

Screen Time: The Impact on Kids and Parenting

New research explains the significant negative effects of excessive screen time.



Parents often worry about the amount of time their child is spending on electronics and how it is affecting their social skills, [motivation](#), attention, emotional regulation, and neurological functioning. Given the easy access to multiple modes of media (TV, iPads, computers, phones, etc.), electronics have become the "go to" in quiet moments. Screen time has also become the primary source of information and entertainment for children. Hence, these concerns are valid, particularly in light of the American Pediatric Association's estimate that children in the U.S. spend an average of 7 hours a day on media devices.

A critical question to ask is whether screen time affects neurological functioning (which can effect psychological and behavioral functioning), and if so what is the impact? There has been a significant amount of research conducted on this topic in recent years that shows the following evidence:

The Social and Emotional Effects:

- Increase in [stress](#)
- Increase in time to complete tasks
- Increase in off-task time
- Increase in [anxiety](#) with no access to electronics
- Increase in frustration and decrease in commitment to deeper, more challenging tasks and problem solving
- Increase in impulsivity
- Decrease in emotional regulation
- Decrease in ability to recognize facial emotions and non-verbal cues

The Neurobiological Effects on the Developing [Brain](#):

- Repeated release of [dopamine](#), increasing pleasure and [addiction](#)
- Chronic need for stimulation and instant gratification
- Decrease in focus and attention span
- Increase in arousal
- Blue light - Shut down of the pineal gland that releases melatonin (a natural [hormone](#) to induce [sleep](#))
- Sleep deprivation: poor sleep and less sleep

- Sensory overload

Screen Addiction can also lead to:

- Grey matter shrinkage (where processing occurs)
- Frontal lobe shrinkage (where executive functioning occurs, such as planning and organizing)
- Striatum shrinkage (where reward pathways and [impulse control](#) of socially unacceptable behaviors occur)
- Insula damage (where our capacity to develop [empathy](#) and compassion occurs)
- Loss of integrity of white matter (these are the connective pathways for communication within the brain)
- Impaired [cognitive](#) functioning
- Reduced number of dopamine receptors, which is linked to [depression](#)

The research strongly suggests that human to human, hands on interaction is the most beneficial for a child's socio-emotional development, as screen time could impair empathy, communication, cognitive functioning, emotional regulation, sleep, attention, and brain development. Perhaps the next important step is for parents, teachers, and professionals to be better informed on how to manage screen time for their children from infancy to young adulthood. Many parents continue to struggle with managing electronics with their children which often leads to:

Impact on [Parenting](#):

- Power struggles: Parents can experience significant power struggles with children regarding time usage and content of screen time. Power struggles create an impasse, and are debilitating to the family system.
- Family conflict: Parents can experience significant conflict, including arguments, yelling, rule-breaking, manipulation, and defiance around screen time.
- Marital/Co-Parenting conflict: Sometimes parents disagree on the rules, boundaries, limits, and consequences related to screen time, which can lend itself to marital and/or co-parenting conflicts. This also sends mixed messages to the children, thereby fostering further child push-back.
- Feelings: Parents and children can experience an increase in helplessness, [anger](#), anxiety, and frustration. This can amplify the need for power and control by both parties, thereby increasing the debilitating power struggles.
- Trust and Communication: The power struggles, conflicts, and need for control can decrease trust and positive communication between parents and children.
- Disengagement: Many parents and children may withdraw and disengage from each other, creating a tense or even hostile home environment.

There are ways to decrease power struggles, family conflicts, and helplessness by restricting your child's screen time in healthy ways. Here are some possibilities:

Tips and Tools:

Sleep:

- The National Sleep Foundation recommends 9 hours of sleep a night.
- Enforce lights and electronics off for a sufficient 8-9 hours of sleep.

Time:

- The American Medical Association recommends only 1-2 hours of screen time a day.
- Create electronic free zones: meals, car rides, bedtime, school, etc.
- Create 10-15 minute breaks for your child when working for thirty minutes to one hour at a stretch on the computer (brain reset).

Parenting:

- Disengage from power struggles.
- Set clear and consistent rules and expectations (inconsistency leads to intermittent reinforcement, which is a powerful phenomenon for maintaining and increasing unwanted behavior).
- Co-parent Agreements: If there are 2 or more parents, they should agree about the rules, limits, and consequences, and enforce them equally.
- Use positive reinforcement in conjunction with appropriate consequences for compliance and non-compliance.

- Provide the research articles and facts to your child to read, so that they are informed and educated.
- Encourage your child to participate in conversations about pros and cons of electronics.
- Organize and facilitate extracurricular activities, [sports](#), hobbies, and social get-togethers as much as possible.
- Family Time: 30-60 minutes of electronic free, FUN, family time daily.

In sum, the research suggests that excessive screen time has a direct and negative effect on frontal lobe structure and functioning, and can also be addictive given the changes in dopamine functioning and receptors. Since this area of a child's brain undergoes critical development until young adulthood, it makes sense that parents and professionals are concerned about the mass consumption of electronics by children. Parents, schools, pediatricians, professionals, and researchers need to continue to pay close attention to and intervene with screen time in structured and consistent ways across domains to foster the healthy bio-psycho-social development of our children.