Checklist for Calculating

Healthy Amounts of Screen-Time

Prescribing specific screen-time limits, based on your child's chronological age isn't effective, as many screen-time recommendations suggest. Not all screen-time is created equal and not all children respond to screen-time in the same ways.

It's important to remember that screen-time guidelines *aren't* scientifically-tested or validated. So we need to ensure that we can calculate healthy screen-time limits based on your children's unique needs.

So how can parents determine 'safe' levels of screen-time?

Children have basic, unchanging developmental needs that must be met. Screen-time becomes a problem when it displaces children's basic needs. So we must ensure that our children's basic needs are met each day. If you do this, then you don't need to fret about screen-time encroaching on these basic needs. You'll have the added benefit of knowing that their screen-time is healthy and not harmful.

Is your child getting enough time each day for:

// sleep
// physically activity
// relationships (real, face-to-face interactions)
// language (hear and use)
// play
// eating
// executive function skills (impulse control, working memory and mental flexibility which are typically developed via play experiences and human interactions)
// white space (time for children to enter mind-wandering mode)?

We start with the time metrics that we have specific research on in terms of required time: sleep and physical activity.

Sleep Guidelines

Screen-time can have a detrimental impact on children's sleep. We have to ensure that their screen use doesn't interfere with their basic sleep needs.

The Australian Sleep Health Foundation's guidelines. These guidelines are based on sleep recommendations published in Sleep Health in 2015:

Age range	Amount of sleep required/24 hour period
Newborns (0–2 months)	14–17 hours
Infants (4–11 months)	12–15 hours
Toddlers (1–2 years)	11–14 hours
Pre-schoolers (3–5 years)	10–13 hours
Primary school children	9–11 hours
Pre-teens and teens	8–10 hours

Physical Activity Guidelines

Sedentary activities, such as excessive or prolonged use of screens can have physical impacts on children's health and development.

These guidelines are based on the Australian Department of Health Guidelines. They are minimum recommended guidelines.

Age	Recommended physical activity levels and suggested activities
0–1 year (babies)	Floor-based play is recommended for this age range. It's difficult to specify an exact amount of time as their waking hours vary so much.
1–5 years (toddlers and pre-schoolers)	Three hours per day of physical activity (light, moderate or vigorous) spread throughout the day.
5–12 years	At least one hour of moderate to vigorous intensity physical activity every day.

// It's much more difficult to prescribe specific amounts of time for your child's other basic needs, as these aren't based on an exact science.

// If your child has opportunities every day (or thereabouts) to meet these basic needs, then their screen-time habits are *unlikely* to be detrimental (so long as they're accessing age-appropriate content).

// Also remember that screen-time can also *support* children's basic needs outlined above. So sometimes their screen-time can contribute to their basic needs as well. For example, a child might spend 30 minutes on Skype chatting to their friend who moved overseas. So this addresses their language and relationship needs.

// Basically, we know that children's screen-time often becomes problematic when it's encroaching on time available to meet a child's basic needs. Using the formula below assures us that our child's screen-time is healthy and not harmful.

My Simple Formula for Calculating Healthy Amounts of Screen-Time

(Without Guilt & Confusion)

// You can apply the following formula to get a rough estimate of how much screen-time is appropriate for your child. Remember, this is likely to change over time, as your child's needs, interests and habits change.

// Calculating screen-time isn't an exact science. The formula below is a simple guideline to determine safe and healthy amounts of screen-time.

// Each child has a different tipping point. Some children can cope with more screen-time than other children. Observe their behaviour over time and adjust their screen-time if you see changes in their behaviour.

24 hours –

(time for sleep)-
(time for physical activity) –
(time for relationships) –
(time for language) –
(time for play) –
(time for eating) –
(time for executive function skills) –
(time for white space) –
_____
Available screen-time
_____

Remember it's impossible to neatly segregate a child's life into separate compartments. Many of their basic needs overlap. For example, during play children often develop relationships, executive function skills, language and movement skills too.

An example for a four year-old:

24 hours-

(time for sleep)- [10]
(time for physical activity) – [3]
(time for relationships) – [2]
(time for language) – [1]
(time for play) – [3]
(time for eating) – [2]
(time for executive function skills) – [1]
(time for white space) – [1]

Available screen-time: 1 hour

An example for an eight year-old:

24 hours-

(time for sleep)- [9]
(time for physical activity) – [2]
(time for relationships) – [2]
(time for language) – [2]
(time for play) – [2]
(time for eating) – [1]
(time for executive function skills) – [2]
(time for white space) – [2]

Available screen-time: 2 hours