Managing your child's screen time

It can be difficult to set screen time limits for children as there's no 'right or wrong' answer to what is the right amount of time spent on screens. To put an end to the confusion, we've outlined five sensible, evidence-based things to bear in mind when setting screen time limits for children.

Remember that not all screen time is the same

Doing something creative or learning new skills are very different from mindless scrolling on social media. Being online might allow children to socialise in a positive way — or maybe they're just doing something that they enjoy. If there are real benefits, then the amount of time they spend doing it becomes important. As long as screen time isn't interfering with schoolwork or other activities and isn't having a noticeable effect on their mood — there's probably no need to panic.

How long should kids spend online per day?

The 'Goldilocks theory' put forward by academics from Oxford and Cardiff universities suggests that some screen time can be beneficial. Around 1 to 2 hours daily during the week and a bit longer at the weekends is considered 'just right' for teens — after that the benefits gradually taper off, and the negative effects increase. Younger children, aged 4-7 years old, should probably spend no more than an hour a day online — this can go up to an hour and a half as they get older.

Boundaries really do work if you stick to them

Get your child involved in the process so that they understand *why* you're setting limits. Be clear about your reasons and ask them what they think — getting buy-in at this stage will really help to avoid arguments later on. Remember that teens might need to spend longer online to complete their homework. Once you've agreed the limits, stick to them! It's always tempting to give up in the face of pester power or teenage sulks, but it will get easier every time you stick to your guns.

Look out for signs that screen time is having a negative effect

If they're spending time with friends and getting enough sleep and exercise, then it's likely that they already have a healthy balance. Talk to your child about what they're doing online and get them to think about how it makes them feel when they spend time doing these things. They may actually agree that staying up late gaming is making them too tired for school the next day or admit that constant scrolling through social media is starting to affect their self-esteem.

Have quality family screen time together

Although it is good to set aside time when the family is not using screens, this doesn't mean that you can't also get involved in using screens together. If you know that your child enjoys playing games online, organise a family gaming night or let them plan something for the whole family to get stuck into. If you take a real interest in what they like to do online, they're more likely to come to you if something goes wrong, or they make a mistake along the way.