



The Healthy Kids Community Challenge

The Healthy Kids Community Challenge is all about helping Ontario children make healthy choices. Our community is one of 45 across the province chosen to be part of this special project. That means new ideas and programs are coming to our community – things that make it easier for children to be active and eat healthier. These are the keys to good health as our children grow up and become adults.

Over the next several months, our Healthy Kids Community Challenge community will be working to encourage children and families to build a balanced day that is not filled with screen time.

Theme 4: Power Off and Play!

‘Screen time’ is the time spent using a screen-based device, such as a smartphone, tablet, computer or television. Not all screen time is unhealthy. Screens can offer an important way to learn and communicate at school and at work. Screens can also be used in an active way – like playing tennis, soccer, baseball or other sports games on a device.

More often, kids use screens for recreational purposes such as watching movies and playing games. They may be sitting, reclining or lying down

the whole time they are on their screens. This is called sedentary screen time and many children are getting too much of it. This could interfere with and take time away from healthy activities in their day. It could even affect their health.

Our community is focusing on minimizing children’s *recreational* and *sedentary* screen time, as part of a balanced day. It’s all about powering off devices and playing more.

Why screen time matters

Screen time affects many aspects of children's health. While research on screen time is still emerging, it suggests that screen time can harm children's early development and physical and psychosocial health.

- **Early development:** Higher screen time is linked to poor brain development, language development and attention skills in the early years.
- **Physical health:** Higher screen time is linked to lower levels of physical fitness, unhealthy weights and higher risks of cardio-metabolic disease (e.g. blood pressure, cholesterol, insulin).
- **Psychosocial health:** Higher screen time is linked to behavioural issues, lower self-esteem and lower psychological well-being.

As you will read in this fact sheet, screen time is also a concern because it can take time away from healthy activities in a child's day.





Three ways to address screen time

We are encouraging children and families to minimize screen time as part of a balanced day in three key ways.

1. Stay within recommended screen time limits

Health and health promotion experts in Canada recommend limiting children’s exposure to screens. This can reduce the associated health risks and promote positive health outcomes. This chart sums up the guidelines:



Age	Recommended hours of screen time
Under 2 years	None ^{A,C}
2-4 years	Less than 1 hour a day ^A
5-17 years	No more than 2 hours of recreational screen time a day ^{A,B}

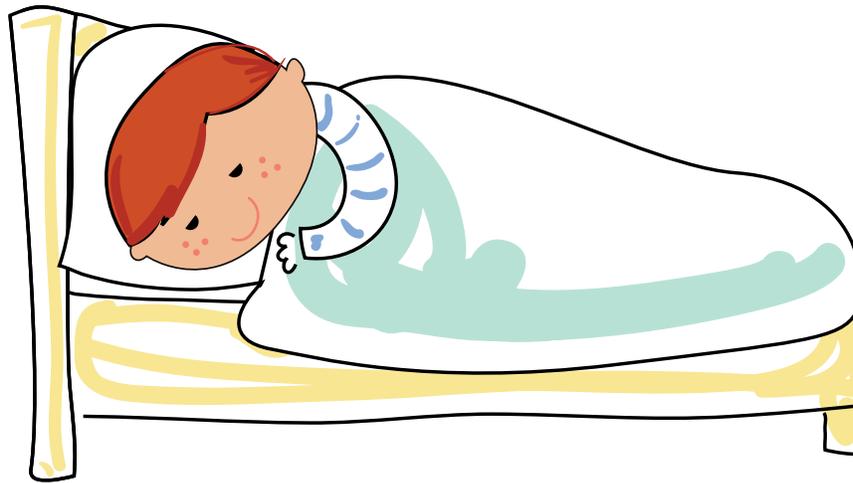
However, few children across Ontario and Canada are meeting these guidelines for screen time.

Sources:

A. Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology’s Canadian Sedentary Behaviour Guidelines⁸

B. Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology’s 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Youth^{9,10}

C. Canadian Pediatric Society’s Position Statement on Screen Time and Young Children¹¹



2. Put screens away during important times of day

Screen time can interfere with important daily routines, making it difficult for children to stay healthy. In particular, it's vital to power off screens for sleep time and meal time.

Sleep Time

The *Canadian Pediatric Society* recommends young children avoid screens for at least one hour before bed time. Some researchers recommend removing **all** screens from children's bedrooms.

Sleep is important for children's health, and studies show that it supports healthy weights, better emotional control and greater academic achievement. The *Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology's 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Youth* recommend the following sleep guidelines, along with consistent bed and wake-up times:

Age	Hours of uninterrupted sleep per night
5-13 year olds	9-11 hours
14-17 year olds	8-10 hours

Having screens, particularly TVs, in children's bedrooms is linked with poor sleeping habits and poor sleep quality. This may be due to the bright lights and physiological/mental stimulation from screens, which can make it hard for children to fall asleep.

Meal and snack time

Health experts such as the *Canadian Pediatric Society* recommend screen-free family meals.

Where and what children eat and drink are important to their health and supports healthy weight. Canada's Food Guide recommends children aged 2-13 years eat 4-6 servings of vegetables and fruit each day.

Screen time can prompt children to eat unhealthy foods, as they see lots of ads for unhealthy foods and drinks on TV and the internet. Research further shows that screen time is linked to mindless overeating even when there are no food ads. In fact, children who routinely eat meals while watching TV eat fewer vegetables and fruit, and more pizzas, snack foods and sodas.

Eating meals away from screens and eating meals as a family, on the other hand, contribute to healthy eating in children.



3. Replacing some screen time with other activities

When children spend time in front of screens, they have less time free for other healthy activities. A balanced day should be filled with learning, physical activity, social interaction and fun activities.

Physical activity

Health experts such as the *Canadian Pediatric Society* say we need to give kids ways to replace screen time with active outdoor play.

Physical activity has many health benefits for children, promoting their physical, psychological/social and cognitive health. The *Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology's 24-Hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Youth* aged 5-17 years recommends a mix of physical activities. This includes:

- Moderate-to-vigorous physical activity adding up to at least 60 minutes a day
- Activities to strengthen muscle and bone at least 3 days a week
- A mix of structured and unstructured light physical activities for several hours each day

While some types of screen time can give kids a chance to be physically active, it is often sedentary. Research shows that it takes away from physical activity.

Social interaction

Health experts such as the *Canadian Pediatric Society* recommend giving face-to-face interactions and family time priority over screen time.

While media and social media use can have a range of social benefits for children, real-life social interactions are also good for children. Parent-child interactions are especially important for children's health because they help children:

- Build emotional connections
- Develop language
- Build mental and social skills
- Regulate their emotions

Screen time, however, may take time away from important real-life social interactions, including family time. This can greatly affect a child's social well-being. With social media in particular, there may also be concerns about cyber-bullying. There may also be negative impacts on relationships and on overall life-satisfaction.



Fun and educational activities

Health experts such as the *Canadian Pediatric Society* recommend choosing healthy alternatives to screen time such as reading and play.

In a school setting, screens can be used for learning and can enhance the student experience. However, too much sedentary screen time may mean that kids have fewer opportunities to learn from other activities like playing and reading.

Play supports your child's development because it contributes to their cognitive, physical, social and emotional well-being. Play helps children develop creativity and imagination. It builds confidence and resiliency. Children learn how to work with others and gain independence. However, passive entertainment such as watching TV disrupts children's play. Even when a TV is simply on in the background, it reduces how long young children play and reduces their focus during play.

Screens can also interfere with children's reading time. They are more likely to use devices such as tablets to play games than to read, and if they have a TV in their bedrooms they are less likely to read.

How families can shape screen time

Parents' use of screens can influence children's screen time. You may sometimes rely on screens such as video games and smartphones to keep your children busy while you do other important tasks, such as chores or running errands. You may even find that screen time serves as family time in your home.

You have an important role in limiting your children's screen time. Consider these approaches:

- Change your screen time behaviour together as a whole family. Do it in a way that aligns with your own family values.
- Set screen time limits for your children that meet recommended screen time guidelines.
- Keep "hands-off" non-screen activities ready to occupy your children during times when you are busy.
- Declare family media-free days or even a part of a day.

Try out these specific ideas and activities:

- Create a screen time log for your family. Use it to track how much time each of you spends in front of a screen each day.
- Develop a family media plan to set family screen time limits. Change your screen time behaviour together, in a way that aligns with your family values.
- Plan to unplug from digital entertainment. Spend time together playing, daydreaming, creating, exploring and connecting with family and friends.
- Create an activity calendar for your family to follow. Give your kids the chance to brainstorm what they would like to do in their free time outside of screen time.
- Stock any rooms that have a TV, computer or other devices with plenty of other non-screen entertainment and activities.
- Build an activity pack filled with non-screen based activities (e.g. books, colouring pencils, a length of rope, playing cards, etc.).
- Rearrange your home to reduce access to screens, especially in spaces where your family eats meals and snacks or where your kids sleep.
- Remove screens from bedrooms. Limit screen time before bed.
- Play active video games instead of non-active ones.

Power Off and Play!

Did you know?

In Ontario, almost 80% of parents say they enforce rules about their children's screen time. Those who do are twice as likely to have their children meet screen time guidelines.

To learn more about the activities in our community or to get involved, contact your Healthy Kids Community Challenge project manager:

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Name

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Email

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Telephone

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Website



Learn more at ontario.ca/healthykids