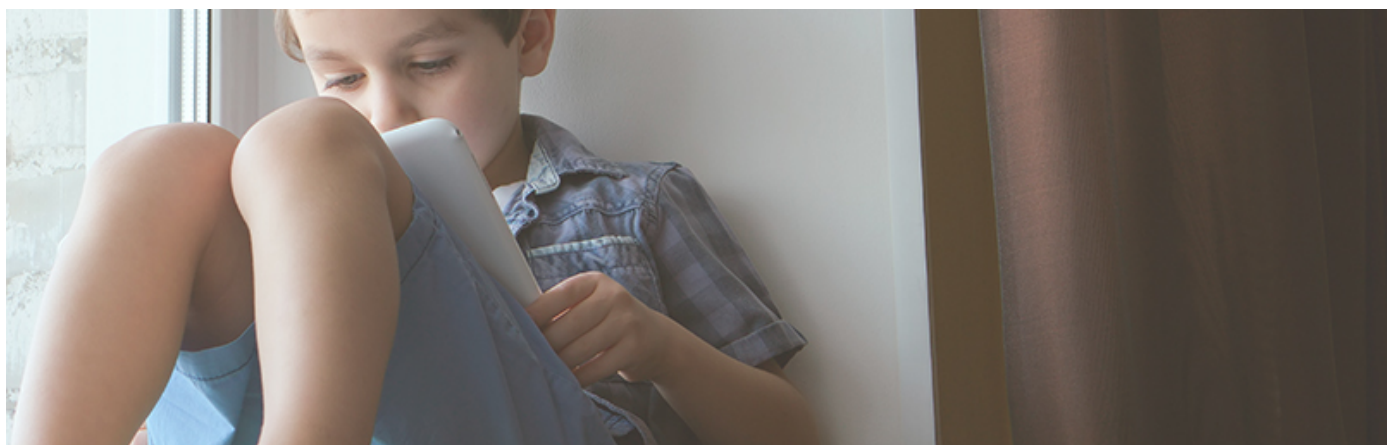


## INSIGHTS

### Getting the screen time balance right



I am always getting asked ‘How much screen time should I allow my child?’ Here’s the thing. I don’t believe there is a magic number of hours a child should be ‘allowed’ or ‘not allowed’ screen time. There are many other more pertinent questions we should be asking about our kids’ screen time, aside from simply ‘how much?’.

What are they doing on the screens? Are they safe? Are they engaging in positive interactions? Is their self-esteem intact, or are they comparing themselves to everyone else online who is (in their mind) smarter, prettier, skinnier or has more friends? Are they creating things or merely consuming? Are they in control? Are they able to put away a device without a tantrum? These are just some of the things we should be looking at when it comes to our kids’ use of their screens. Which is not to say that the amount of time spent on screens is irrelevant. It is still valid to be concerned about how much time screens are consuming of your children’s days.

To help alleviate some of the concerns you may have, and to put some strategies in place, here are some things you can focus on when it comes to your kids and screen time.

#### Look at the individual child

How is your particular child coping? Each child is different. A boundary that works for one child may not work for another. Is your child in control of their screen use? Are they coming to the dinner table without a fight? Are they sleeping, eating, keeping up with friends?

Conversely, are they showing signs of not being in control? If so then you may have to look at better ways to manage their time. Discuss the issue with your child and explain why they need better balance. Not because the technology is bad per say, but because they need to ensure there is enough time left in their day for all the other activities that are needed for their growth, development and wellbeing.

#### Are all of their other needs being met?

Ask yourself, are they getting enough:

##### Sleep time

It’s super important that kids are getting a good night’s sleep. Keeping devices out of the bedroom when they are young, and avoiding the screens for at least an hour before bed helps ensure their sleep needs are met.

##### Bored time

Today’s kids don’t tend to get as much time to be bored as kids used to. It is an important skill to be able to fill in their time themselves. Bored time promotes creative play and thinking as kids are forced to come up with other ways to amuse themselves.

# parenting \* ideas

## Connection time

Face-to-face interaction is obviously crucial for children's social and emotional development and wellbeing. Time with friends, siblings and family members must always be a priority. Learning to engage, problem solve and read body language and facial expressions are all crucial skills that need real-life time and experience to develop.

## Active time

A healthy body and mind requires activity and movement. Kids still love to get out and play. However, some may need a bit more encouragement to remind them.

## Downtime

Whilst playing games may be described by many kids as their downtime (and yes, there is some validity to this argument) kids also need downtime that involves doing very little. It is in these moments of reflection, of thinking and of pondering, that our ideas come to us and our creativity for other activities flows.

## Focus time

There are times of the day when all of us need to be focused on other tasks. These may be homework, chores, reading a book or the newspaper, building something or making something. There needs to be time in kids' days where they are able to focus solely on a task without the distractions of a screen.

## Mealtime

Getting plenty of good food is of course very important to kids' wellbeing. But it's not just about the food. Sitting at the table with parents, siblings or others and enjoying a meal together without the need of a screen helps children to develop good habits while they are young which they can carry into the future.

Obviously there will be times when all these needs are not completely balanced. There will be periods when screens are used more often and times when one or more valuable needs is neglected. But if we can use this as a guide and aim to fit the many key experiences our kids need into each day, we are much more likely to ensure our kids grow up with a healthy respect for their screens and a healthy respect for the many areas of their life that need to be nurtured.



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Martine is a parent educator and a youth and family counsellor who speaks, writes and consults on the challenges faced by families in the modern world. Martine has a Masters in Counselling and a background in secondary education. Through her personal and professional work with families raising children, she recognises the important role technology plays in the social and emotional wellbeing of young people. Martine is an accredited speaker with the Office of the eSafety Commissioner.