

Children and Screens: Navigating Benefits, Drawbacks, and the Role of Parents

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Abstract

Screen time has become an integral part of children's daily routines, influencing cognitive, social-emotional, language, and physical development. While excessive use—especially during early childhood and pre-adolescence—can be associated with reduced executive functioning, limited parent-child interaction, emotional regulation difficulties, sleep problems, and physical health challenges, thoughtful use of digital media can support learning, creativity, and communication. Educational apps and interactive platforms enhance literacy, numeracy, critical thinking, and motor coordination. Parental guidance is crucial in maximizing benefits and minimizing risks by setting age-appropriate limits, selecting high-quality content, and engaging in co-viewing. This article synthesizes current research findings on both positive and negative effects and emphasizes balanced and supervised screen use in childhood.

Keywords: Screen Time, Child Development, Cognitive Development, Language Development, Social-Emotional Development, Physical Health, Critical Thinking, Creativity, School Readiness, Motor Skills, Parental Guidance, Digital Media, Early Childhood

Negative Effects of Excessive Screen Time

1. Cognitive Development

Children's brains undergo rapid development before age five and throughout pre-adolescence. Excessive screen exposure during these critical periods has been associated with reduced attention, memory difficulties, and poorer academic outcomes in some studies. Prolonged use may interfere with development of executive functions such as planning, working memory, and inhibitory control.

However, evidence also suggests that the **context of screen exposure matters**: passive viewing is more strongly linked to negative outcomes, whereas co-viewing or interactive educational use can be neutral or beneficial.

2. Language Development

Early childhood is a key period for language acquisition. Studies show that greater amounts of unstructured screen time are associated with lower receptive and expressive language skills, particularly among very young children.

In contrast, **high-quality screen content combined with adult engagement** may support language learning to some extent, underscoring the importance of guided media use.

3. Social-Emotional Development

Excessive screen time has been linked to social-emotional challenges, including increased risk for emotional regulation difficulties, depression, anxiety, and reduced well-being in some studies.

Mechanisms are complex, but negative outcomes often correlate with **background screen exposure**, interruptions during parent–child interaction, and content that is inappropriate for age and developmental level.

4. Physical Effects

High levels of screen time are associated with **reduced physical activity**, increased sedentary behavior, disrupted sleep patterns, and potential musculoskeletal strain from prolonged device use.

Additionally, disrupted sleep behaviors linked to screens—especially close to bedtime—can further affect physical and cognitive functioning.

Positive Aspects of Screen Time

- 1. Fostering Socialization:** Digital tools can connect children with family and peers, fostering social engagement in ways that may not otherwise be possible—particularly over distance. Interactive play and cooperative games may support communication and teamwork skills when balanced with real-world social interaction.
- 2. Enhancing Critical Thinking:** Certain educational platforms and logic-based games are designed to enhance strategic thinking, spatial reasoning, and problem-solving. Engaging, age-appropriate activities can stimulate analytical thinking and cognitive flexibility.
- 3. Encouraging Creativity:** Digital creation tools and open-ended games provide platforms for creative expression, design thinking, and imaginative play. Such environments can nurture creative skill development when screen use is purposeful and guided by adults.
- 4. Promoting School Readiness:** Educational apps focused on early literacy, numeracy, and phonics can reinforce foundational academic skills. When used in limited, structured ways and accompanied by adult interaction, these tools may support pre-school thinking skills.
- 5. Developing Motor Skills:** Touchscreen activities and interactive drawing tools can help young children practice fine motor skills, hand–eye coordination, and precision.

The Role of Parents in Managing Screen Time

Parental involvement significantly shapes the impact of screen use on children. Research shows that **parental monitoring, limit setting, and active co-viewing are associated with healthier patterns of screen use and lower problematic media behaviors** in adolescence.

Effective strategies include:

- Setting clear time limits based on age and developmental needs
- Establishing screen-free routines (e.g., during meals and before bedtime)
- Choosing age-appropriate, high-quality content
- Co-viewing and discussing media together
- Modeling healthy digital habits

Conclusion

Screen time is not inherently harmful or beneficial; its effects depend on **duration, content quality, and context of use**. Excessive and unsupervised screens can pose risks to cognitive, language, social-emotional, and physical development, while purposeful and moderated use can support learning, creativity, and connection. Parental guidance and thoughtful media planning are essential for maximizing benefits and minimizing risks. Continued research is needed to refine age-specific recommendations and understand how contextual and developmental factors influence outcomes.

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