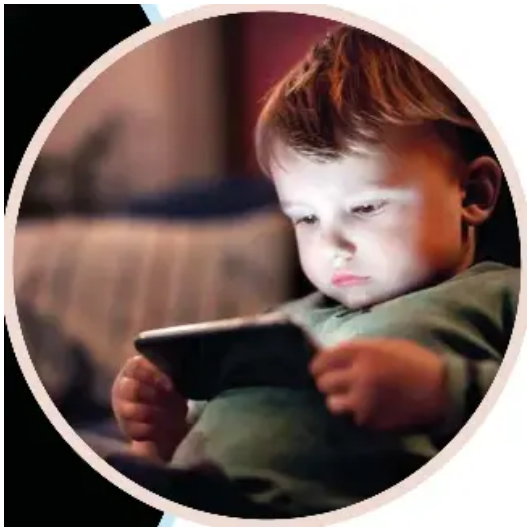
- Screen time

Play Over Pixels

How to help children swap screen time for play

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In today's digital age, it can feel almost impossible to prise children away from screens. Tablets, smartphones, and televisions are constant companions, offering bright colours, instant rewards, and endless entertainment. While screens can be fun, too much exposure can affect attention spans, creativity, and social skills.



One of the most effective ways to balance screen time is by reintroducing the joy of learning through play. Hands-on, imaginative activities stimulate a child's mind, nurture problem-solving skills, and support their social and emotional development — all while keeping play fun.

WHY TOO MUCH SCREEN TIME IS A RISK

Children are naturally drawn to activities that offer instant gratification. Digital devices are designed with this in mind, fast content, bright visuals, and immediate feedback.

But extended exposure during crucial developmental years can interfere with how children learn, connect, and regulate themselves.

"Excessive screen use often comes at the expense of active, realworld learning, which is essential for brain development, particularly in early childhood," explained Dr Gayatri Govind Gajjam, Clinical Psychologist at Aster DYU Child Development Centre.

"When children are passively consuming content rather than physically interacting with their environment, they miss out on the sensory and cognitive stimulation necessary to build attention, emotional resilience, and motor coordination."

Screens may also limit opportunities for emotional growth. Reallife interaction helps children interpret facial expressions, manage conflict, and practise empathy — skills that animated characters or digital avatars cannot truly replace.

Dr Gajjam added: "Prolonged screen time has also been associated with sleep disturbances, reduced physical movement, and behavioural challenges, including irritability, attention difficulties, and emotional outbursts."

HOW PARENTS CAN SET LIMITS WITHOUT BATTLES

Managing screen time doesn't need to mean constant conflict. Experts say it's about structure, empathy, and offering engaging alternatives that meet a child's developmental needs. Dr Gajjam suggests:

■ Establish predictable routines — Children thrive on consistency. Setting clear time windows for screens — for example, after homework or before dinner, helps reduce resistance.

■ Facilitate smooth transitions — Give a "5-minute warning" before turning off a device and follow it with an inviting activity. Sensoryrich play such as water play, kinetic sand, finger painting or textured puzzles can help children calm down after screen time while keeping them engaged.

■ Curate purposeful play materials — Choose toys that spark exploration and problemsolving — construction kits, pretend-play sets, interactive books, or musical instruments are great options.
■ Prioritise sensory play — Dough modelling, foam play, or exploring nature build motor skills and help children regulate their emotions.
■ Create inviting screen-free spaces — A cosy reading nook, a craft table, or a sensory corner can encourage independent, imaginative play.

THE MANY FORMS OF PLAY AND WHY THEY MATTER

According to Dr Sneha John, Clinical Psychologist at Aspris Wellbeing Centre, Dubai, different types of play nurture different aspects of development. ■ Imaginative play: Pretending to be a teacher, doctor, or superhero boosts creativity, flexible thinking, and empathy. “It allows children to practise problem-solving and explore emotions by stepping into someone else’s shoes,” said Dr John.
■ Constructive play: Activities like LEGO, puzzles, art, and craft kits encourage perseverance and spatial reasoning. “These activities teach children to plan, experiment, and keep trying when things don’t go as expected.”
■ Physical play: Games of tag, climbing frames, or ball games develop coordination, balance, and confidence. They also provide a natural outlet for stress and energy, helping with emotional regulation.

SELF-EXPRESSION

Beyond these, toys such as science kits, coding robots, and board games fuel curiosity and early academic skills. Instruments, textured blocks, and sensory materials like sand or clay encourage self-expression and fine motor development.

“The best toy is not necessarily the most expensive or high-tech,” Dr John explained.

“Simple, open-ended toys often engage children longer and more deeply, because they leave room for imagination and problemsolving. The less a toy does, the more a child can do with it.”

Screens are here to stay, but they don’t have to dominate childhood. By setting healthy limits and creating playful alternatives, parents can help children develop focus, resilience, and creativity.

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