

## **Is screen time harming your child's eyes?**

There are many reasons to set limits on your child's screen time: to encourage outdoor play and activity, foster healthy sleep habits and promote in-person social relationships. Eye health is another. But with more and more of our lives spent in front of screens, how can parents help their kids practice healthy screen habits?

Wesley Language, head of optometry at Execuspecs, helps us understand the risks of too much screen time and makes some recommendations. Let's start with how screen time can affect our kids' eyes.

### **Eye fatigue**

Eye fatigue is caused by overuse of the eye and is characterised by eye discomfort, dimness of vision and headache. Any glare on the screen can further strain the eyes and kids' tendency to focus intensely on their screens adds to the fatigue because of prolonged close-focus attention. "Our eyes need breaks from close-up focus, but children can lose track of time when they're absorbed," says Language.

### **Dry and irritated eyes**

A clear and stable tear film on the eye surface is essential for clear vision, but studies show that people of all ages blink far less often when concentrating on a screen, which in turn causes the eyes to dry out. This problem can be worse for children who need to look up at a screen that's positioned for adult use.

### **Nearsightedness**

Kids who are on screens are typically indoors, but Language says that exposure to natural daylight is critical to developing eyes. "Kids need time playing outside for their health, but also for their eyes. In fact, studies have shown that children who spend more time indoors are more likely to develop near-sightedness (myopia), and the rate of near-sightedness in children has increased dramatically in the past 30 years."

### **Beyond the eyes: impact on sleep and overall health**

Screen time can also disturb kids' sleep. First, the exhilarating content of video games and movies can wind a child up when they should be winding down for bed. Second, research shows that when screens are used in the evening, the blue light they emit alters the brain's sleep rhythms, because the brain reads the screen light as "daytime" and shifts the body's circadian rhythm.

While 'blue light blocking' lenses can help, it's important to practice consistent, healthy habits to protect your child's eyes during screen time. And when it comes to sleep, the best option is to limit screen time in the hours before bedtime. Aim for no devices or screens for at least one hour before bedtime.

### **Help your child practice good eye habits**

Most families can't – and don't want to – completely remove screened devices from their children's lives as they're part of living in the modern world. What you can do is protect your child's eyes by teaching them healthy screen time habits.

**The 20-20-20-2 rule**

Since focusing on a “near task” increases the demand on eyes’ microscopic focusing system, eyes need a break to reset. Use the “20-20-20-20-2 rule.” During any concentrated visual task, encourage your child to break focus every 20 minutes, focus on something at least 20 feet (six metres) away for 20 seconds, and blink 20 times. This allows the eyes to relax and to return to their natural position and baseline settings. Kids aren’t always the best judge of time, especially when they’re engrossed in a game or movie, so consider using a timer to encourage those breaks. The final “2” is a recommendation for two hours of outdoor play each day to stimulate the healthy development of the focusing system of children's eyes and ward off near-sightedness.

**Screen size and distance**

The smaller and closer a screen is, the harder your child’s eyes must work to focus. If possible, encourage your child to work on a larger screen, such as a tablet, laptop or desktop, rather than a small phone screen.

Language says that, to minimise eye strain, the screen should be positioned so your child looks slightly down at it, not up. “Consider following the 1-2-10 rule when it comes to screen positioning: Hold phones one foot (30 centimetres) away; sit two feet (60 centimetres) away from laptops and desktops; and encourage children to sit 10 feet (three metres) away from the television.”

**Eliminate glare**

The more reflection on your child’s computer screen, the harder their eyes must work. Lower the brightness settings on any devices they use and watch for glare on the screen to ensure comfortable viewing.

**Have your child’s eyes examined regularly**

Most young children have their eyesight assessed as part of routine developmental checks and school vision screenings. While these are important, they aren’t as thorough as a complete eye test by a qualified optometrist. Language recommends children have their eyes tested every 24 months from the age of six, unless there is a need for them to be examined at a younger age. “Unlike vision screenings, comprehensive eye exams evaluate not only the focusing system of the eye but its structure and overall health.”

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