

# Your Kids and the Digital Dilemma: How Much is Too Much?

In case you had any doubt that children's screen time should be limited and monitored, here comes yet another report that shows digital media, and our love affair with the many varieties, definitely has a dark side.

A study recently published in *Lancet Child & Adolescent Health* found that kids who spend more than two hours a day looking at screens recreationally scored worse on memory, language and thinking tests than kids who spend less time in front of a device. The study looked at more than 4,500 children ranging in ages from 8 to 11 years old.

For Dr. Alan Delamater, a clinical psychologist with the University of Miami Health System, the results are not surprising. In his practice, the tug-of-war between parent and child over video games and smartphone use is quite common. Now, this latest survey adds to a growing body of research that shows too much screen time correlates with a number of negative outcomes.

“Parents should definitely be concerned about the amount of time their kids are spending with screens,” says Dr. Delamater. “And they should also worry about the content and interaction during that time. The questions they should be asking themselves are: How much time are they on their phone or the tablet, even TV, and what are they doing?”



The Lancet study also revealed that children averaged 3.6 hours of screen time daily for video games, videos and other fun. In fact, two out of three spent more than two hours a day with a screen, which is at the top-end of recommended time for children. What most concerned Dr. Delamater, however, was how few children met the guidelines for overall healthy practices.

For this study, researchers used data from the Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) study, a 10-year, longitudinal, observational study from 21 study sites across the US. They then compared kids’ daily sleep habits, exercise time and screen use to guidelines set in 2016 that recommend an hour of moderate-vigorous physical activity, between nine and 11 hours of nighttime sleep, and no more than two hours of recreational screen time.

**Only 5% of the children met all three guidelines on screen time, exercise physical activity, and sleep. And an alarming 29% met none of the guidelines.**

## **“I find that to be really striking,” Dr. Delamater says. “It’s a red flag.”**

The study does not conclude that there is a cause and effect — in other words, that too much screen time leads to lower cognitive skills. Establishing such a relationship for human behavior is difficult to do, Dr. Delamater points out, and it may simply mean that smarter kids spend less time on screens. “It’s been hard to tease that out even in other studies,” he adds. “Nevertheless this data does a pretty good job of establishing relationships. It’s a snapshot in time that gives us good information.”

Plenty of other studies bolster the anecdotal evidence that excessive screen time is harmful. One report published in *Psychology Today* in 2017 found that children suffer from lack of sleep, sensory overload, and hyper-aroused nervous system when they spend too much time with screens. Brains scans revealed frontal lobe atrophy as well as shrinkage in the striatum and the insula. (The frontal lobe controls organizing, planning and impulse control, the striatum help suppress socially unacceptable behavior, and the insula is responsible for empathy.) What’s more, researchers also noted “compromised white matter,” which could impair cognitive function.

Too much screen time has also been shown to correlate with obesity, contribute to anxiety, and depression, and be associated with isolation and poor socialization.

Of course it’s not all bad news, Dr. Delamater says. He is a fan of educational apps and games. Some social media can also make adolescents feel connected. “It’s really a matter of healthy habits and parents modeling appropriate behavior,” he adds. “Parents are role models. If kids see them glued to their screens, the kids will want to do the same.”

He is not a proponent of banning screen-time altogether, either. “It just makes it

more attractive.”

## **Recognizing the challenge of digital media, the American Academy of Pediatrics in 2016 issued tips for families to maintain a “healthy media diet.”**

- Avoid all use of screen media other than video-chatting for children younger than 18 months.
- Choose high-quality programming and watch it with the kids when you begin to introduce them to media between 18 to 24 months.
- Limit screen to one hour per day of high-quality programs for kids 2 to 5 years old. Also watch and discuss the programming with them.
- Place consistent limits on all media for older kids. Make sure it does not take the place of sleep, socialization and physical activity.
- Institute media-free times (meals, for instance) and media-free locations (bedrooms).

“Children expect parents to provide structure and limits,” Dr. Delamater says. “You don’t have to be a bean counter because you’re setting yourself up for failure. Some days there might be more time on screen, other days none at all.

“We should be encouraging them to explore and enjoy alternative activities.”

## **12 ways to add activity to your child’s day.**

1. **Model healthy habits.** Alternate your own media use with unplugged activities and exercise regularly. Children learn by watching and communicating with parents. Engage in active play with little ones and board games, sports or outdoor fun with older children. You might also volunteer to coach your child’s sports team.

2. **Set limits.** Establish media-free zones such as the family dinner table. Blue light from digital devices disrupts sleep-wake cycles - ban them from children's bedrooms or use your Internet provider's pause command for family electronics. Depending on age, children need between 8-12 hours of sleep nightly. Sleep hygiene can start even at young ages and has been found to be an important protective factor against unhealthy weight gain.
3. **Use a timer.** Tell your child how much screen time they have before they must switch to a different activity. Then set a timer. Additional time could be earned through chores, reading or other unplugged pursuits.
4. **Mix it up.** Six to 14-year-olds aren't interested in exercise classes, so take advantage of Miami-Dade County parks. Go hiking, biking, swimming or kayaking as a family. When kids come home from school, don't immediately launch into homework. Allowing time for play and movement improves their focus and patience for homework later.
5. **Move after meals.** Go for walks or ride bikes after dinner instead of watching TV or playing video games.
6. **Limit the electronic babysitter.** TVs and video games may keep youngsters quiet, but they also need to learn to solve problems, handle emotions and overcome boredom. Take time to communicate with your children and teach them strategies for dealing with difficult situations.
7. **Active duties.** Add physical jobs (dog walking, yard work, vacuuming) to your child's chore list.
8. **Don't opt out.** Avoid opting your children out of physical education classes, even if the school allows parents to exercise that option. If your child feels awkward about P.E., boost their confidence with yoga, dance or martial arts classes after school or on weekends.
9. **Provide active toys.** Balls, jump ropes and hula hoops work well for younger children; skateboards, bikes, skates, and surfboards may satisfy pre-

teens and teens.

10. **Active vacations.** Plan a camping, hiking, kayaking, sailing or horseback riding vacation to get your family moving. Or, mix in several activities to keep each day new and different.
11. **Schedule downtime.** Unstructured, unplugged time stimulates creativity and imagination.
12. **Have a plan.** Download the AAP's Family Media Use Plan tool.

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### ***In Their Words***

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