

SCREEN TIME TALKS



Screen Time, Managed

*What the research says
and how to manage it.*

A short guide for parents, educators, and healthcare providers —
the research in four pages, and the habits that follow from it.

What the Research Actually Says

Screens are part of childhood now, and they aren't going away. The research is more useful than the headlines: it points to how screens are used, not only how long.

Where the evidence is encouraging

Use matters

A study that followed 260 Finnish children for eight years found more screen time from childhood was associated with better cognitive processing in adolescence. The researchers suggest the type of activity (educational, creative or problem-solving) may matter more than the amount.

Pediatricians have shifted

In 2026 the American Academy of Pediatrics replaced its fixed time limit with guidance built around content quality, a family media plan and device-free meals. It also advises asking why a child reaches for a screen, such as boredom or loneliness.

Where the evidence calls for care

Eyes

A pooled analysis of 45 studies and more than 335,000 children linked each added daily hour of screen time to 21% higher odds of nearsightedness (myopia). The rise is small at one hour and close to double at four.

Sleep

Late-night screen use can disrupt sleep, and poor sleep affects memory, mood and learning. Devices off at least 30 minutes before bed, every night.

Youngest children

No screen use under 18 months other than video chatting with family. From 18 months to 5 years, less than an hour a day of high-quality content.

Heavy use

Four or more hours a day is linked to higher rates of anxiety, depression and behavior problems. Part of that link is what heavy use pushes out: activity and sleep.

What the research can't tell us

Most of these findings are associations, not proof of cause. A large U.S. study of more than 50,000 children found roughly half of the link between heavy screen time and poorer outcomes is explained by what it displaces: physical activity and consistent sleep.

Manage the use, the setting and the time of day — not only the clock.

Sources: Jyväskylä PANIC study, Pediatric Exercise Science (2026); American Academy of Pediatrics, Digital Ecosystems, Children, and Adolescents (2026); Ha et al., JAMA Network Open (2025); U.S. Surgeon General's advisory (May 2026). Findings are associations from observational studies.

Match the Use to the Child

Four kinds of screen time look alike on a clock and very different in a day. Knowing which one a child is in is the first step to managing it.

Kind of use	Examples	What to look for
Create	Making video, music, art or code	Is the child making something, or only watching how it's made?
Connect	Video calls with family, messages with real friends	Is it adding to real relationships or replacing them?
Learn	Schoolwork, tutorials, STEM tools	Is it building a skill? Does it stop when the work stops?
Passive	Scrolling, autoplay, endless feeds	Who decides when it ends: the child, the parent, or the app?

Three questions for any screen activity

ASK

What is it doing for them?

Learning, laughing, connecting, or just filling time?

ASK

What is it replacing?

Sleep, daylight, conversation, a friend?

ASK

Can they stop?

Stopping when asked, or a fight every time?

The body doesn't care what's on the screen. Distance, daylight and sleep matter for homework just as much as for games.

The same habits apply to every kind of use. See page 4.

Try this week

Pick one screen activity your child does often. Sit with them for ten minutes and ask the three questions together. Children who help set the rules are more likely to follow them, and the answers show where a rule is needed and where one isn't.

Sources: Jyväskylä PANIC study, Pediatric Exercise Science (2026); American Academy of Pediatrics, Digital Ecosystems, Children, and Adolescents (2026).

Every Screen, Every Use

These habits matter whether the screen is for homework or play.

Habit	What to do	Why
Distance	Hold screens at arm's length, 18 to 24 inches. Watch for a child creeping closer over time.	Working distances under about 8 inches (20 cm) have been associated with myopia. A TV viewed from across the room is easier on young eyes than a phone held close.
Breaks	20-20-20: every 20 minutes, look at something 20 feet away for 20 seconds. Avoid more than about 45 minutes of continuous near work.	Long, unbroken near work is associated with myopia.
Daylight	Aim for 1 to 2 hours outdoors most days.	Outdoor time is one of the best-supported protections against myopia starting. Evidence is mixed on whether it slows myopia already present.
Bedtime	Devices off at least 30 minutes before bed, every night.	Late-night use can disrupt sleep.

In a July 2026 parent survey, 46% believed it takes three or more hours of daily screen time to raise myopia risk. Research suggests the odds begin rising earlier and are close to double by four hours.

Signs worth an eye exam

Blurry distance vision, squinting, frequent headaches, rubbing or frequent blinking, or holding things very close.

In the survey, only 22% and 23% of parents recognized blurry distance vision and squinting as signs of myopia, and 46% did not know headaches can be one.

Good to know

- Nearsightedness can be managed. Glasses and specialty contact lenses are options. Prescription eye drops are one option; ask an eye doctor what fits the child.
- Blue-light glasses have not been shown to clearly reduce digital eye strain.

Sources: National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine (2024); Ha et al., JAMA Network Open (2025); AAV/Harris Poll of 704 U.S. parents (July 2026); Optometry Times (Oct. 2026). This guide is general information, not medical advice.

Set It Once. Let the Default Do the Work

Willpower is a poor plan for a 9 p.m. argument. Decide once, on a calm afternoon, and let the setup do the work.

- 1 A family media plan**
Write down when, where and what, together. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends one for every household.
- 2 Device-free meals**
Dinner is the easiest place to start, and it gives every other rule something to stand on.
- 3 Out of the bedroom overnight**
Phones and tablets charge somewhere else. Devices off at least 30 minutes before bed.
- 4 Share a family device**
A shared tablet in a common room is easier to manage than one for each child.
- 5 Ask why**
Boredom, loneliness and stress are common reasons children reach for a screen. Offer an alternative they will want.
- 6 Model it**
Children copy what they see. Put the phone down at dinner.
- 7 Let the network help**
Router and carrier controls can pause Wi-Fi at dinner and bedtime. See the Layered Approach guide at truefocusinitiative.com.

Questions to bring to a school

What is the phone policy, and how is it enforced?

How much of the school day is unstructured, outdoor time?

Which screen-based tools are used in class, and how are they chosen?

Some governments are moving too. The Netherlands plans a national ban on smartphones in schools starting in 2027.

Sources: American Academy of Pediatrics, Digital Ecosystems, Children, and Adolescents (2026); U.S. Surgeon General's advisory (May 2026); NL Times (Oct. 5, 2026).