- Child development

# The hidden costs of screen time

## How do you protect your child in the age of the smartphone?

Pakistan Today (Lahore) · 25 Mar 2025 · 4 · DR FAWAD Suleman The author is Senior Instructor, Department of Psychiatry AKUH. His clinical interests are and adolescent psychiatry

IT starts innocently enough—a parent hands their child a tablet to keep them occupied during dinner or a car ride. What begins as an occasional distraction soon becomes a daily habit. While technology has revolutionised how we learn and connect, growing research warns that excessive screen exposure can profoundly affect a child's development.



Paediatric specialists are increasingly concerned—not just about digital addiction, but also about how excessive screen time affects brain development and social skills. Many parents may not realise that prolonged screen exposure is shaping their children's futures in ways that could impact learning, relationships, and mental well-being.

Perhaps even more troubling is how screens are eroding parent-child interactions. Conversations, storytelling, and shared moments are increasingly being replaced by digital distractions. Instead of asking about their child's day, many parents find themselves scrolling through their own screens while their child does the same. This shift reduces emotional exchanges that help children develop empathy, communication skills, and security.

Research indicates that children aged 3 to 5 who spend more time on screens have lower brain development in areas critical for language and memory. Studies also reveal that every additional hour of TV watched at age two corresponds with decreased class participation and math proficiency. Similarly, children aged 2 to 5 who exceed two hours of daily screen time face a higher risk of anxiety, attention problems, and emotional distress by age six.

Excessive screen time also impacts emotional regulation. Many parents report concerns about their children struggling to focus on schoolwork, becoming easily frustrated, or preferring screen-based entertainment over real-life conversations. Highly stimulating digital content triggers dopamine release, making it harder for children to engage in slower, real-world activities that require patience and problem-solving.

Another growing concern is the impact of screens on sleep patterns. Children who use screens in the evening experience shorter sleep duration and poorer sleep quality. Studies show that excessive screen exposure before bed increases sleep disturbances by 30%. The blue light

emitted from screens disrupts circadian rhythms, suppresses melatonin production, and makes it harder for children to fall asleep. Poor sleep, in turn, affects mood, learning, and well-being.

Parents may notice subtle signs of excessive screen time: difficulty focusing in school, irritability when screen time is restricted, sleep disturbances, and a preference for screens over social interactions. These symptoms suggest that screens may be interfering with a child's ability to develop essential skills such as empathy, self-regulation, and problem-solving.

While the risks are real, eliminating screens entirely is neither practical nor necessary. Instead, experts recommend a balanced approach. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), children under two should have no screen time, while those aged two to five should

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be limited to one hour per day. More importantly, how children engage with digital content matters. Parents should prioritise interactive and educational media over passive consumption. Watching a nature documentary together and discussing it is different from binge-watching cartoons alone.

Creating screen-free zones and designated screen-free times can also make a significant difference. Keeping screens out of bedrooms and setting boundaries, such as no devices at the dinner table or before bedtime, helps establish healthy habits. Encouraging offline activities like reading, outdoor play, and creative hobbies allows children to develop essential skills that screens cannot teach. Parents can also lead by example—when children see caregivers setting limits on their own screen use, they are more likely to adopt healthier habits.

Perhaps the most powerful antidote to excessive screen time is quality time with parents. Simple activities like cooking together, playing a board game, or taking a walk provide children with the attention and engagement they crave. These shared moments strengthen family bonds and reinforce the social and emotional skills that screens often replace.

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Empowering parents with knowledge and strategies is crucial for navigating the digital age while safeguarding children's well-being. The conversation around screen time is not about fear—it is about awareness, balance, and making informed choices for a healthier future.