad** on her social network sites and then she's shouting at her Xbox beacuse she plays live online another thing that I don't understand"*

Greater independence

*"I originally set his phone up so everything was linked to my email address. My son was given an email address at school and used this to get things from the google app store. **I didn't know he had snapchat until a few weeks ago.**"*

"My parents are pretty strict with my phone. I'm not allowed to just sit in the corner and use it without them knowing what I'm doing on it."

Fear of Missing Out

Parents admit to setting a bad example themselves as they are constantly looking at their own devices to read emails, texts and check social media accounts. However, it is very much a case of 'do as I say and not as I do' for children. Parents claim that children are restricted to using screens/devices at certain times, however this is not the case when we speak to children.

Although parents have some rules in place, children are always pushing the boundaries and bending the rules to enable them to spend more time online e.g. using devices for longer periods of time than allowed if parents are not around or sneaking devices into the bedroom when they have been told not to.

Friends

Parents feel pressured to allow screen time, particularly access to mobile phones, so that their child does not feel as though they are missing out and can keep in touch with friends. This is mainly the case among parents with children aged 11+ as they become more and more independent and start organising their own social lives.

Across the age ranges **44%** of parents feel pressured that their child will miss out by not being online, rising to **52%** among parents with a child aged 11-13
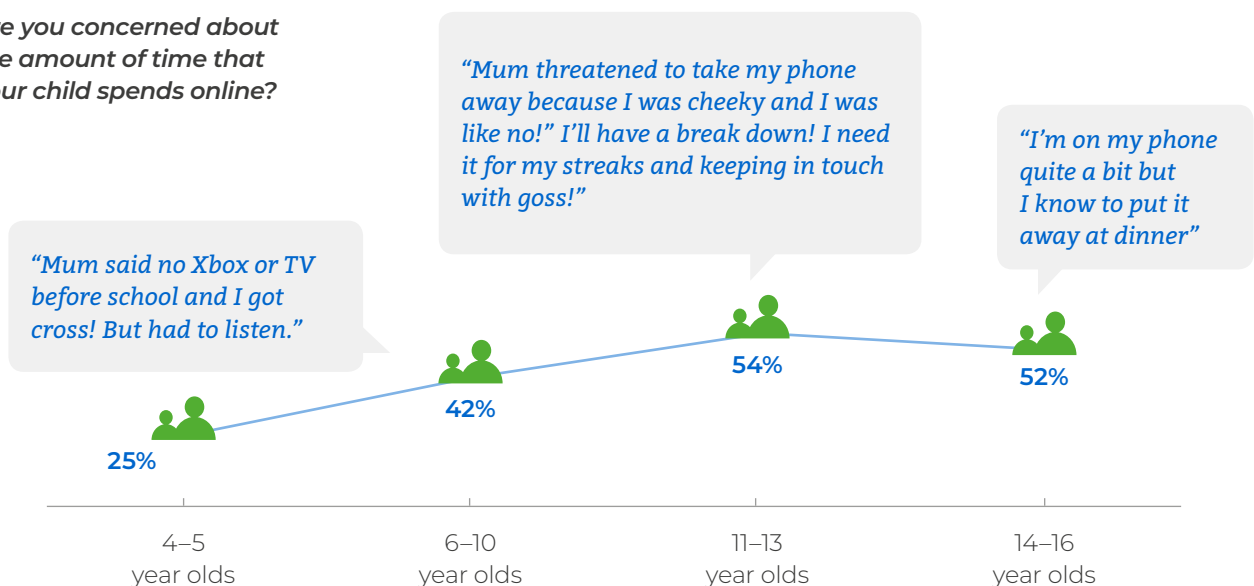
However, that doesn't mean they are happy with the amount of time their children spend on screen, as, almost **9 in 10 (88%)** parents take measures to limit their child's use of devices

Family

Whilst the nature of that concern changes by age of child, there was a common theme across all age groups about the opportunity cost of screen time. This centred on the impact that had on family time and interaction with siblings, one parent summed it up:

"As soon as they come home from school they're online. My son is constantly on his PS4 on online gaming, I take them off for their dinner and then they're pretty much back on it again."

Are you concerned about the amount of time that your child spends online?

"Mum said no Xbox or TV before school and I got cross! But had to listen."

"Mum threatened to take my phone away because I was cheeky and I was like no!" I'll have a break down! I need it for my streaks and keeping in touch with goss!"

"I'm on my phone quite a bit but I know to put it away at dinner"

25% — 4–5 year olds
42% — 6–10 year olds
54% — 11–13 year olds
52% — 14–16 year olds

New opportunities bring new concerns

Parents recognise that although being online can help their child access limitless information, it can also become a distraction from what they perceive to be the 'real' or 'offline' world. 'Mindless scrolling' was particularly mentioned by parents as wasted time. Parental concerns can be clustered into six areas, which vary by age of child.

Health and wellbeing

"It doesn't help them to be active which cannot be good for health"
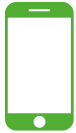
Missing out on learning valuable skills

"Children need to learn how to be able to sit quietly in a room and learn patience but given a tablet teaches them they are always occupied"

Declined concentration

"It can affect school work and the time spent on homework not to mention concentration levels"

Limits family time

"When all children in the family have a screen, they no longer interact as siblings, just find their own quiet space in the house to use their device"

Cause for conflict

"My son is addicted to being online and can become very irritable if he can't have access to it"

Gives unrealistic views

"Social media would suggest that everyone has a perfect life, always on holiday, eating out etc."

Parents of younger children aged 6-10
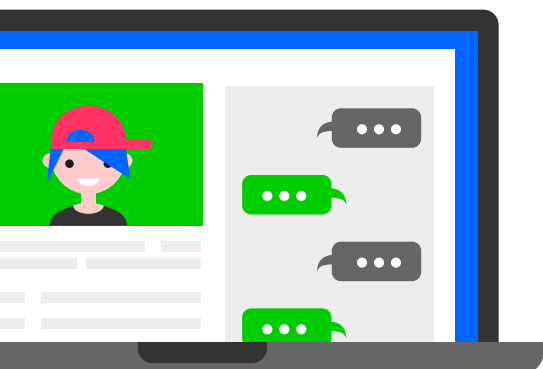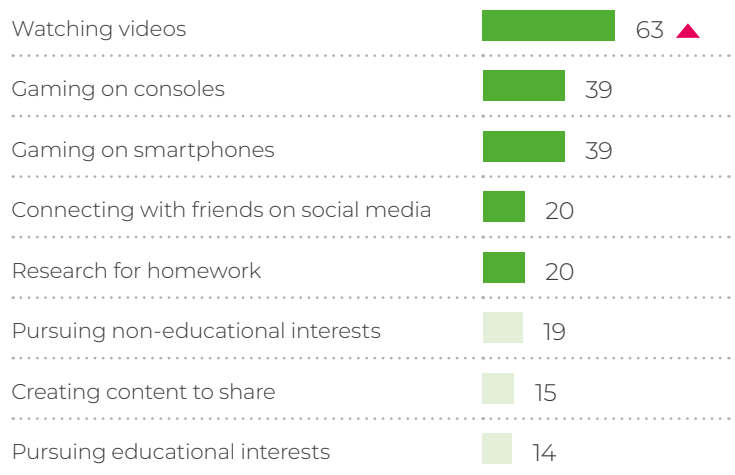
For the younger age group parents still have a lot of control over when and where their child has access to a screen. Concern is polarised around time spent watching videos although gaming both on consoles and smartphones is also of concern.

The main worry is about the potential impact this may have on eyesight **(39%)**. A significant number of parents **(32%)** are also concerned about the impact on playtime.
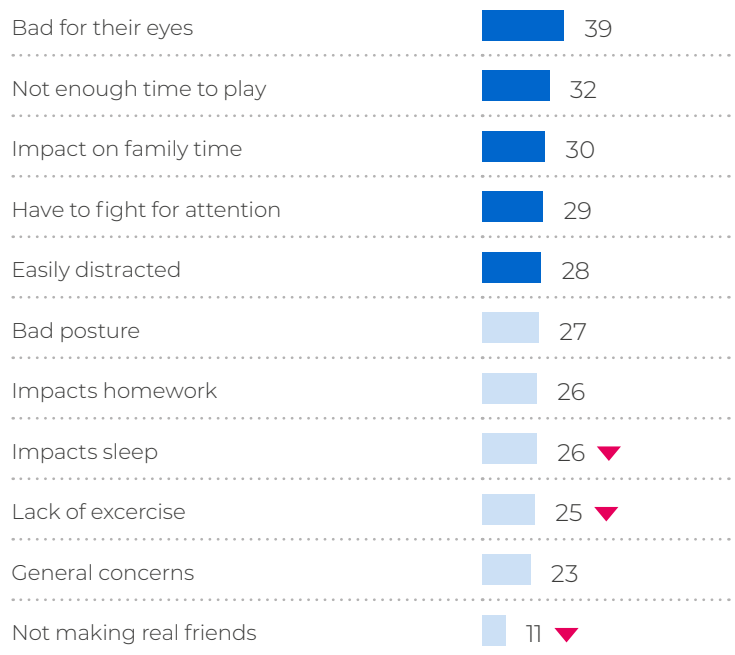
Even at this relatively young age, almost **3 out of every 10** parents say screen time means they have to fight for their child's attention and over a quarter **(26%)** say it has an impact on completing homework.

Activities parents are concerned about (%)

Activity	%
Watching videos	63 ▲
Gaming on consoles	39
Gaming on smartphones	39
Connecting with friends on social media	20
Research for homework	20
Pursuing non-educational interests	19
Creating content to share	15
Pursuing educational interests	14

Reasons for concern (%)

Reason	%
Bad for their eyes	39
Not enough time to play	32
Impact on family time	30
Have to fight for attention	29
Easily distracted	28
Bad posture	27
Impacts homework	26
Impacts sleep	26 ▼
Lack of excercise	25 ▼
General concerns	23
Not making real friends	11 ▼

▲ ▼ *Denotes significant difference between age groups*

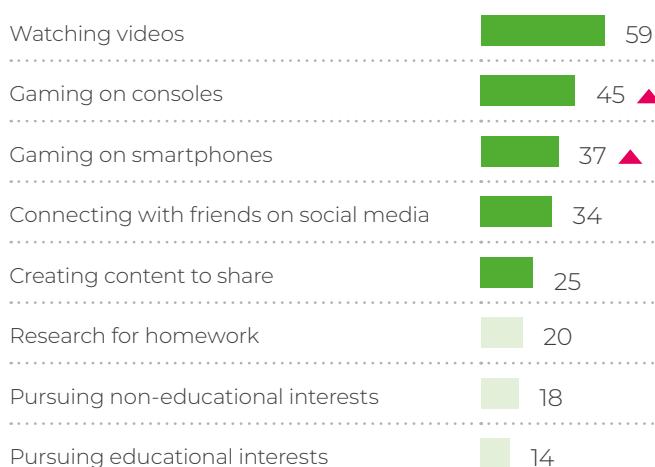*"If it was up to her she would be on her phone until the cows came home"*

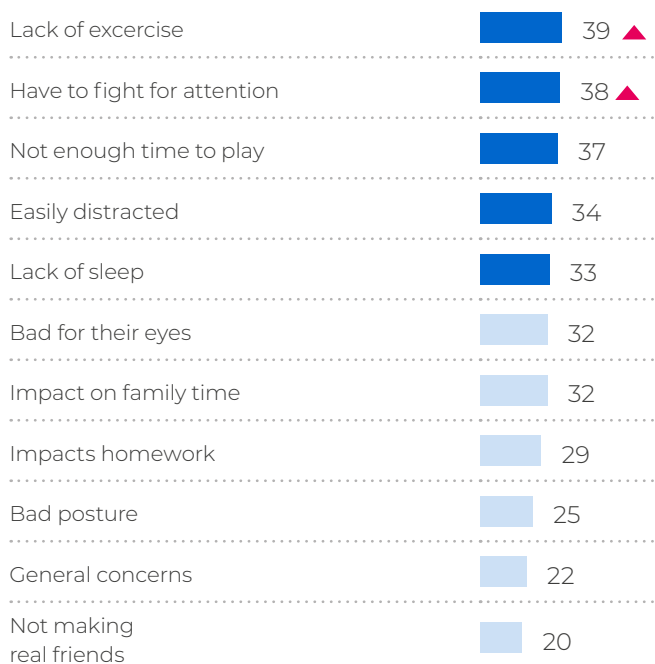## Parents of children aged 11-13

As children get older, and are engaged in a wider range of online activities, parents become more concerned about other screen time activities, in particular gaming on consoles and smartphones. We also start to see concerns about the creation of content to share becoming more important with **1 in 4 parents** expressing a level of concern.

As a consequence, parents worries shift to concerns about their children not getting sufficient exercise **(39%)** or having enough time to play **(37%)**. The screen based games they are playing in the family home mean that they are not leaving the house, are sitting for long periods of time, and not engaging with friends face to face. Furthermore, parents also dislike the struggle they face when fighting for their child's attention **(38%)** particularly whilst they are engrossed in a game.

Activities parents are concerned about (%)

Activity	%
Watching videos	59
Gaming on consoles	45 ▲
Gaming on smartphones	37 ▲
Connecting with friends on social media	34
Creating content to share	25
Research for homework	20
Pursuing non-educational interests	18
Pursuing educational interests	14

Reasons for concern (%)

Reason	%
Lack of excercise	39 ▲
Have to fight for attention	38 ▲
Not enough time to play	37
Easily distracted	34
Lack of sleep	33
Bad for their eyes	32
Impact on family time	32
Impacts homework	29
Bad posture	25
General concerns	22
Not making real friends	20

▲ ▼   *Denotes significant difference between age groups*

"Mum says that I should finish my homework before going on my phone but I'll keep my phone with me and keep checking it. I can't live without it. I need to know what my mates are up to!"
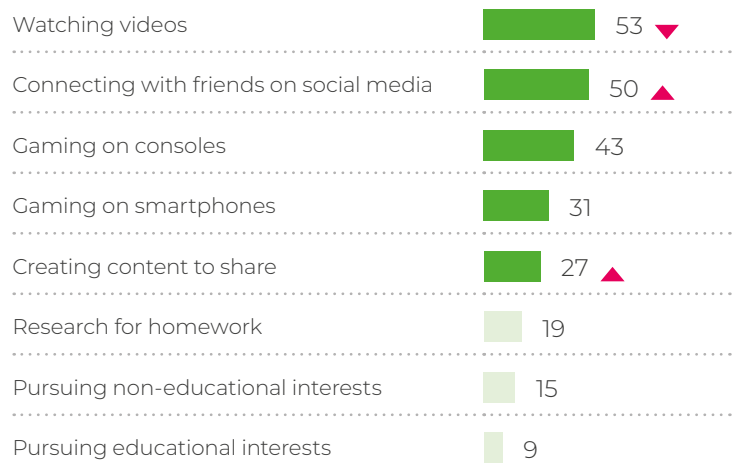
Parents of children aged 14-16

Throughout the age groups watching videos is the activity that parents are most worried about albeit the level of concern does decrease with age. For the eldest age group, parental concerns are significantly higher around children using social media (**50%** compared with **37%** of parents overall). Parents are particularly concerned about them creating content, whether photos or videos, to share online **(27%)**.
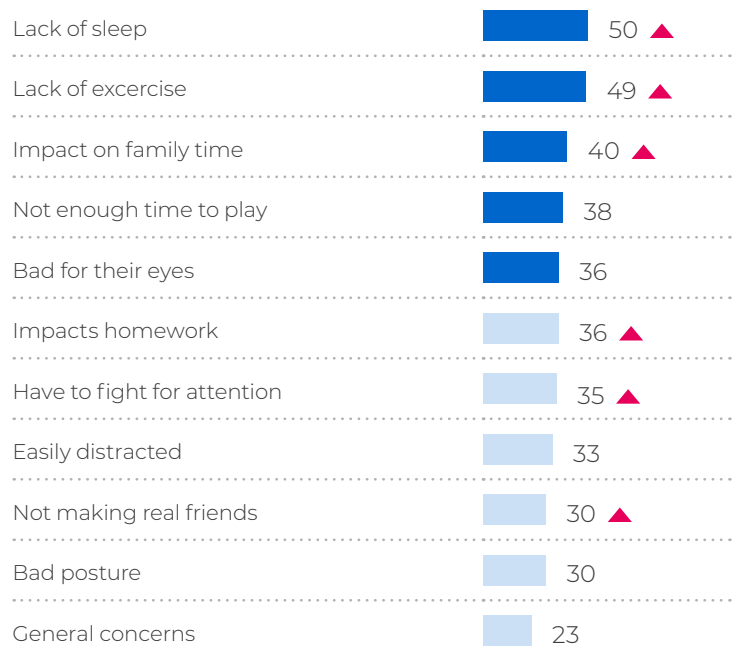
Parents are concerned about these things because of the impact it can have on overall mental wellbeing as well such as lack of sleep and exercise (**50%** and **49%** respectively). Parents are also wary of the impact that online activities have on homework **(36%)** as this is a crucial age where children are preparing for their GCSEs.

As with the other age groups impact on family time remains a concern for all families ranging from **30%** of parents with children aged 6-10 being concerned to **40%** of parents with children aged 14-16 being concerned.

Activities parents are concerned about (%)

Activity	%	
Watching videos	53	▼
Connecting with friends on social media	50	▲
Gaming on consoles	43	
Gaming on smartphones	31	
Creating content to share	27	▲
Research for homework	19	
Pursuing non-educational interests	15	
Pursuing educational interests	9	

Reasons for concern (%)

Reason	%	
Lack of sleep	50	▲
Lack of excercise	49	▲
Impact on family time	40	▲
Not enough time to play	38	
Bad for their eyes	36	
Impacts homework	36	▲
Have to fight for attention	35	▲
Easily distracted	33	
Not making real friends	30	▲
Bad posture	30	
General concerns	23	

▲ ▼   *Denotes significant difference between age groups*

"I like to talk to kids and make them understand, not to force the issue and put a timer on a device. This to me will create a divide, like I am the big bad wolf putting timers on everything."

Rules around screen time are commonplace

Overall, almost 9 in 10 **(88%)** parents take measures to limit their child's use of devices. However parents of older children (14-16s) are less likely to take any measures - **21% say they don't take any measures at all.**

88%
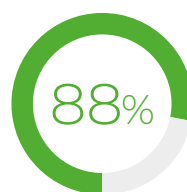
of all parents 4–16 year olds take measures to limit their children's use of devices

There isn't a 'one rule fits all' for families – parents trial and test a range of techniques to enable transparency, honest conversations and to try to manage usage. Mostly this is done by having periods of the day when screens are not permitted:

Measures taken to limit screen time (%)

Measure	%	Change
Not at meal times	59	▲ 6–10 & 11–13
Not in bedrooms after bedtime	48	▼ 14–16
Not before homework	41	▲ 6–13
Not before breakfast	35	▲ 6–10
Router turned off at certain times	18	
Not in the car	14	▲ 4–5 & 6–10
Other ways	8	

Far fewer parents use technical tools to monitor and reduce screen time peaking at only **28%** for 6-10 year old – and even this reduces by age:

22%
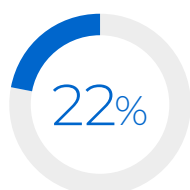
claim to use any tools or apps to control the amount of time that their child spends online

When we asked parents why, we often heard that putting timers on things made the parent out to be the 'big bad wolf', seemingly determined to spoil their children's fun, so a negotiated agreement was preferable. This makes it all the more important that parents are aware of what their children are doing whilst looking at screens and what benefits and risks they might be exposed to.

Parents recognise many benefits

"The school makes you complete homework through an app so they have to use it. I think it actually makes them more likely to complete because it's online"

## In order to stay ahead screen time is seen as inevitable by parents and provides many benefits.

Educational benefits of screen time are widely recognised. In fact, **7 in 10 parents** think screen time is essential for their children's learning development. Moreover, with many schools incorporating apps or online platforms to help children complete, and submit homework, screen time is, felt to be supported by schools.
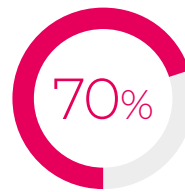
70% *strongly agree/agree that using devices is essential to my child/ children's learning and development*

62	70	74	70
4–5	6–10	11–13	14–16

Age of child
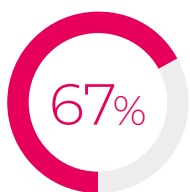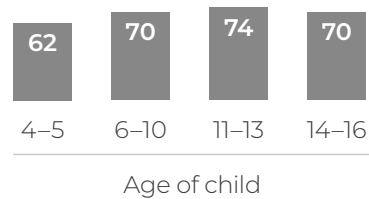
67% *of parents strongly agree/agree that using devices gives my child another way of being creative*

60	70	69	65
4–5	6–10	11–13	14–16

Age of child
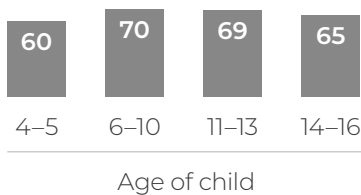
The creative opportunities on offer support personal development. Developing other passions, learning new skills and drawing upon creativity is important to parents with two-thirds **(67%)** saying devices give their children another outlet for creativity, particularly so for those with children aged 6-10. The internet can also be inspirational for children with a certain passion in particular when discovering content and sharing their own content. For example, a child with an interest in playing the drums may record his or her self and then share this soundbite with others on YouTube.

"My son uses it to follow a lot of actors he has seen in musical theatre and finds this interesting and educational as this is his passion. He picks up a great deal of knowledge from social media about the world of musical theatre."

"All my friends use social media and I like to see what they're doing daily"

Screens can provide much needed down-time

Gaming or watching YouTube videos is felt to be a great way of relaxing and unwinding after a long day at school. This is similar to adults relaxing at the end of the day by settling in front of the TV after work.

They help children maintain friendships/relationships

Phones and tablets help children keep in touch with friends and stay included within conversations. It can also help them stay connected to family that they wouldn't otherwise see regularly e.g. using Facetime to call grandparents.

Parents feel screens can help ease the burden when looking to entertain/ occupy children

This is especially true of parents in low income households where they most feel the expense of trying to keep children entertained. Without a large disposable income, screen time activity reduces the pressure on families without a significant price tag. Watching a film on Netflix is cheaper than a family day out. Furthermore, if watching as a family, this is important quality time spent together.

Parents want to understand the new 'normal'

Parents have a nuanced view of screen time which varies by age of child and type of activity.

For younger children, the concerns centre around screens impacting eyesight and playtime. Parents of older children are not only more concerned about the amount of screen time, they are also concerned about a greater number of areas that it could impact from health and wellbeing to homework.

Therefore, it is not surprising that parents would generally welcome advice on screen time, with over half wanting advice on how much screen time is appropriate for the age of their child.

53%
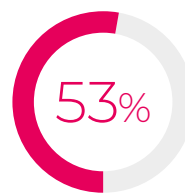
of parents strongly agree/agree they would like advice on how much screen time is appropriate for my child/children

"Some of the top jobs use some sort of technology and screen time, it's becoming much more of our way of life now and it most definitely is the future."

However, it is important the advice is tailored (e.g. for parents with children of different ages), but also advice that encourages their child to take some of the responsibility.

Parents have told us that they would welcome support on managing their children's screen time and a key component of that would be enabling the children to take an appropriate level of responsibility for themselves. Over two fifths of parents (43%) would welcome parallel advice guides for parents and children (broken down by age). And schools once again play an important role with almost the same amount (41%) welcoming information evenings at school – again targeted to both parents and children.

There is a recognition from parents that this is a sensitive subject area – and that there is much good that comes from being in front of a screen. Perhaps the last word on this should go to parent expressing a sentiment most parents would recognise:

"Kids don't seem to hear about this (screen time) from anyone other than their parents and let's face it they don't listen to them. It would be good to see tv adverts, radio adverts on at times that the kids can see/hear them."

Top tips and tools to manage children's screen time

Internet Matters has created a range of resources to support families around screen time.

Things you can do

Set a good example

- Children tend to do what you do, not necessarily what you say so it's important to model the behaviour that you'd like to see in them.

Agree device free zones

- Make the most of family time by creating a no-mobile zone at the dinner table or even in the car. Removing the temptation to check notifications mid-conversations can help take away distractions and encourage everyone to be present in the moment.

- Also, banning phones from the bedroom at night is advised for children to get better sleep as they'll be less likely to chat to friends into the night and the blue-light from mobiles phones can disrupt their sleep cycles.

Get the whole family to unplug

- Take a break from screens as a family to encourage children to learn to strike a balance between time on and offline early on. You can use Apps like the Forest App which builds beautiful forests the longer you stay off devices.

Use tools to set digital boundaries

- Make use of parental control tools on their devices and the platforms they use to set digital boundaries together to ensure they get the best out of their screen time.

- Switch off notifications on their phone to limit the distraction this can cause when they are doing other activities.

Put a family agreement in place

- Establish a family agreement together to manage expectations of how screens and online platforms should be used and why.

Give them a varied media diet

- Together find apps, websites, and games that will help give kids a way to explore their passions, enhance their skills and discover their identity in a safe way.

Conversations to have

Building critical thinking

- Encourage them not to accept everything they see online at face value and to be aware that not everyone they talk to online is who they say they are.

- Share with them that apps/ websites are designed to keep you watching and on the platform so it's important to take active steps to stop when it feels like they've had too much.

Managing their wellbeing

- Discuss the signs to watch out for to assess if their device use could be having a negative effect on their overall wellbeing.

- Encourage them to think about when and where they are using their devices and when it would be better for them to unplug and focus on other activities.

How to recognise when screen time is 'too much'

- Often a sign that a child is spending too much time on screens is when they may feel anxiety or stress if they are disconnected or separated from their phone.

- Lack of sleep and exercise and no willingness to visit friends may be a sign they need to take a break from their device.

Download the guide here:

https://www.internetmatters.org/wp-content/
uploads/2018/07/Internet_matters_Screen_Time_Guide.pdf

Settings and tech tools to get screen time under control

Turning off auto-play on the platforms

YouTube

Auto-play is switched on by default but you can switch this off by going to the video player settings on the platform. Note that auto-play won't start if you're connected to a mobile network and have been inactive for 30 minutes. On Wi-Fi, auto-play will stop automatically after four hours.

Netflix

To stop auto-play, navigate to your account, click on Playback settings and uncheck the option to play next episode automatically. As a default the platform will ask 'are you still watching…' if you've watched several episodes back to back without interacting with it.

Amazon Prime

To turn the auto-play off, go to settings on website or app and look for 'Auto Play' option and toggle it off.

Switching off push notifications

Set 'Do not disturb' on Android and iOS devices

For Apple phones or tablets, go into Settings, and select 'Do Not Disturb' from the main panel.

For Android devices swipe down into the 'Quick Settings' option on your main screen and select 'Do Not Disturb.'

You can also pick and choose which apps can send alerts by going to settings menu on both iOS and Android devices.

Monitoring time on social

Facebook and Instagram

Both offer digital well-being screentime management dashboards to monitor how much time you are spending on the platforms. This can help children self-regulate their screen time.

To use the tools, go to the settings on the either app and select 'Your Time' on Facebook or 'Your Activity' on Instagram. The dashboard will only show activity on that device not across devices. You can also set a daily reminder that will alert your child when they've spent over the set amount of time on the platforms and mute push notifications.

Using apps

Apple Screen Time

This feature can be controlled from your child's device or your own once you've set up 'Screen Time for Family'. You'll be able to set controls on different apps they use by category and see Screen Time reports. When your child reaches their limit on an app they can request more time. The app will also appear dimmed on their home screen.

There is also a 'Downtime' function that can be used to mute most of the phones notifications at specific times.

Google Family Link

The app allows you to control your child's android device directly from your phone. If your child is under 13 years old you can remotely lock their device, set screen time limits, track their location and manage what apps they use. When they get to 13 and over teens can disable the app or both parents and child have to consent for monitoring to continue.

Broadband filters

Most broadband providers will offer you settings and filters to set times where the access to the internet could be restricted to create digital rules for the whole family to follow. You can find how to set these by visiting **www.internetmatters.org/setupsafe**.

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