Be Well Comments

About this series

Our *Cognita Be Well Comments* series looks at nine key areas related to young people's wellbeing, providing a summary of published research in each area along with practical tips for parents. In preparing the series, we commissioned experts from University College London (UCL) to conduct a review of all published research in these areas.

This document incorporates the review by Kelly Dickson and James Thomas in the area of social media and offers tips for parents based on the experience and expertise of Cognita's education and wellbeing team.

Screen Time

Technology has comprehensively changed the way we interact, work, and live. Parents today will be raising children who have grown up surrounded by digital information and entertainment on personal devices.

While research in this area is in its infancy, without offering many firm conclusions about the direct impact of screen time on general wellbeing, the most common recommendation seems to be 'everything in moderation'. However, it isn't just how long your child spends on devices that's important, but how and why, too.

SOCIAL MEDIA | **SCREEN TIME** | SLEEP | THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN | MINDFULNESS | RESILIENCE | STRESS AND EXAM PRESSURE | EATING | STUDENT TRANSITION

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What the evidence says

It's not about denying your child, but observing and being informed about the potential impact screen time can have on their concentration, cognitive performance and mood. This knowledge, combined with parental intuition about what is best for your child, will help parents make informed decisions on monitoring, limiting or guiding screen time. We believe the priority for us as educators, and for parents, too, should be to minimise the risks of technology while maximising its opportunities.

Connection:
Devices can connect families and friends when they're apart, but they can also disconnect them when they're together. For example, the ability for your child to play games with friends when they're in different places can be a good thing. But if this ends up replacing face-to-face interaction, it can damage the quality of their relationships and interpersonal skills, and increase the risk of exposure to inappropriate and harmful content. Furthermore, it can desensitise young people, inhibiting the development of healthy and safe relationships.

Addiction:
Dependency on screens doesn't just affect children. Personal devices are designed to pull all of us in, regardless of our age. They demand more of the brain's attention and interaction by stimulating the reward centre and releasing the pleasure-giving chemical dopamine. Online platforms use various techniques to give users that instant dopamine hit, such as constant notifications and likes.

Impact on the brain:
The adolescent brain continues to develop until the mid-twenties and in part is shaped by what it is tasked to do. In a process called synaptic pruning, the connections between neurons strengthen when an activity is repeated. Similarly, when neurons are not used, they are eliminated. This inevitably invites questions about the impact on that development of spending prolonged periods of time using devices.

If you're concerned your child is becoming dependent on their device, look out for the following signs associated with addiction to screen time:

- Problems falling asleep or waking up in the morning
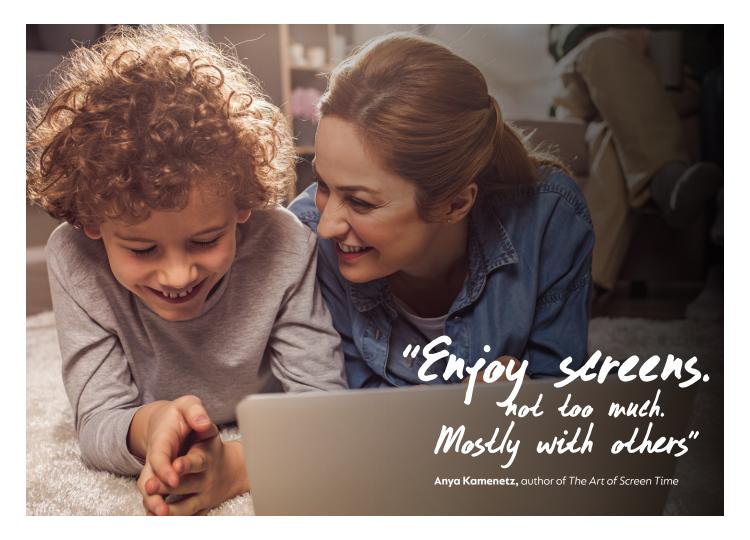

- Changes in mood/behaviour

- Overeating and reluctant to be physically active

- An unwillingness to communicate

- Withdrawing from activities or becoming reclusive

"Enjoy screens. not too much. Mostly with others"

Anya Kamenetz, author of *The Art of Screen Time*

Data:

It's critical that our children understand the risks of casually agreeing to data requests online and of sharing their information and images with companies and individuals. Companies can target advertising as well as fake news (which travels six times faster than real news) so convincingly because they can access our personal history of content viewed and purchases made. It's critical that children are aware of this to help them understand the difference between beliefs, facts, propaganda and outright falsehoods.

Self-regulation:

Self-regulation means being able to stand back and really consider your own thoughts, feelings and behaviours in relation to your goals; thinking about the consequences of your choices. Dependence on screen content to validate your views or actions can lead to a loss of personal agency or control.

Children's development of self-regulation and agency is reinforced by face-to-face connections with others, being engaged in fulfilling activities and giving to help a cause or others. Therefore we should encourage our children to prioritise these habits in their lives.

Sleep:

Perhaps the most irrefutable and damning evidence about screen time links to obesity and sleep. Given that sleep is the foundation of good health, a lack of it can often be the basis of other negative health behaviours. The impact of devices in the bedroom is significant. The blue light emitted from screens inhibits melatonin production, thus delaying sleepiness. The mere presence of devices in the bedroom can also raise anxiety levels, further hindering sleep, and create a temptation to check them during the night.

Top Tips

Our role as parents and educators is to help our children be the masters of their devices and screens, not their servants. *The Art of Screen Time* is an excellent practical and reassuring book for parents. Its author, Anya Kamenetz, has the most wonderfully straightforward advice for parents: **"Enjoy screens. Not too much. Mostly with others."**

1 Monitor your own device usage and model what you'd like to see in your children's habits. As a family, value and protect screenless time to ensure screens don't intrude on family meals, activities and one-to-one conversations.

2 Create a family agreement on screen time and ensure balance is at the heart of it. Common Sense Media has a great example. To view it, go to **commonsensemedia.org** and click on 'Family Media Agreement'.

3 Screens negatively impact sleep. There should be no screen time within an hour of bedtime and phones should not be in the bedroom overnight.

4 Encourage your child to engage in non-screen-based fulfilling activities, including charitable work – this genuinely supports your child's brain development, as does adequate physical exercise each day.

5 Look out for the common signs of screen time overuse (see page 2). If you're concerned your child is becoming dependent, talk to them and consider using an 'Internet Addiction Assessment' questionnaire like the one available at **psychology-tools.com.** This can help identify patterns of use that are causing problems.

6 Talk to your child about the way their data can be used by companies. This will empower them to be more selective about what they share.

Talk to your child and remember to trust your instinct – you know your child better than anyone.

For more resources visit **cognita.com/cognita-be-well**