

PRIMARY SCHOOL

CHILDREN WITH SPECIAL EDUCATIONAL NEEDS (SEN) AND SCREEN USE



WORKING TOGETHER TOWARDS
HEALTHIER DIGITAL HABITS



HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FOR SAFER SCREENS



VISIT HPFSS

Neurodivergent children (e.g. autism or ADHD), and children with Special Educational Needs (SEN, e.g. speech and language or learning needs) are more vulnerable to the harms of excessive screen time than children without SEN.

CHILDREN WITH SEN MIGHT STRUGGLE WITH THE FOLLOWING DIFFICULTIES, MAKING THEM MORE VULNERABLE TO THE HARMS OF SCREEN TIME:



- Difficulties monitoring their behaviour, linked to spending too much time on screens.
- Discomfort interacting with other children in real life, leading to a greater attraction to online social spaces.
- Poorer impulse control, meaning they struggle more to resist checking their device compulsively.

- Delayed developmental milestones (language, social interaction, etc), meaning they require greater frequency and consistency of real-life intervention and interaction to make good progress with their goals.
- Greater vulnerability to bullying in the real world, leading to cyberbullying and anxiety around school attendance.
- Difficulties regulating their emotions, meaning they feel the emotional impact of negative interactions or content online more keenly.



If you have any further questions or queries, please speak to your health provider (e.g. G.P. or paediatrician), or ask the SENDCO of your child's school to speak to their educational psychologist for further information.

MYTH BUSTING

“TOO MUCH SCREEN TIME WILL CAUSE MY CHILD TO HAVE ADHD.”

ADHD isn't caused by excessive screen time, it's a **neurodevelopmental condition with strong genetic roots** and the structural brain differences begin during early brain development. Children who have excessive screen time throughout their childhood can display behavioural changes that may be similar to the symptoms of ADHD. However, these behavioural changes can be reversed through screen detoxes, unlike if children have a true diagnosis of ADHD, which persists throughout their life regardless of amount of screen time they engage in.

“SCREEN TIME HELPS MY NEURODIVERGENT CHILD EMOTIONALLY REGULATE.”

Screens can temporarily **distract children from their overwhelming bodily sensations and emotions**, however, they do not support a child's ongoing learning of how to cope with stress or emotional discomfort. The development of emotional regulation relies on repeated, real-world experiences of co-regulation, reflection, and connection, none of which can be sought through a screen.

“ONLINE GAMING IS THE ONLY WAY MY CHILD WITH SEN CAN LEARN TO MAKE FRIENDS.”

Whilst occasional usage of (developmentally appropriate and parent-supervised) online games will not have long-term, serious consequences on a child's social development, children with social communication needs (common in autism) **benefit from repeated, guided, face-to-face experiences** that build social cognition, emotional reciprocity and flexible communication capacities.

“MY CHILD WITH SEN IS BEHIND AT SCHOOL, SO THEY BENEFIT FROM WATCHING EDUCATIONAL VIDEOS ON YOUTUBE.”

Watching educational videos might seem helpful, but children with SEN **build deeper learning and brain connections through real-world play** (especially with a parent or sibling) where they can practise language, problem-solving, and learn to tolerate difficult feelings such as frustration.

“ALL SCREEN TIME IS EQUALLY AS HARMFUL FOR MY CHILD WITH SEN.”

Not all advancements in technology are detrimental, far from it! 'Assistive technology' can help children with SEN by making learning more accessible and less frustrating. For example, speech-to-text tools can support children who struggle with writing, while visual scheduling apps can help autistic children manage their day with less anxiety over transitions. Devices like adaptive keyboards make it easier for children with physical disabilities to use computers, and alternative/augmented communication (AAC) tools give non-verbal children a way to communicate and be heard.



HOW TO SUPPORT YOUR CHILD'S SEN NEEDS WITHOUT SCREENS AND DEVICES

The skills below may take longer for a child with SEN to develop independently. Excessive screen time will hinder, not support, your child's development in these areas. Below we have outlined several ways of supporting your child with their SEN needs that do not involve screens.

EMOTIONAL REGULATION

It may appear that your child's screen serves as a comfort object or a coping mechanism when they are upset. For example, many children with SEN can find change difficult and this can lead to frustration and distress, experiences that, as loving parents, you understandably want to take away as quickly as possible. However, exposure to fast-paced, highly stimulating content when your child is already dysregulated is not supportive to their development and can lead to more **long-term difficulties** with managing their emotions.



As an alternative, **help your child learn to self-soothe** by validating the child's feelings in the moment; explaining why they are feeling upset, and acknowledging their need for comfort or control. Children who are dysregulated can benefit from more movement (running around outside, jumping on the spot, swinging, having a hug, or using their own sensory aid, e.g. cuddly toy) to feel better. Structuring a predictable routine with visual schedules (e.g. 'Now' and 'Next' etc.) can help children to feel more secure and serve to highlight screen-free periods.

ATTENTION AND FOCUS

Screens, such as smartphones and tablets, and those that have interactive content such as short video content or visual material, are designed to be continuously swiped to provide constant stimulation and compulsive engagement. Children with SEN are **more vulnerable to their addictive design** and can have fewer resources to resist their pull. Checking one's phone during learning time can break crucial thinking processing (such as working memory) and disrupt problem solving tasks (putting more stress on a child's cognitive faculties).

When your child is doing homework (or any learning), make sure any device is out of sight and ideally in a different room. **Movement breaks** can help if a child is struggling to maintain concentration for longer periods of time. **Working on homework together** and giving verbal prompts may help your child stay focused but be aware of your expectations in light of any developmental delays your child may have. **Breaking up the task** (sometimes even physically cutting up their worksheet into different questions) will help the task feel more manageable in the child's mind.



SOCIAL SKILLS

Some neurodivergent children may seek out screen time at social times of the day as they find it easier than communicating directly to another person and many young people have a preference for chatting to their friends online (or texting) as it provides less social friction or discomfort. However, it is vitally important for all young people to develop 'real-world' social skills via **direct interactions** with others, and work through the anxiety that socialising may bring, by learning to seek out support from grown-ups that can help them navigate their social surroundings.



Using Social Stories or Comic Strip Conversations (Gray, 1998) can be used as a gentle guide to support children's understanding of how and why they might struggle with socialising and how they can feel better in their relationships. If your child is struggling with being in larger groups, establish what group size may work best for them. Encourage 1-1 friendships and opportunities to have in-person play-dates. **Structured group activities** (playing a board game) may help. Involve your child's school in support planning as they may already be running evidence-based small intervention groups such as Lego Based Therapy (LeGoff et al., 2014), Talkabout (Kelly, 2018) and Socially Speaking (Schroeder, 1998).



SENSORY REGULATION



A child who experiences sensory overwhelm may need additional help with their sensory regulation. They could seek out more time on a device as this offers a passive, routine experience that **distracts them from the discomfort** they may be feeling in their body.

Offer healthier alternative options to your child such as a **quiet space** with calming toys if they are seeking to avoid sensory stimuli. For sensory-seeking options consider using **tactile play** (e.g. with sand, water or putty, or rough and tumble play, etc.), get outside for nature walks and/or use outdoor play equipment.

SLEEP

Good sleep habits improve attention, behaviour, learning and memory. If your child is having disrupted sleep patterns it would be helpful to establish clear guidelines for when screens are permitted and when they are not. It is recommended that all children have **at least 2 hours of screen-free time before bedtime** and that is because levels of cortisol (the stress hormone) are still high after one hour of screen-free time before they are ready to sleep. There should be no internet-enabled devices in bedrooms overnight. Keeping the first hour of the day screen-free helps to keep the morning calmer. **Predictable routines** help children with SEN feel secure, and scheduling screen time as part of a broader daily plan provides clarity.



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WHAT COULD YOUR CHILD BE MISSING WHEN THEY ARE ON SCREENS ?



Being read stories which inspire their imagination and help them process difficult scenarios linked to their SEN.



Connecting with nature and experiencing its existential ability to calm our nervous system. 🐞



Working through periods of emotional dysregulation and finding **they can cope**, and the world does not end.



Getting really into a **real-life hobby** or area of interest.



Learning how to **play independently** and occupy themselves from the content of their own minds.



Experiences of successfully **navigating difficult social interactions**.



Working out their own **sense of identity** and unique contribution to the world.



PARENT WELLBEING

We know that putting in boundaries around screen time and maintaining them is a huge effort. We also know the apps are known for their addictive content so it is not easy for parents to navigate this on their own. Building healthy habits needs to be a collaborative effort, to ensure children and young people are guided in their use of screens for their educational and social activities.

Use the **Health Professionals for Safer Screens Family Plan** on our website to create a healthy digital diet; working on this together to set realistic and attainable, shared goals to reduce your family's screen time. It may help to set up screen-free time and screen-free zones at home, with parents leading by example, by modelling healthy behaviour.

If possible, involve your child in developing their daily routine to encourage self-advocacy and share this with your child/ren's school(s) and develop pro-active strategies with teachers and professionals. Consistency between home, school and other settings will help towards reinforcing healthy habits.

As a replacement for the much-needed down time you might have enjoyed while your child is on their device, instead we encourage **co-viewing of low stimulation or educational programmes on a communal television**. This type of 'calm down time' does not have the negative impacts of hand-held devices or unsupervised scrolling through short-form video content. It can also be a way that children with SEN remain connected with the loving and supportive grown-ups in their lives, instead of disappearing into the disembodied online world within their hand-held devices.

Further Information

HPFSS (all resources) <https://healthprofessionalsforsaferscreens.org/resources/>

Healthier Together (NHS) <https://www.healthiertogether.nhs.uk/>

The ADHD Foundation www.adhdfoundation.org.uk/

National Autistic Society (NAS) www.autism.org.uk/

References

Gray, C. A. (1998) Social Stories and Comic Strip Conversations with Students with Asperger Syndrome and High-Functioning Autism. In E. Schopler, G. B., Mesibov, & L.J. Kuncze (Eds.), Asperger Syndrome or High-Functioning Autism. Springer.

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Kelly, A. (2018, 2nd ed.) Talkabout: A Social Communication Skills Programme. Speechmark.

Schroeder, A. (1998) Socially Speaking: Pragmatic Social Skills Programme for Primary Pupils. LDA.

This leaflet has been developed by experts at Health Professionals for Safer Screens, led by Dr Emily Barrett and Dr Rachel Reid (Educational and Child Psychologists).

