

Thinking About Screen Time

By Deb Maes, Extension Educator, Family & Consumer Resources

How much time do you spend in front of a screen each day? Not much you say? Think again. When we talk about screen time we include time spent texting, using your phone to check the internet, actual computer time, video games and television.

Now how much time do you spend in front of a screen each day? If you are an adult who works on a computer it could be 5-6 hours a day. Do you text your kids or partner throughout the day? What about watching a baseball game after dinner? It might not be unreasonable to find that you spend at least 8-10 hours a day looking at some type of screen.

As part of the **5-2-1-0 HealthyNH** goal, the “2” refers to spending two hours or less each day viewing a screen. It’s probably a challenge for you as well as your children to limit yourself to only two hours in front of a screen. And maybe if you have a job that requires you to use some sort of screen each day it may not be possible. But what choices do you make at home?

Why is limiting screen time part of the goal? Here’s what we know about children and screen time. The first two years of life are critical for optimal brain development. When babies and toddlers are plopped down in front of the screen they aren’t exploring their world, playing and interacting with the adults and peers in their lives. All those activities encourage learning and healthy physical and social development. Watching the television doesn’t do that.

As kids get older, too much screen time can interfere with being physically active, reading, doing homework, playing with friends and spending time with family. Too much screen time can also be the cause of irregular sleep, emotional, social and attention problems and also impaired academic performance especially if there is a television or computer in a child’s bedroom. Kids who are exposed to violence on television, music, videos and games can be desensitized to violence. Finally there is less time for active and creative play.

Kids who constantly spend too much time in front of a screen are more likely to be overweight or obese. Consider the number of food related ads that you see watching a television show. What kind of an impact would these have for the children in your life who can be susceptible to this type of marketing aimed especially for the young audience?

Your first step in determining if screen time is an issue for your family is to monitor how much time each family member is actually spending in front of a screen. If everyone is spending more than two hours a day, you may want to consider ways to gradually reduce this figure to get closer to the two hours a day that 5-2-1-0 recommends.

Next, think about when the television screen is on. Is anyone watching it or is it merely providing background noise? Shut off the television and perhaps put on the radio or some music.

Most child development experts feel strongly that computers and televisions should not be in the bedroom. Kids who have access to screens in their room watch more television than children who don’t.

Make meal time family time, not television viewing time. This goes for snacks too! It is too easy to eat more food than you intended if you are caught up in a video game or television show.

Consider setting rules for weekday and weekend viewing. There was a two-year timespan that my children only watched television during the weekends. I found that they read more, were easier to get to the dinner table, were more likely to play games, got their homework finished and interacted better with everyone in the household.

If your children are cared for by someone else during the day, talk to your provider about limiting television viewing.

If your child whines that “there’s nothing to do” be prepared with a list of activities. Be willing to spend time with them trying a new game, reading a book, preparing dinner or going for a walk or a bike ride. Remember you are trying to reduce your screen time too, so be a good role model.

Like any changes, these may take time. Consider small steps. Make one day a week an “unplugged” day. Challenge your child to come up with alternative activities. Help them learn a new hobby, start a garden, write a story journaling how hard it is to give up their screen time or encourage them to visit their grandparents or an older neighbor.

There are still going to be plenty of screens in your child’s life, and yours too. Paying closer attention to how much time we spend viewing a screen and developing some non-screen activities can help produce a more active imagination, better family relationships and maybe even a fitter you!