هيئـــة أبوظـــي للطفــولة المبكــرة
Abu Dhabi Early Childhood Authority

Healthy Use of Technology Guidelines for Children from 0-8

Screens are part of our everyday life and it is important to acknowledge the need for a healthy, balanced screen exposure diet. The key is understanding the harmful effects that screens can have on our children and balance it with healthy exposure limits.

Facts about screen exposure

Children in Abu Dhabi spend more time on electronic devices (e.g., TVs, mobile phones, tablets, computers...) than what professionals advise

UAE is one of the countries with the highest social media penetration and activity

Abu Dhabi children have strong attachments to media devices that can potentially cause them to go without food or drink for long periods of time

Around two thirds of households have no access limitations to the content their children are exposed to

What is the recommended screen time for children?

Experts from global entities such as The World Health Organization (WHO), The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and The Australian Department of Health recommend:

No screen time for children younger than 2 years old

No more than **60 minutes** of screen time per day for children 2-5 years old

No more than **120 minutes** of screen time per day for children 5-8 years old

Brain function and screen time

The brain stem grows in the early years of a child's development. It is responsible for heart beat, breathing, temperature regulation and other basic functions.

The ability to control emotions, focus thoughts and coordinate fine motor movements develop later in the cortex regions. It is important to set realistic expectations for children based on their age.

For instance, while babies and young toddlers' attention span are developing, it is important to limit their screen time as they might not be able to focus for more than 20 minutes.

What are the harms of excessive screen exposure on children?

Studies have shown that excessive exposure to screens and/or exposure to negative content is associated with adverse effects on:

Physical health such as obesity, irregular sleep, nearsightedness and eye fatigue.

Mental health such as depression, language development delays, and behavioral issues.

Screen time displaces parent-child interaction/bonding affecting social development.

What can you do as a parent now?

- Be aware and involved with your child's screen exposure. Communicate with your child to better understand their habits and interests.

- Set screen exposure limits for children. This should include a breakdown of time spent on screens per day and the content they should be exposed to.

- Lead by example. Reduce your exposure to screens and spend more time interacting with family.

- Using parental control software can manage the time spent and content viewed on your child's device.

- Ensure your child is exposed to beneficial content. For more information on age appropriate content please visit: www.commonsensemedia.org.

- Report inappropriate/illegal content. Cybercrimes should be reported to the UAE's federal Public Prosecution using 'the My Safe Society' mobile application.

Suite of co-created ideas:

In this section we share some ideas that Abu Dhabi moms and dads have successfully used in their homes to limit their children's screen time. The purpose of these ideas is to create self-control habits, utilizing screens as a helpful tool and ensuring healthy usage limits.

Equal Attention

This technique recognizes that we live in a digital world and cannot always keep away from devices entirely by teaching children how to be reasonable about their own screen use. The rule is simple: 30 mins on YouTube = 30 mins on Pinterest creating a new art board or on a math game.

Child Project Templates

This creative technique helps children learn valuable life lessons outside of screen time and requires that extra bit of commitment from our parents to get the long-term reward- like any good investment!

Start by giving your kids a project brief- this could be creating a collage of nature, or a music wall. Discuss the space in the house where you can hang it up, the size of the output, materials you will need, etc., with the child and assign them a milestone a day with a clear deadline to the project.

By showing them you are serious about their output by supporting their process you will be able to see them taking tasks seriously and thinking outside the box!

Wonder Wall

Caregivers often worry about young children being exposed to wrong content that may fill their inquisitive minds.

The Wonder Wall technique for younger children, ensures they remain inquisitive and safe while searching for answers to quench their inevitable curiosity.

Set up a space (ideally a board on a wall) where children can use sticky notes to write up some burning questions they have that day and at the end of the day. Allot one question to each adult family member and then spend time online together, finding answers to them (e.g. articles, videos, photos).

Time Teller

This technique helps parents avoid feeling guilty about children picking up their behaviours and addressing the often-asked question "Why do you get to have screen time but I can't?".

Time Teller is a method that gets children to understand the importance of listening to time cut-offs. Allot a family member a specific time slot (e.g. checking WhatsApp in the evening for parents or watching YouTube videos for children) and appoint a "Time Teller" (ideally a child to start with) for the day who sets alarms for each task. When the Time Teller says its time up, everyone has to put down their devices and move on to something else.

Getting both parents and children involved in this is vital, as when they see their parents listen to the Time Teller, they will abide to the rules as well!

Family Priority Dinners

This is a great way to build children's acceptance in putting away devices during important family occasions.

Ask children to design a meal based around putting away screens in a box designed solely for that purpose. Then encourage them to pull out all the (reasonable) stops like writing invitations, thinking of the home-cooked meal they want to eat and inviting family, extended family and/or friends over. At the start of the meal, children will go around the table to collect everyone's phones/tablets and enjoy the meal where devices are consciously put away.

Seeing the participation of family and friends will encourage children to carry on this behavior.

Abu Dhabi Personas

Which persona do you relate to the most?
Which one is most suitable with your family values and traditions?
Based on your values, we have curated some tips and tricks for you to work around screen time for your children.

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1. THE TECH-AVERSE FAMILY

USES TECHNOLOGY WHEN THEY HAVE NO ALTERNATIVE AND BAN IT WHERE POSSIBLE

VALUES	DRIVERS	CONTROLS	KNOWLEDGE GAPS
Modern — Traditional		High control — Low control	
Values **family time** with relatives and **tangible activities**	Driven by **fear** and feels **constant pressure**	Extreme measures to restrict and control use	Unaware of children's work-arounds

" LIKELY TO SAY...

They feel annoyed. They feel like I'm such a 'Mother' - they feel that I'm obsessive because I don't give them a phone.

On Saturday night it goes back in the drawer.

They have to leave their phone on my table in the eveing, and if they don't then I get very angry.

It's an addictive behaviour. It's close to drugs or alcoholism. **"**

"I'm not tech mum, Let's just say I do not prefer technology."

If your child starts feeling exasperated by you controlling their screen-time – try putting them in charge of monitoring their own screen times. They will oversee collecting devices and putting them away at a certain hour. This will help create a balance, using screens and technology as a tool and gaining control over the use of screens.

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2. THE TECH-CONTROL FAMILY

USES TECHNOLOGY FOR SPECIFIC REASONS WITH CLEAR CONTROLS AROUND ITS USE

VALUES	DRIVERS	CONTROLS	KNOWLEDGE GAPS
Modern — Traditional		High control — Low control	
Values **family time** with all their relatives and **food**	Driven by **need**	Have clear controls and justifications	Unaware of latest kid-friendly apps

LIKELY TO SAY...

I encourage them to download useful/educational games – I say I will give them more time if they use those games.

After 7pm I don't want them to use their phones, and I tell them I do this because I'm worried about your eyes, mind. I tell them to enjoy themselves by doing other things – go play, play with your brother or sister.

Kids have to be respected, you can learn so much from them, so give them phones but teach them rules and trust them. **"**

"Before he installs the app, it goes through me first, then i click apply and the kids can use it."

Explore some child-friendly educational apps that are age-appropriate.
A few of our suggested useful/educational games applications include, Kinedu, Afinidata and Lamsa.
Kinedu is a video-centric mobile and desktop platform that unleashes early childhood development at scale by fostering quality learning experiences at home and at school. Afinidata is an AI powered chatbot that equips parents with personalized educational activities to develop the brains of their children. Finally, Lamsa is a UAE-based mobile application that encourages parents to engage with their children through culturally relevant and interactive Arabic content (stories, games, videos).

3. THE TECH-RESIGNED FAMILY

USES TECHNOLOGY BY HABIT BUT FEELS POWERLESS TO CONTROL IT

VALUES	DRIVERS	CONTROLS	KNOWLEDGE GAPS
Modern ... Traditional		High control ... Low control	#
Values **self-development** and **time to relax**	Driven by **ease** and **guilt**	Try to apply controls, but are easily persuaded to remove	Unaware of the latest tech trends or content

LIKELY TO SAY...

She (aged 2) is always saying 'mummy where is my phoney? Just for the youtube and when we are travelling. If I don't give her she keeps trying.

When my energy levels are really low, I whip out my phone. I'm so afraid that she's going to get used to it.

Still I cannot trust the internet. Especially in this digital world. Every day there is something new, but every day you have to be aware, but I can't.

There are some videos that are not good. They gain some attitudes from this and it is reflecting on them and their personality.

I cannot tell you what he's watching, sometimes i'm not there. Sometimes on the YouTube, there's a pop-up and he just click on it and he see different things. I know I'm a bad mother.

In the week I hide it in the cabinet. Once he found it, mummy I found the ipad!

"She doesn't want the toys, so that's why I give her the phone."

If your child doesn't want to engage with toys, try taking away both of your devices and suggest playing an interactive game together. It is important to lead by example by not using your phones around your family and creating a cut off time between work and family time.

4. THE TECH-OBSESSED FAMILY

LOVES TECHNOLOGY AND ENCOURAGES ITS USE WITHOUT MUCH CONTROL

| VALUES	DRIVERS	CONTROLS	KNOWLEDGE GAPS
Modern ... Traditional		High control ... Low control	?
Value discussing **new ideas** and **theories**	Driven by **exploration**	Don't apply many controls	Unaware of what their children use the device for

LIKELY TO SAY...

It's important for them to start seeing what they are doing without too much supervision.

He is a child, but he is a person in himself, so he needs to be respected.

Technology is a big part of my house.

We have a entertainment room, majilis, with playstations. Other houses have different themes. Mine is gaming.

I'm a technology freak. I've been obsessed since I was 5. I don't want to take my kids away from that, this is their time and is part of the ecosystem they're in.

"Tech is in my blood"
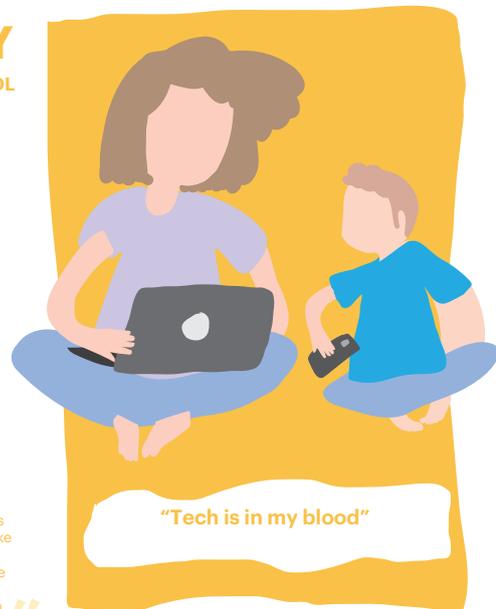
Use screen-free zones at home to limit your screen exposure whether that is the bedroom, living room, dining room etc. Set time limits on screen exposure – create a schedule with a healthy media balance.

Your step by step plan to limit screen time:

1

Plan ahead for schedule of daily activities:

Social games: Conversation decks to get to know each other on a deeper level.

Cognitive games: Puzzles, or starting a project like building something from scratch.

Active games: Build a fortress with pillows and bedsheets in your living room, splash each other with water in the garden, or ride a bike.

2

Download content control applications: Make a list of child-friendly applications and games that help increase knowledge and skill building.

3

Make a bucket list of things your children want to do and involve them in the planning process.

4

Create rules about screen time together:

For example, no screen time in the car. Instead listen to podcasts, music or radio shows.

Limit screen time to a specific period of the day, allowing your child to pick the time they prefer.

6

Aim for short screen time session: Use a timer to set breaks and do something active when the timer ends, like play outside or have a conversation with a family member.

5

Involve the child's caregivers in the process so they are aware of the guidelines being set in the home.

Create screen-free zones in your home: For example, the entire family may not bring their handheld screens in the living room. To enforce this rule, place a sign that says "this place is saved for conversations".

7

Journal down all your feelings, what did you gain? What differences in behavior did you notice in yourselves and your children?

8

Dealing with resistance. If your child refuses to stick to the rules try to:

Recommend screen-free alternatives and make sure you are engaged with them at that time.

Stick to your plan. Remembering it takes a few weeks to form a new habit. Eventually they will accept the changes and it will take children less of an effort to stay off their screens.

Enforce the idea of a well-balanced media diet as opposed to a strict no screen time rule.

Introduce the "Thinking Corner": if they ignore the rules ask them to go into a thinking corner to assess their behavior and help instil self-awareness.

Cultivate routines and structure for the child to attach to. Setting up a daily structure is helpful as a child will feel less coerced once they attach to the routine. Routines are helpful around transition times such as going to school, doing homework, and getting ready for bed.

Remove screens from bedrooms to protect children from radiation exposure.

Avoid screen time during meals.

Use simple and straightforward direct assertive sentences like 'Please put away your phone' and 'Please turn off the device' etc.

Put them in charge wherever appropriate. Sometimes the best way to avoid conflicts and court a child's desire to 'do it myself' is to put them in charge of collecting everyone's devices during screen-free times.

If they are watching other family members using more screen time, make sure to involve the whole family in the process and take it as an opportunity to connect with each other and the environment.

If you and your families current screen time is excessive, start with gradually decreasing it over a longer period of time.

Example of a child's routine

MORNING

6 WAKE UP get dressed

MOVE play outside, if hot exercise indoors **7**

ACADEMIC study, workbook **8**

11 GET CREATIVE color, play dough, build a fort

AFTERNOON

1 LUNCH

RELAX nap, read **2**

3 SCREEN TIME youtube shows, online games

4 SNACK eat fruits and vegetables

EVENING

CONNECT WITH NATURE play outside, if hot outside play indoors, come back in before it gets dark **5**

DINNER **6**

7 SHOWER wear pajamas, tv time

BED TIME read a bedtime story **8**

How can we protect children from inappropriate/harmful content and conduct?

Inappropriate content

Protecting your child from accessing inappropriate content online/offline such as violence, offensive language and sexual material may avoid negative influence on their development and behavior.

- Explain to your child that not all online content is suitable for children and that they should ask for permission before viewing content online/offline.

Cyberbullying

Ensure your child is not exposed to online bullying to protect them from social, psychological, or physical harm.

- Detect if your child is bullied. Symptoms include anxiety, distress, decline in schoolwork, avoidance of school.

- Listen to your child and advise them. Talk with your child about their experience and advise them not to respond to negative comments.

- Report cyberbullying immediately. Most websites allow you to report abusive content.

Online Privacy

Protect your child's private information such as home address, school name, personal photos, etc. to prevent it from getting in the wrong hands.

- Explain to your child that some people are not always who they seem online and that it is unwise to share any personal information including pictures online.

- Ensure the appropriate privacy settings are selected for your child especially on social media.

- Ensure your child is not using 'geo-location' enabled applications and sharing their location unintentionally.
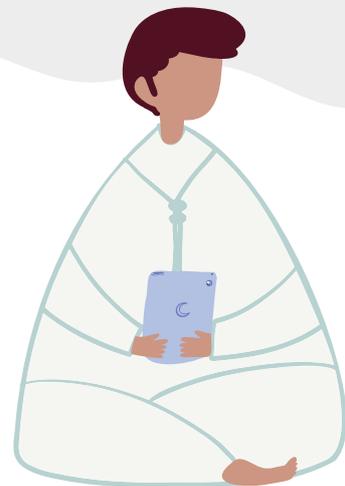
For more information please see our Healthy Use of Technology Guidelines for Children from 0-8 on our website: https://eca.gov.ae.

Talk to us,
we would love to listen

Share your experience with us by posting photos on Instagram using the hashtag #healthyscreentime

If you would like to share your experience with us in private please contact us on info@eca.gov.ae

To learn more about what we do, please visit our website: https://eca.gov.ae