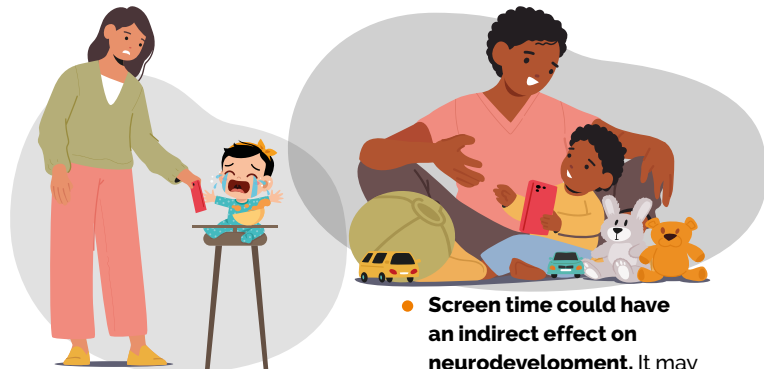


WATCH AND LEARN

THE SCREEN TIME DILEMMA: HOW MUCH OR HOW LITTLE IS IDEAL FOR CHILDREN?

Smartphones and tablets are so ubiquitous that it is impossible to avoid them. The challenge for parents is to strike the right balance — letting children keep pace with the digital world while protecting their eyesight, overall health and well-being. When parents are busy, it is tempting to rely on digital devices as virtual babysitters. This is a slippery slope, warns Dr Evelyn Law, a clinician-scientist specialising in developmental and behavioural paediatrics. She says, "A little bit of screen time at intermittent intervals is unlikely to be harmful. But unconsciously, the amount will gradually increase over time. Once a child has started using screens, it is hard to revert to no screens."



Healthy Outcomes (GUSTO), her team found that infants who were exposed to longer screen time had poorer executive functions — such as difficulty regulating emotions, sustaining attention and persisting in hard tasks — beyond eight years of age. There are two possible reasons:

- **Infants have difficulty processing information on 2D screens.** Their brains have to work harder when bombarded with sensory stimuli (e.g., fast movements, blinking lights) to make sense of the information. This leaves inadequate cognitive resources for their executive functions to develop.



Dr Evelyn Law, paediatric specialist

- **Screen time could have an indirect effect on neurodevelopment.** It may displace quality parent-child interactions critical for facilitating holistic development. This includes building thinking and language skills in the early years.

While Dr Law plans to further investigate these explanations, her findings are consistent with other studies. A mounting body of evidence shows deficits in children's cognitive and problem-solving skills after excessive screen use. It can also put infants at risk of language developmental delay. She adds, "Unlike a parent or educator, screens cannot respond to a child's questions, nor can they interpret non-verbal answers such as a child looking at a correct object in the room."

exchanges which are critical for a child's development. She suggests some non-screen activities for parents with infants and toddlers:

- ➔ **If your child is crying to be picked up, strap him close to you as you go about your chores (unless it is cooking).** Talk about what you are doing (e.g., "Mummy is vacuuming the floor" or "Daddy is packing for our outing later").
- ➔ **Enjoy music together.** Sing along with actions. Give your child a rattle or drum to shake with the rhythm.
- ➔ **Bring your child outdoors.** Point out objects by name and add descriptive words. Use sounds or sing to enrich what he hears with what he sees.

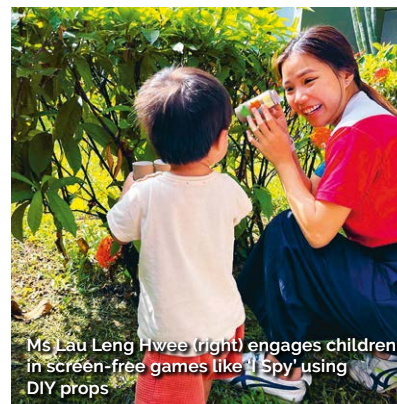
For pointers on cultivating healthy screen practices, visit go.gov.sg/moh-screenadvisory.

Doctor's Orders

THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH ADVISORY, 'GUIDANCE ON SCREEN USE IN CHILDREN', RECOMMENDS THE FOLLOWING SCREEN TIME LIMITS DURING THE FIRST THREE YEARS:

| Age Group | Recommendation |
|--------------|---|
| 0–18 months | No screen time (unless it is for interactive video chatting) |
| 18–36 months | Less than 1 hour a day (if co-viewing age-appropriate, educational content) |

Dr Chong Shang Chee, a developmental paediatrician who co-chaired the expert panel behind the advisory, highlights that parents' responsiveness and reciprocity promote language development and social-emotional connections. Screens cannot replace the rich and sensitive language



Ms Lau Leng Hwee (right) engages children in screen-free games like 'Spy' using DIY props

WHAT PARENTS AND EDUCATORS CAN DO

Educators can assist parents in setting screen time limits. Ms Lau Leng Hwee, Early Years Educator, M.Y World @ Sun Natura, says, "We can suggest meaningful activities for parents to engage their children in that do not involve screens, such as arts and crafts or practising songs learned in preschool. Share with parents the positive changes we observe in their children resulting from reduced screen time. This affirms and acknowledges parents' efforts."

A mother herself, Dr Law understands parents are caught in a quandary between the convenience screen time offers and its negative effects. Yet there is one consolation — even though increased screen time during infancy is associated with poorer attention span and executive functioning in later childhood, the brain does not mature until we are in our 20s and 30s. She emphasises, "Screen time is just one aspect of parenting; it does not determine one's efficacy as a parent." •



PRACTICAL SOLUTIONS

Ms Lau's advice to parents on managing screen time and meltdowns.

"My children rely on screen time, especially during mealtimes in restaurants."

LIN CHI CHENG, father of two, aged 6 and 4

- **Provide alternatives such as colouring sheets or books. Children will be more attentive when they can choose what they like.**
- **Engage them in conversation about the activity, the meal or their surroundings.**

"It almost always ends in tears even if we agreed on a fixed time together."

JEANNIE LI, mother of a 3-year-old

- **Acknowledge children's emotions but do not give in. Wait for them to calm down and reiterate your expectations (e.g., turn off at dinner time). Give a hug and move on to the next activity.**

"Controlling screen time is challenging in my household of four boys. The younger ones are exposed to screen time earlier because of their big brothers."

SYAHIDAH JAMAL, mother of four, aged 12, 9, 6 and 3

- **Tap the support of family members. Older siblings can serve as role models and help young ones follow the limits. Parents, too, must lead by example and refrain from using devices.**

"Our 5-year-old squints and has difficulty falling or staying asleep when screen time is too close to bedtime."

CHIA SHUNYI, mother of two, aged 8 and 5

- **Designate screen-free zones at home such as bedrooms and the dining area. Enforce this rule for adults too. Be consistent, firm and kind.**
- **Read a story to start a new bedtime routine to replace screen time.**

Both **DR EVELYN LAW** and **DR CHONG SHANG CHEE** are with the National University Hospital's Khoo Teck Puat – National University Children's Medical Institute (KTP-NUCMI) and the National University of Singapore's Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine (NUS Medicine).

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