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# RAISING MY iBaby

## How Much Screen Time Is Too Much?

Text and photo by Dr Shubashri Jeyaratnam

Living in Singapore, we are no strangers to technology. In fact, the convenience of connectivity, increased efficiency and dynamism that technology has lent modernisation is a culture we rather proudly belong to. It is only natural that with this seamless integration of technology into our lives, we see it as the natural progression to introduce this seemingly indispensable tool to our children.

Our phones, tablets or other screen media devices, in their various shapes and forms, have become the new pacifiers and babysitters. Admittedly, in many instances, these seem to be the easiest way to keep a wailing, tired or highly energetic child quiet while you go about your busy day. Even if you yourself are not a parent, you are likely to have seen a sibling, friend or even stranger resorting to these tactics with his/her child. But how much do we *really* know about introducing technology from the cradle?

### Under 24 months

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendations, children under 24 months of age should not be exposed to screen media devices at all. The reason for this is simple – at such a young age, the child is unable to process the visual and auditory information produced by the screen and make sense of it. In other words, there is no replacement for the tender love, care and interaction a parent personally affords to his/her little one. A guideline change in 2016 now permits video calls for those above the age of 18 months, at the caregiver's discretion. Video calls are an exception mainly because in this day and age, grandparents and significant relatives or even spouses may not live in the same country or residence, and they may wish to interact with the child – short periods of meaningful interaction may be the best compromise here. Neurodevelopmentally, infants/

children benefit from active interaction with caregivers rather than the passivity of the screen and this can even have implications on the child's developmental milestones, such as in speech and language, social, emotional and behavioural domains.

### Two to five years

From the ages of two to five years, parents are advised to limit screen time to one hour of quality screen programmes a day. This would ideally mean setting limits on screen time and vetting the quality of programme the child is watching. Watching the programme together with the child or interacting with him/her in relation to the programme will also help your little one to contextualise, and develop a better understanding of, what he/she views. This time spent interacting may even become something the child looks forward to more than the programme itself!



## Beyond five years

Parents are still advised to place consistent limits on how much time the child spends on screen media devices and the types of media the child is exposed to (eg, television, computer and video games) although there is no specific advice on the exact duration. It is useful to bear in mind that the child should be able to maintain a normal healthy lifestyle incorporating play, physical activity, reading and/or schoolwork, as well as adequate sleep; if technology seems to be getting in the way of any of these aspects, perhaps it is time for a review.

Children benefit from understanding why things are done in a certain manner, instead of being told sternly that they are not to play on the computer or watch a particular programme. Setting down such rules with no further explanation may breed unhappiness and frustration for both ends, put an unnecessary strain on your relationship or even lead to the child trying to watch the screen without Mummy or Daddy knowing. Instead, have an open conversation with your little Mister or Miss about screen time and get them on board!

Other issues associated with too much screen time or indiscretion with screen media may ring a more familiar bell. Health-wise, childhood obesity, myopia, attention deficits, poor sleep and appetite, as well as neglect of self-care, are some matters of concern. Behaviourally and psychosocially, the lack of real-life interaction bodes for poorer communication skills and impatience, and less parental interaction of family time leads to compromised

relationships. Beyond this, it must be remembered that the young child is eager to explore and yet blissfully unaware of some of the dangers that lurk in the virtual playground. This can result in early exposure to illicit, sexual or graphic content that is age-inappropriate, or other such online dangers.

With such a pervasive tech culture, many of us start and end our days being on our mobile phones. We have it on the dining table during mealtimes, and glance at it frequently even when at meetings or at social gatherings. Admittedly, more often than not, this compulsive phone-checking, attentiveness to phone buzzing and indulgence in social media scrolling has resulted in inattention and anti-social behaviour in real life. Short of using the term “addiction”, technology has become so intricately entwined in our lives that it sometimes becomes difficult to picture its true implications on our lives and relationships. Children benefit from meaningful interaction, and as parents or caregivers, it is important that you give them the emotional and cognitive pillars of support they need as they make their baby steps into the big world. Furthermore, children learn by example and advocating less screen time for your child while succumbing to indiscretion yourself makes it hard for any follow-through.

## What can I do?

Simple solutions, such as setting limits on screen time with a simple schedule; removing screen media devices from the child’s room or not installing them at all; setting “technology-free zones” within the house, such as the living room; and indicating “screen-free times”, such as at mealtimes, are all effective. Encouraging active play, reading, creativity and interaction with your child is also paramount. A simple self-assembled playpen in the living room can be an

effective solution if you need to keep your little one safely in sight, but still give them enough room to roam. It might help to look back at your own childhood (that undoubtedly would have been less influenced by technology) for some ideas!

For those of us who do not have our own kids but see this in clinical practice (not limited to paediatrics), opportunistic screening and intervention for those around us can go a long way. Think about your own daily encounters and remember that it may take only a few seconds of counselling to spur a lifestyle change for these little ones. In line with the old African proverb, “it takes a village to raise a child”, I believe that the onus goes far beyond Mummy and Daddy, extending to each and every one of us to do our little bit for the future of tomorrow’s generation! ♦

For more information on the project, you may visit <http://www.projectibaby.com> or contact us at [contactprojectibaby@gmail.com](mailto:contactprojectibaby@gmail.com).

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## Legend

1. iBaby fair in Yishun Polyclinic

Dr Shubashri recently graduated from NUS Yong Loo Lin School of Medicine, having written this article when she was in her final year as head of Project iBaby. She dedicated six months to full-time equine therapy helping at-risk children and volunteers in various service projects during her spare time.

