



Managing screen time and digital technology use: strategies for children 3-11 years

Screen time and digital technology use can be part of a healthy lifestyle for children when they balance these things with other activities.

To achieve this, you might need some strategies for managing screen time. For children aged 3-11 years, these strategies might include:

- family rules
- routines
- transitions
- choices.

Family rules for screen time and digital technology use

Family rules about screen time and digital technology use can help your child understand your family's limits and expectations. For very young children, it's a good idea to keep the rules simple and brief. And for older children, you could make these rules part of a formal agreement that you and your child discuss, negotiate and sign.

Here are some questions to help you negotiate screen time in your family:

- Do you want guidelines about screen time hours? What about weekends, holidays and tech-free days?
- When can your child use digital technology? For example, not until after homework, or not during mealtimes? Do children need to ask you first?
- Where can your child use digital technology? For example, in family rooms but not bedrooms?
- How can your child use digital technology? For example, to play a puzzle app or make animations but not to watch YouTube videos?

Making the rules

It's important to involve all family members when you're making family rules about screen time. Your rules should be flexible enough to cover school days, weekends and holidays. The rules also need to take into account changing needs and interests as your child grows.

It's a good idea to revisit the rules every few months and whenever you introduce a new device into your home. This helps you ensure the rules are still meeting everyone's needs.

Breaking the rules

Sometimes your child might break the rules you've agreed on. For example, your child might play on the tablet without asking first. You can discuss and agree on some consequences for these situations with your child. For example, the consequence for using the tablet without asking might be no tablet for a day.

Routines and screen time

Routines help children know what to do, when and how often. This means routines can help you build screen time and digital technology use into your family life in a way that suits you and your family.

For example, if you want to put limits on screen time, you can make this part of a routine. You might decide your child can watch TV or use the tablet, but only between 5 and 6 pm. Or your routine might include just one program before dinner, or whatever suits your family.

Routines can also help you minimise conflict about screen time. For example, if you don't want your child to use digital technology in the car, you might have a car routine that involves listening to music or family-friendly podcasts or playing 'I spy'.

Screen time transitions

Your child might find it hard to stop watching TV or playing on the tablet, especially if they're having a good time. Planning transitions to other activities can make things easier.

Here are some tips:

- **Set your child's expectations about a screen time session before the session starts.** You could say, 'You can watch one program', or 'You can watch until it's bath time'.
- **Choose your timing.** If you can, get your child to stop using digital technology at a natural break. For example, try to plan bath time for when your child has finished a level in a game or when a TV show ends.
- **Give your child a warning when it's almost time to stop.** For example, 'Sam, it's time to switch the TV off at the end of the program', or 'Sam, you have 10 more minutes on the tablet'.
- **Give your child time to save what they're doing.** You could offer to help – for example, you might say, 'Ali, it's time to stop using the computer now. Do you want me to help you save what you're doing?'

Choices about screen time and digital technology use

If your child has choices about screen time and digital technology use as well as input into your family's screen time rules, your child is more likely to cooperate with the rules and limits.

Also, making choices from a range of healthy and high-quality options helps your child learn how to manage screen time independently in the future.

You could offer your child choices about:

- what to watch or do – for example, 'Do you want to watch *Play School* or *Sesame Street* today?' or 'Do you want to work on your animation or play your puzzle app?'
- when to use digital technology – for example, 'Do you want to use the tablet after school or after dinner today?'
- how to break up screen time – for example, 'Do you want to use a timer, or take a break when you finish the level?' or 'Are you going to jog on the spot or do star jumps when you finish the level?'

One of the keys is encouraging your child to make choices about screen time based on quality. To do this:

- Talk with your child about what makes a good-quality app, game, TV show or movie.
- Play a game or watch a TV program with your child and talk about why it's good quality.
- Ask your child whether they think they've chosen good-quality content.

Good-quality apps, games, YouTube, TV and movies for younger children and good-quality apps, games, YouTube, TV and movies for older children can support your child's learning and encourage positive behaviour.