



The most important thing to remember is simple, not all screen time is the same. PHOTO/COURTESY

# It is not how much screen time children get, it is what they are doing that counts

The question is no longer just about limiting access, but about navigating a world where screens are central to school, friendship, and fun.

BY MARY SYLVIA NAMAGEMBE

Experts say parents should worry less about the clock and more about content and connection, as new research links digital habits to rising rates of anxiety and poor sleep in children. You know the scene. The children are finally in their pyjamas, ready to unwind with a favourite show. As you hit play, a small knot of worry tightens in your stomach. Are they watching too much? That article your cousin sent about screen time flashes through your mind.

If this sounds familiar, you are in good company. Most parents today fret over the hours their children spend on phones, tablets, and laptops. But a grow-

ing body of evidence suggests we might be focusing on the wrong thing. For a child's mental well-being and development, what they do on a screen often matters far more than how long they look at it.

This shift in thinking comes as studies paint a concerning picture of young people's digital lives. Social media use is now almost universal among teenagers, with many logging several hours a day on platforms such as TikTok and Instagram. Research links this level of use to a doubled risk of depression and anxiety. The question is no longer just about limiting access, but about navigating a world where screens are central to school, friendship, and fun.

## Why screens can hurt young minds

The risks are not just about wasted time. Experts point to specific ways that unhelpful screen habits can harm children.

## It can feel as an addiction.

"Social media is designed to hook us,"

explains Grace Bikumbi, a clinical psychologist. "Every 'like' or comment gives a little hit of a feel-good brain chemical called dopamine. Children can start to crave that feeling, checking their phones constantly without even thinking about it."

It steals sleep. The blue light from screens tricks the brain into thinking it is daytime, making it hard to wind down.

"When children do not get enough sleep, everything suffers," says paediatric neurologist Dr Joseph Mukibi. "Their mood, their memory, and their ability to focus in school all take a hit."

It opens the door to bullying. Cyberbullying has become a common and damaging experience. A recent survey found that most teens have been targeted online with hurtful comments or exclusion, which can lead to serious anxiety.

For Winnie Nalweyiso, the danger became frighteningly real. During the Covid-19 lockdowns, her teenage daughter, Emily, spent hours on social media.

"She became very quiet and was so hard on herself, always comparing her life to others online," Nalweyiso says. The crisis came when Nalweyiso discovered a message where Emily expressed suicidal thoughts. Getting professional counselling was, she says, what saved her daughter.

## What schools are, and are not doing

Schools are on the front line. Most have strict rules against using phones in class to prevent distraction.

Hasadu Kirabira, who chairs a national group of private schools, says the focus is on supervised internet use for learning.

But he admits there is a gap.

"Schools are very good at focusing on grades and discipline," Kirabira notes. "Helping learners with their emotional well-being, including how to handle the digital world, often gets left behind."

## What you can actually do at home

So, if counting minutes is not the best strategy, what is? Parents can use these six practical, research-backed steps to build healthier digital habits.

### Put your own phone away.

It is impossible to be perfect, but try to make meals and playtimes mostly screen-free for you, too. When parents are distracted by their own devices, kids can feel ignored.

### Help them find the good content.

Be a guide, not just a gatekeeper. Seek out shows, games, and apps that are right for their age and teach positive things. Websites such as Common Sense Media offer excellent, free reviews.

### Watch and play with them.

When you can, join in. Ask questions about the story: "Why do you think that character is sad?" This turns screen time into a chance to connect and learn together.

### Turn off the background TV.

A TV that is always on in the background makes it harder for children to focus on playing, talking, or reading. A quieter house helps their brains concentrate.

### Do not panic about 'fast' cartoons.

Scientists are split on whether fast-paced shows are harmful. If the show is good quality and your child enjoys it calmly, it is probably fine.

### Find other ways to calm big feelings.

Try not to use a tablet as the main way to stop a tantrum. Instead, help them take deep breaths or use their words.

The most important thing to remember is simple, not all screen time is the same. An hour video-chatting with a grandparent is worlds apart from an hour of mindless, lonely scrolling.

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