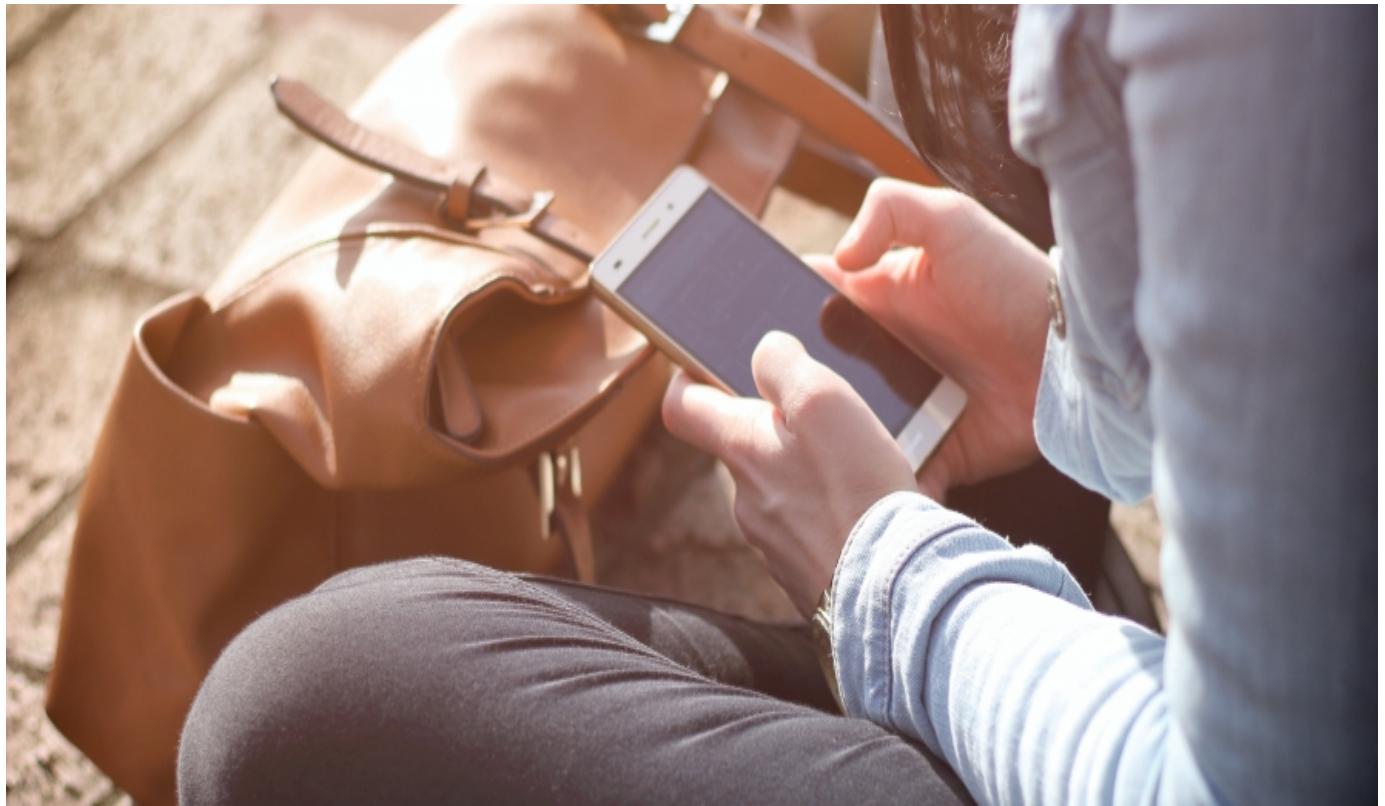


Health and wellbeing

## Screen time: why you shouldn't worry



We hear constantly that screen time is a problem. Parents worry that letting their children use screens is lazy parenting. Most of us have probably felt guilty at some point about 'smartphone babysitting'.

But is screen time really that bad for you or your children? Oxford Internet Institute Senior Research Fellow and Director of Research Professor Andrew Przybylski debunks the myths.

## Screen time is like air

Screen time is everywhere. Screens contain much of what we need to function day-to-day, much as oxygen keeps our systems going. All the same, as a society, we find it hard to think through what screen time actually means to us. There are a couple of reasons for that:



# Three screen time myths

## Myth 1: We all know what we mean by 'screen time'

Your child probably thinks of screen time as a means of communication, bringing everyone closer together. You, on the other hand, might be tempted to think of screens as designed to rot your brain.

Screens allow for all kinds of different activities. What matters is not the screen, but what's happening when children are in front of it.

Your child is connecting, searching, communicating, and playing. It's estimated that six billion hours of video games are played each month on this planet: that's 11 Apollo moon programmes worth of time!

The fact that your child plays video games doesn't necessarily make them anti-social. Playing video games is a human pleasure. It's also very often social.

## Myth 2: We can trust the way screen time is measured

Ever since screens were invented, researchers have pretty much relied on users' own estimates of how long they're spending on them. A simple questionnaire asking how much time we spend a week on social media can lead to headlines about time-wasting or worse.

But the fact that your child spends five hours a week on social media doesn't necessarily mean they're heading for damaged relationships or mental health problems. What might potentially cause harm is the content they consume, not the amount of time they spend.

The best response is to help your child become digitally resilient and self-aware: are they doing fun things on screen? Are they learning, in the broadest possible sense? Do they know how to respond to potential risks and harms?

## Myth 3: Screen time inevitably causes problems



Friendships, school, food, even the weather all contribute to emotional wellbeing - and often go unnoticed in this kind of research.

## Unhelpful advice

Flawed research and negative attitudes towards screens have led to parents constantly being given unhelpful advice about how to monitor screen time at home.

Each child is different, and deciding together on digital activity helps your child express their likes and dislikes in a way that will help both of you make a decision that feels right in your household, while allowing them to take responsibility.

## Actions you can take

There are things you can do to develop a more positive relationship with your child's screen time:

**Be involved and curious:** Avoid seeing the screen in your child's hand as alien and intimidating. Remember that devices play a huge part in your child's life: it's important to approach them with a sense of openness and curiosity. Discuss your child's screen-use with them, listen to what they enjoy doing online, and educate yourself on their favourite activities. Talk to them in the same spirit of openness about what you yourself like and dislike, accepting that they may not always agree.

**Support them to explore:** You are still the most important influence in your child's life. You can set reasonable tech boundaries - but it always helps to explain your reasons and agree them together. Encourage your child to communicate when you both disagree. (No matter how well-meaning you are, if you lay down the law in an authoritarian way, you will probably just make them resist.)

**See things from their point of view:** Trying to see screen time through your child's eyes will help them understand that you're on their side. Explain that you realise that



**Think about how you say it:** Try not to use phrases such as 'you must' or 'you have to'. Use language in a sympathetic way, and you'll avoid shutting down the conversation. It will show your child you respect their views, that you expect them to have an opinion and express it - and that you will always listen.

Our devices are a lifeline for all kinds of issues that children and young people have to face - questions of identity, sexuality, self-expression and relationships. If you discuss their screen-use together, and find out about the technology they enjoy, you'll find it easier to set boundaries that work. That also means that your child will be much more likely to come to you if they're worried.



### Article written by Professor Andrew Przybylski

Professor Przybylski is an experimental psychologist and Director of Research at the Oxford Internet Institute. His work is mainly concerned with applying psychological models of motivation and health to study how people interact with virtual environments.