



Healthy Lifestyle

Children's health

Children and TV often go hand in hand. Understand the effects of too much screen time — and how to enforce reasonable limits.

By Mayo Clinic Staff

Are you concerned about how much time your child spends watching TV or movies, playing with a smartphone or computer, or enjoying [video](#) games?

Although some screen time can be educational, it's easy to go overboard. Consider this guide to children and TV, including what you can do to keep your child's screen time in check.

The American Academy of Pediatrics discourages media use by children younger than age 2 and recommends limiting older children's screen time to no more than one or two hours a day. Too much screen time has been linked to:

- **Obesity.** The more TV your child watches, the greater his or her risk is of becoming overweight. Having a TV in a child's bedroom also increases this risk. Children can also develop an appetite for junk food promoted in TV ads, as well as overeat while watching TV.
- **Irregular sleep.** The more TV children watch, the more likely they are to have trouble falling asleep or to have an irregular sleep [schedule](#). Sleep loss, in turn, can lead to fatigue and increased snacking.
- **Behavioral problems.** Elementary students who spend more than two hours a day watching TV or using a computer are more likely to have emotional, social and attention problems. Exposure to video games is also linked with an increased risk of attention problems in children. Watching excessive amounts of TV at age 4 is linked with bullying at ages 6 through 11.
- **Impaired academic performance.** Elementary students who have TVs in their

bedrooms tend to perform worse on tests than do those who don't have TVs in their bedrooms.

- **Violence.** Too much exposure to violence through media — especially on TV — can desensitize children to violence. As a result, children might learn to accept violent behavior as a normal way to solve problems.
- **Less time for play.** Excessive screen time leaves less time for active, creative play.

Your child's total screen time might be greater than you realized. **Start** monitoring it and talk to your child about the importance of sitting less and moving more. Also, explain screen time rules — and the consequences of breaking them. In the meantime, take simple steps to reduce screen time. For example:

- **Eliminate background TV.** If the TV is turned on — even if it's just in the background — it's likely to draw your child's attention. If you're not actively watching a show, turn off the TV.
- **Keep TVs and computers out of the bedroom.** Children who have TVs in their bedrooms watch more TV than children who don't have TVs in their bedrooms. Monitor your child's screen time and the websites he or she is visiting by keeping TVs and computers in a common area in your house.
- **Don't eat in front of the TV.** Allowing your child to eat or **snack** in front of the TV increases his or her screen time. The habit also encourages mindless munching, which can lead to weight gain.
- **Set school day rules.** Most children have limited free time during the school week. Don't let your child spend all of it in front of a screen. Also, avoid using screen time as a reward or punishment. This can make screen time seem even more important to children.
- **Talk to your child's caregivers.** Encourage other adults in your child's life to limit your child's screen time, too.
- **Suggest other activities.** Rather than relying on screen time for entertainment, help your child find other things to do, such as reading, playing a sport, helping with cooking or trying a board game.
- **Set a good example.** Be a good role model by limiting your own screen time.
- **Unplug it.** If screen time is becoming a source of tension in your family, unplug the TV, turn off the computer or put away the smart phones or video games for a while. You might designate one day a week or month as a screen-free day for the whole family. To prevent unauthorized TV viewing, put a lock on your TV's electrical plug.

When your child has screen time, make it as engaging as possible:

- **Plan what your child views.** Instead of flipping through channels, seek quality videos or programming. Consider using parental control settings on your TV and computers.

Preview video games and smartphone applications before allowing your child to play with them.

- **Watch with your child.** Whenever possible, watch programs together — and talk about what you see, such as family values, violence or drug abuse. If you see a junk food ad, explain that just because it's on TV doesn't mean it's good for you.
- **Record programs and watch them later.** This will allow you to fast-forward through commercials selling toys, junk food and other products. When watching live programs, use the mute button during commercials.
- **Encourage active screen time.** Have your child stretch or do yoga while watching a show. Challenge your family to see who can do the most jumping jacks during a commercial break. Choose video games that encourage physical activity.

It can be difficult to start limiting your child's screen time. It's worth the effort, however. By creating new household rules and steadily making small changes in your child's routine, you can curb screen time and its effects.

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Aug. 16, 2013

Original article: <http://www.mayoclinic.org/healthy-living/childrens-health/in-depth/children-and-tv/art-20047952>

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