

The Truth About Screens and Your Child

By Dr Justin Coulson

Right now *everyone* is focused on big kids and social media. The social media ban is everywhere. What *no one* is talking about is how younger children are being affected by screens.

But we should be. Take a walk in public spaces (cafes, parks, shops) and count the kids holding screens almost before they can hold up their heads. What do we know about kids and screens? And should we be worried?

My answer: We know a LOT. And yes, we should be worried! Here's why.

Why are we using screens with our kids so much?

Surveys conducted in several different countries show that parents hand screens to young children for educational purposes, entertainment, keeping their children occupied during household chores, calming, alleviating boredom, facilitating mealtime, and sleeping.

In a [US study](#), researchers found that by age 2, 40% of children have *their own* tablet. It is 58% by age 4. More than one third (35%) of parents of 0-2 year olds delegated entertaining their children to devices (e.g., reading fairy tales). It reaches 80% in the 3-5 years age group. An [Italian survey](#) of 800 families showed exposure to digital devices started at *breastfeeding*, and 26% of parents allowed 0-2 year-old children to use devices independently, rising to 62% for kids aged 3-5 years.

Why is this a bad thing?

Over 30 systematic reviews and large-scale studies involving thousands of children point to consistent, concerning evidence. First, the [physical impact](#): screen time is linked to myopia, hearing loss, obesity, sleep disturbances, and musculoskeletal problems (back and neck pain).

Impact on psychology? As screen time goes up, so do mental health disorders, including ADHD and language delay - among many others.

In infants and children up to eight years, screens [negatively](#) impact relationships, brain function, thinking, attention, impulse control, and language development. They disrupt playtime and sleep.

But there's no regulation or requirement to reduce screen access for our youngest and most vulnerable. Worst of all, most kids are getting way [too much](#) screen time. And at this age, it's almost entirely passive consumption, offering no developmental value while carrying all the risks.

Can't I go to the toilet in peace?

Reading an article like this feels unfair. Kids are demanding. It's relentless. Sometimes you need to chill out, take a long shower, enjoy small talk with an adult, and relax. You fantasise about

prepping dinner without hearing “Mum?” 1000 times. The screen is your saviour! Surely a few minutes of YouTube Kids or ABC Kids or Roblox is ok? Well, not really. Let me explain.

What your child needs when it comes to screens

Kids’ brains respond to screens the way the body responds to drugs: it’s a dose-response relationship. This means the more of one thing you get, the more of the other you’ll also get. Take more panadol (or drink more alcohol) and get more impact. The casino that is your phone hits your child’s dopamine receptors so hard they’re on a high the second they stare at the screen. It builds a compulsion in them to have more. And more. This neural hijacking might save your sanity in the short-term, but long-term impacts are profoundly unhealthy for brain development.

If you *must* give your kiddo a screen, make the content slow and simple. Look for content that is quiet, with a clear storyline (ideally that emphasise empathy and other valued traits). I’m talking *Bluey*. Not games - even the “educational” ones - and not the slop on YouTube or other platforms.

During these first years, neural pathways are built at an astonishing rate - through real-world, analogue interaction, not digital stimulation. When your toddler stacks blocks and they fall over, they’re learning cause and effect, spatial reasoning, and frustration tolerance. When they wrestle with you, they’re developing body awareness, trust, and emotional regulation. When they get bored and have to figure out what to do next, they’re building executive function and creativity. Screens can’t replicate these experiences because the brain needs resistance, unpredictability, and three-dimensional sensory input to wire itself properly. A perfectly designed app is still a poor substitute for an imperfectly stacked block tower.

Your child needs analogue, tactile experiences; puzzles, books, games. They need OUTDOORS! Swings, trampolines, bikes, scooters. They need hugs, wrestling, and peek-a-boo. They need YOU.

So, put on ABC Kids if you need 30 minutes to whip up a spag bol or to take a shower. Don’t stress yourself out so much that you’re no good to be around with screens off because you’re ready to crack.

But... be intentional. Be mindful. And minimise those screens in your life.

We’re finally waking up to the dangers of social media for teenagers. We’re passing laws to protect 13-year-olds from algorithmic manipulation.

But who’s protecting the 3-year-olds? Who’s regulating the apps designed to capture toddlers’ attention?

Right now, that’s on us as parents. And yes, it’s harder. But protecting our children’s developing brains might be the most important screen battle we fight - precisely because they’re too young to fight it themselves.



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