

The Royal College of Psychiatrists: Technology use and the mental health of children and young people

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The use of screen time and social media by children and young people has rarely been out of the headlines in recent years. In light of the concerns from young people, the public and policy makers, The Royal College of Psychiatrists has developed a summary paper in 2020 on the use of technology by children and young people. This can be found at [college-report-cr225.pdf \(rcpsych.ac.uk\)](https://www.rcpsych.ac.uk/college-report-cr225.pdf).

Children's use of technology is increasing annually with social media now a part of many families' lives. Screen time can cover a broad range of activities from reading novels on an e-reader or doing research for a school project to cooperatively playing games with others across the world. Even on the same platform, children and young people could have vastly different experiences depending on the content they are accessing. Therefore, when considering the risks and benefits of technology use, an understanding of the content with which children and young people are engaging is essential. For children and young people there are many positives about these innovations: instant communication with family and friends around the world; the ability to play and be creative; access to high-quality information; the ability to socialise in a different environment; and online support for a range of health concerns and identity themes. However, these devices can pose potential challenges to the health and well-being of children and young people:

1. Time spent engaging with digital technology can come at the expense of time spent on other activities including face-to-face interactions with family or carers and peers, exercise and sleep.
2. Online content may be viewed which is distressing, including exposure to violent, graphic or sexual imagery and exposure to hate speech.
3. Exposure to online bullying.
4. The risk of exploitation including sexual exploitation.
5. Money can be quickly and easily spent online, for example in game purchases, online gambling and on products such as prescription and illegal drugs.
6. Whilst evidence for causal links is still developing, there is evidence to suggest that digital technology can affect weight, mood, thoughts of suicide and self-harm and body image.
7. Some children and young people may be more vulnerable to the impact of digital technology, for example those with mental health needs such as depression, anxiety and developmental conditions such as ADHD.
8. The concept of technology addiction is emerging together with developing clinical services for children and young people with addiction

Guidance for children and young people

1. Getting a balance.

Technology can be great but it can also take over! Do you think that you are getting the right balance between spending time looking at technology and spending time with the people you care about and looking after yourself? Do you regularly spend time having fun with your family or carers? Do you spend time face-to-face with your friends? Do you stay on top of the things you need to do for school or college? Do you get enough fresh air and exercise? If the answer to these questions is no you are probably not getting the balance right. Try thinking about how you spend your time across the week. Can you spend more time each week with the people you care about, getting your work done and being active?

2. Making use of technology time limits and setting your own boundaries.

Many devices, e.g. smartphones, tablets and consoles, now have programs to record and limit the amount of time they are used. Individual users can also set limits to the amount of time they spend on games or devices. If you feel technology is interfering with your life and you're struggling to get a balance, try setting limits for yourself - plan what you'd like to do instead then ask did you enjoy yourself or feel a sense of achievement? If so, plan your next goal.

3. Being aware that you might be using technology to avoid other things.

Sometimes people might use technology as a way of coping when they are feeling anxious or upset. Sometimes this can help, for example in getting support and information online. Sometimes people might spend time on technology as a way of avoiding difficult things. Do you find that you are using technology just for the sake of it even if you are feeling bored or not enjoying it? Do you feel overwhelmed when you stop using technology? Talk to someone about how you are feeling. You can find more information about mental health problems and how to access help at <https://youngminds.org.uk/find-help/>

4. Sleep

It can be really tempting to stay up late going online or watching videos. Do you think using technology affects your sleep? Are you tired during the daytime? Does this affect how you concentrate in school? We recommend that you stop looking at screens one hour before you go to bed because the light from screens can make it more difficult to get off to sleep. As it's easy to pick up a phone or tablet at night we recommend that you keep technology in a different room from the one where you sleep.

5. Sports and exercise

Most of our online time or digital activity involves sitting still for long periods of time. This can stop us from taking part in physical activity which is very important for our health and well-being. So, scheduling in some time each day for sports and exercise is a great way to break up our screen time with healthy physical activity.

6. Content

Sometimes you may come across something stressful online. This could be pictures, videos or audio or writing which can be generally available or may be something directed

at you personally. It's not okay for people to bully you online. Talk to an adult you can trust if this happens; this could be a family member or carer, school staff member or another adult. Find out more about how to stay safe online, how to block people or report distressing content here: <https://www.childline.org.uk/info-advice/bullying-abuse-safety/online-mobile-safety/staying-safe-online/>

7. Impact on your health

If your online world is making you feel self-conscious or sad - take a break or talk to someone.

8. Sharing information online

Once you have posted or shared information online you are not in control of it. Would you want your parents or teachers to see it? If not don't post it. People may not be who they say they are online, don't share personal information with people you don't know. There is useful information on the 5Rights website such as The Right to Know how your information is being used: <https://5rightsfoundation.com/in-action/fulfilling-the-5rights.html>

9. People you meet online

Remember that the people you meet online might not be open about their age or their true identity.

Guidance for parents

- Although technology can be a positive and unifying experience for families, many parents worry about its potential impact. Technology will continue to evolve but there are core principles of parenting that can be maintained and applied to the use of technology. Maintaining a dialogue with your child about the pros and cons of the use of technology is important, as well as thinking about the needs and vulnerabilities of your individual child and their stage of development.
- From a young age encourage discussions within the family on content viewed online.
- Pick your battles, be flexible and choose the right moment to discuss technology with your children. Remember, the younger the child the easier it is to develop good habits around technology use, for example around the use of screens at bedtime.
- Provide a positive perspective on healthy routines e.g. having beautiful skin from a good night's sleep rather than discussing the negative consequences of poor sleep.
- You may feel that your children know more about technology than you do but remember you know a lot about being a parent and this is just another opportunity to use your parenting skills. Resources such as MindEd provide helpful advice about parenting and technology.
- Think about the images that you post of your children and remember that they may see those images in years to come. Consider asking your child's permission before posting their image.
- Be open about your concerns and seek advice if your child is engaging excessively with online activities and becoming more withdrawn.

Screen time boundaries

- Think about the developmental needs of your child. Try to decide what is the right age for your child to own a smartphone or tablet. If your child is using your smartphone or tablet ensure that you have set the controls for appropriate content access.
- Sleep is central to healthy functioning. Screens should be kept out of the bedroom and children should spend one hour away from all technology conducting relaxing activities before bed.

Promoting a balance of activities.

- Try to promote offline activities e.g. talking and playing games together. Remember technology can also be a positive parenting strategy, for example by watching educational programmes together and talking about the programmes you have seen.
- Children can often spend large amounts of time sitting in front of a screen. However, we know that physical activity is very important for children and young people's physical and mental health. Try to encourage your child to take breaks from the screen and take regular exercise.
- Support your child to enhance their social and emotional development by promoting the development of offline relationships with family and friends. Online relationships can be an important way for children to keep in touch with friends and family but face-to-face relationships are vital for the development of social and communication life skills.
- Ensure that you build in times of the day without devices e.g. mealtimes.

Parents modelling a balanced approach to technology

- You can model good screen use by moderating your own use of technology and avoiding phones at certain times e.g. at mealtimes and during face-to-face conversations.

Safeguarding

- Think about your child's online safety, for example: by reviewing privacy settings; sharing of their location; sharing of personal information and images; and discussing how children can block unwanted messages.
- Provide general guidance about the internet and ways of interacting safely online, for example, oversharing information, online identities and meeting people they don't know offline.

Younger children.

- If boundaries are set at an early age then it may be easier to support children to develop routines.
- Keep very young children's use of screen time to a minimum: the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that 1-year-olds should not have access to screen time and 2 to 4-year-olds should have a maximum of one hour a day, although 'less is better'.
- Ensure that children are using age-appropriate apps, games and television.

Older children

- Dialogue around boundaries becomes increasingly important as a child becomes older. Maintaining a positive parent-child relationship is important in providing a space for children to be open and discuss any worries they may have related to technology use e.g. cyberbullying, unwanted messages, inappropriate images, worries about missing out. If your child is able to discuss their worries this will be an opportunity to offer support and help your child with maintaining boundaries around screen use.
- Work with your child to set boundaries around the amount of screen time and the times when screens can be used. Encourage self-observation of screen time involvement through the use of self-monitoring apps.

Safeguarding

- Support young people to manage the potential impact of hurtful comments and other experiences which may be stressful, such as viewing distressing content, comparing themselves to others, worries about their self-image and the impact of fear of missing out.

Under 1 year old	Avoid screen time
2–5 years old	<p>Ensure that screen time is part of a varied and balanced day with activity and face-to-face time.</p> <p>Spend at least three hours a day in physical activity.</p> <p>Children should spend no more than one hour sitting watching or playing with screens.</p>
5–11 years old	<p>Develop a plan with your child for screen time and try to stick to it.</p> <p>Ensure that children have a balance of activities in the day with physical activity, face-to-face conversation and tech-free times.</p> <p>Encourage mealtimes to be tech free.</p> <p>Ensure that you have spoken to your children about how to keep safe online and check that they are keeping safe. Make it clear that you will support them if they feel unsafe or upset online.</p> <p>Try to ensure that there are no screens in the bedroom at night.</p>
11–16 years old	<p>Develop a plan with your teenager; if you have a plan, check that this still fits.</p> <p>Encourage a balance of activity, face-to-face social time, schoolwork and family time.</p> <p>Encourage mealtimes to be tech free.</p> <p>Keep having conversations about keeping safe online and offer space to talk about things that teens might see online which they find upsetting.</p> <p>Make it clear that you will support them if they feel unsafe or upset online.</p> <p>Try to ensure that there are no screens in the bedroom at night.</p>