

Indian Academy of Pediatrics (IAP)



GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

Screen Time Guidelines for Parents

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10 FAQs on SCREEN TIME GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS

1. I have heard that screen time has an effect on children. What is meant by screen time?
2. For how long can my child use screens? Should I limit screen time?
3. What is the effect of using screens for a prolonged time on my child?
4. All children seem to be using the screens nowadays. Are there any benefits of the digital devices?
5. What is the right age to introduce computer, mobile, and television for my child?
6. Children waste a lot of time on Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram. They even interact with strangers there. Should children be allowed on social media? What is the right age to use social media?
7. How can I make my children follow good online manners? What should I do when others post messages that hurt my child?
8. How can I motivate my child to use media in a healthy way?
9. I have read that media is as addictive as drugs. How will I know that my child is addicted to media? Can media addiction be cured?
10. I am very careful about screen use. Does my screen time have an effect on my child?

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5

Screen Time Guidelines for Parents

Q1

I have heard that screen time has an effect on children.

What is meant by screen time?

Screen time is the total time spent per day in viewing screens such as mobile phone, TV, computer, tablet, or any hand-held or visual device. Screens have become an essential part of our life. Parents, teachers, and health professionals are concerned about the increase in children's screen time. Just like the balanced food that we eat, screens need to be properly chosen and to be consumed in the right quantity and at the right time. The way we use the screens determines whether it is healthy or unhealthy. Screen time spent for educational or prosocial activities such as schoolwork, interacting with friends and relatives, and creating art or music or relaxation is termed positive or healthy, while watching inappropriate TV shows, visiting unsafe websites, or playing violent video games are few examples of negative or unhealthy screen time.

Q2

**For how long can my child use screens?
Should I limit screen time?**

- Children below the age of 2 years should not be exposed to any type of screen with the exception of occasional video call with relatives.
- Screen time for children between the age of 2 and 5 years should not exceed 1 hour; the lesser, the better.
- For older children and adolescents, it is important to balance screen time with other activities that are required for overall development. These activities include an hour of physical activity (play time), adequate duration of sleep (recommended sleep time varies with age, for example, adolescents require 8–9 hours of uninterrupted sleep at night), and time for schoolwork, meals, hobbies, and family time. If any of these activities is displaced due to screen use, then it is called excessive screen time and it should be reduced.



Balance screen time with other healthy activities such as reading books.

Q3

What is the effect of using screens for a prolonged time on my child?

There are multiple ill effects of excessive screen time on child:

- *Physical health:* Obesity, sedentary lifestyle, disturbed sleep, headache, eye strain, neck, back, and wrist pains
- *Mental health:* Delayed speech, hyperactivity, aggression, violence, desire for instant gratification, poor concentration, FOMO (fear of missing out), FOBLO (fear of being left out), cyberbullying, media addiction, distorted perception of sex by exposure to pornography, drug use, self-harm, anxiety, and depression
- *Social:* Reduced socialization and social anxiety
- *Scholastic:* Decreased academic performance



Excessive screen time reduces the time spent on physical activity.

Q4

All children seem to be using the screens nowadays. Are there any benefits of the digital devices?

When screens are used in moderation in a balanced and healthy way, they have many benefits:

- Encourage learning and knowledge
- Act as a tool for communicating with friends and family and promote social interaction
- Healthy co-viewing and co-playing using digital platforms improve child and parent bonding, recreation, and relaxation.
- Smartphone Apps such as Saathiya, Calm, and digital platforms such as NIMHANS online yoga class encourage kids to adopt healthy behaviors and kindle device promotes reading
- Channels like youTube and blogging platforms give opportunities to children to display their talents
- Customized computer programs can improve social behavior in children with autism and study skills in children with learning problems.



Digital devices can promote social connections and interactions.

Q5

What is the right age to introduce computer, mobile, and television for my child?

For children <2 years, social interaction is required for healthy brain development. Use of digital devices in this age group can result in delayed speech, hyperactivity, and poor social skills. Hence, screens should be avoided for children <2 years. At 2 years, you could introduce digital devices such as computer and television but you should view the screens along with the children and prefer educative interactive programs for a short duration of time. Adolescents could be given ordinary mobile phones and preferably not smartphones mainly to maintain contact with you when they are outside home. Older children and adolescents may be allowed for the use of smartphones for educational and recreational purposes under parental monitoring for limited duration.

Q6

Children waste a lot of time on Facebook, WhatsApp, Snapchat, Twitter, and Instagram. They even interact with strangers there. Should children be allowed on social media? What is the right age to use social media?

Social interaction is vital for a child’s healthy development. Social media are online platforms that are used by children and adolescents to connect with friends and family, share media content, and form social networks. Some of the popular platforms include Facebook, Twitter, WhatsApp, Instagram, Skype, YouTube, and Snapchat. In recent time, online multiplayer games, such as PUBG and Clash of Clans, are becoming important social media spaces for young people, where they connect with other gamers and chat while playing.

Advantages of Social Media

- Fosters a sense of connection and belonging especially for shy children who are hesitant to interact with others in person
- Promotes collaborative learning through sharing of online educational material and creativity through graphics and videos showcasing talents and achievements of young people
- Serves as a social support platform for children with chronic diseases and their parents, e.g., with thalassemia, diabetes mellitus, and rare diseases
- Gives a platform for advocacy to young people, e.g., for climate change and child rights

Specific Disadvantages of Social Media

- Exposure to inappropriate content such as pornographic websites and fake news
- Social media anxiety when the children get anxious and assess their self-worth by the number of “likes” or positive responses that they get on their posts
- Indulging in risky online behavior such as forming friendships with sexual predators
- Cyberbullying that is repeated intentional posting of demeaning and derogatory posts and/or pictures
- Sexting that is posting of sexually explicit material on chatting platforms
- Exposure to targeted advertising and marketing
- Breach of privacy results when the child posts personal details, revealing pictures, details of bank accounts, and credit cards online

Children and young adolescents are not mentally ready-to-use social platforms, as it is difficult for them to analyze the pros and cons of social media. Hence, it is best avoided in this age group. Various platforms have mentioned the permissible age of use as given in the table below.

The permissible age of use of various platforms.

Social media platform	Minimum permissible age
Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat, Instagram, and Google Plus	13 years
WhatsApp	16 years
YouTube	18 years 13–18 years, require parental permission
PUBG	18 years For 13–18 years, restricted play time Less than 13 years and need parental permission
Clash of Clans	13 years

Before allowing children to use a social media platform or a video game, you should familiarize yourselves with it, and analyze whether it is appropriate for age. Also, listen to your children about their reasons for using the social media site and educate them about rules of online safety.



Excessive use of social media reduces sleep duration.

Q7

How can I make my children follow good online manners? What should I do when others post messages that hurt my child?

You should talk to children regarding good manners before permitting them to use gadgets and make them responsible digital citizens. You must formulate clear rules about the online content, i.e., Apps, social media sites, and games that they are allowed to access and their duration. A few good online manners are:

- Follow the golden rule of interpersonal relationships; treat others, as you want yourself to be treated. Never post hurtful messages. Disagree politely
- Use the right language for communication. Avoid the use of swear words. Do not use all caps while typing, as it implies that you are screaming
- Do not post private information such as home address and passwords
- Respect the copyright laws and do not download or copy without permission
- Think before you type, post, and share to check, if it is true, kind, and legal. Before posting a picture, discuss with a parent. Do not post inappropriate material. Anything posted online cannot be erased permanently, as it leaves a digital footprint.
- Never meet a digital friend in person alone whom you have never met before
- Make internet a safe place by reporting online misbehavior to trustworthy adults
- During online schooling, maintain the decorum of the class, wear proper attire, and follow the instructions of the teachers

If others repeatedly post hurtful or inappropriate messages to your child, follow these steps:

- Reassure your child that you love him/her and will help
- Ask the child to take a break from the online world
- Block the sender
- Do not respond to the hurtful message
- Save the message to enable reporting
- If you know the bully, try talking to the parents
- Contact the school teacher to inquire about bullying in school. Most schools have antibullying policies
- Try contacting the digital platform provider to block and report the bully. If bullying does not stop, report to the cyber police

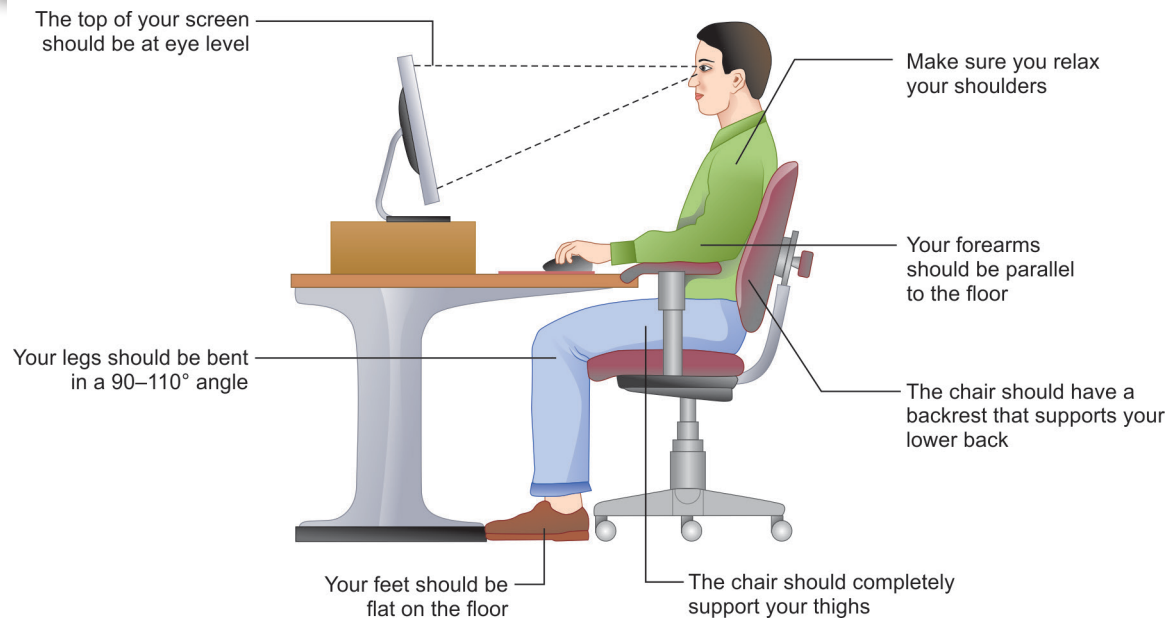
Cyberbullying, sexting, and online sexual solicitation are cybercrimes and can be reported at <https://www.cybercrime.gov.in> or to the Childline phone number: 1098.

Q8

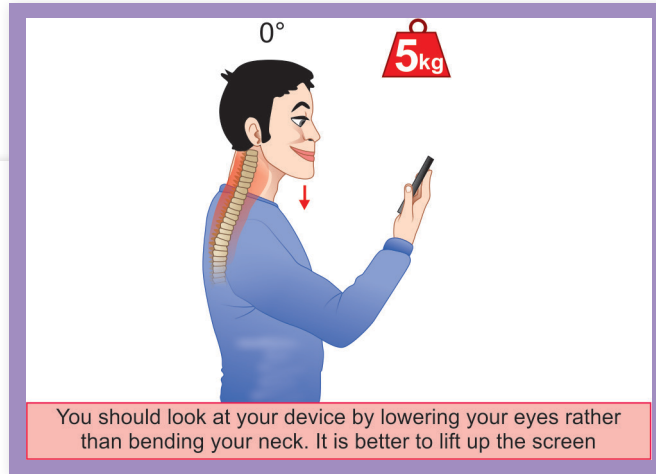
How can I motivate my child to use media in a healthy way?

Children feel secure when boundaries and rules are laid down for behavior. You should formulate “digital rules” to encourage healthy media usage when your child begins to use a digital device. These should be age appropriate and new rules could be added as the child becomes older. A few rules for maintaining “digital hygiene” are:

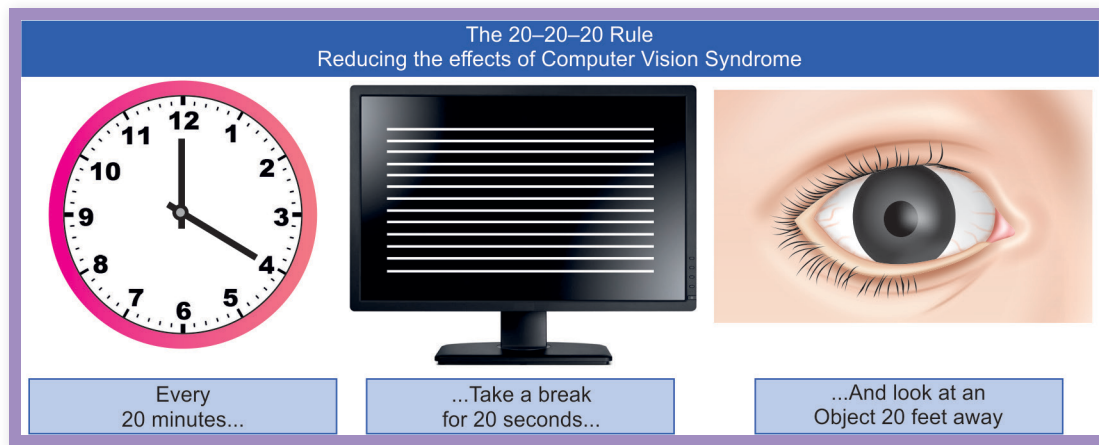
- Ensure a warm, nurturing, supportive, fun-filled, and secure environment at home. Children follow rules, if they are guided in a respectful and empathetic manner. Do not use a screen for calming or distracting a child.
- Balance screen time with adequate time for sleep, physical activity, study, family, meals, and hobby time. Screens should be switched off 1 hour before bedtime, as blue light emitted from devices disturbs sleep.
- The correct posture to be adopted while sitting in front of the computer and the mobile phone is shown in the figures below, respectively. To reduce eyestrain and dryness of eyes, it is important to follow 20-20-20 rule as outlined in the figure below.
- Avoid multitasking. While doing offline homework, all digital devices should be switched off.
- Keep children safe by co-viewing and monitoring the online content and interactions. Avoid programs and games with violent content. Also, ensure proper privacy settings on the computer, safe search engines on browsers and apps, and anti-virus software. For young children, install protective software to restrict access to inappropriate websites.



Correct posture while using desktop or laptop.



Correct posture while using mobile phone.



20-20-20 rule to reduce computer vision syndrome.

- Encourage the use of media for educational purposes and promote physical activity and offline creative games for recreation. Use “teachable moments” on the media to convey family values, healthy lifestyle, and interpret media messages. For example, irresponsible sexual behavior leading to unwanted pregnancy can be talked about while co-viewing serials showing casual sexual encounters between teens.
- Mark digital free zones such as bedroom, dining table, kitchen, bathroom, and motorized vehicles where no family member uses a gadget.
- Decide upon a digital fasting time when no family member uses any device and utilizes that time for family bonding.
- You should role model healthy media use and formulate a family media usage plan.

Q9

I have read that media is as addictive as drugs. How will I know that my child is addicted to media? Can media addiction be cured?

Unhealthy use of media can lead to addiction. Internet gaming addiction is a mental disorder. If your child compulsively uses media, craves for it, has lost control over its usage, gets violent when asked to stop its use, and continues to use despite adverse consequences such as fall in academic performance and loss of friendships, he is probably addicted to it. Media addiction may be associated with other disorders such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), depression, and anxiety. Media addiction can be treated by consulting mental health professionals. When you find one or more flag signs given above, do consult with your pediatrician or a mental health professional at the earliest.

Q10

I am very careful about screen use. Does my screen time have an effect on my child?

Your screen time does have an effect on your child. Children learn best when parents demonstrate what they have “to do” rather than just “say it”. Your children will follow healthy use, if you role model digital hygiene and responsible digital citizenship. If you use screens excessively, your time for social interaction with your child decreases and this has a negative effect on child development.



Parents should role model healthy media usage.

KEY POINTS TO REMEMBER

- Screen time is the total time spent per day in viewing screens such as mobile phone, TV, computer, tablet, or any hand-held or visual device.
- If any of the essential activities such as sleep, physical activity, study, family, meal, and hobby times is displaced due to screen time, then it is called excessive screen time and it should be reduced.
- Avoid the use of digital devices in children <2 years.
- Healthy media usage promotes learning, creativity, social interaction, and holistic wellness.
- Unhealthy media usage affects physical, psychological, social, and academic wellbeing of a child.
- Implement digital rules, digital hygiene, and nurture responsible digital citizenship.
- Consult a mental health professional at the earliest on detecting flag signs of media addiction.
- Act as a role model for healthy media use.