Screen Time and Brain Development – What Parents Should Know

Screen time in children, particularly during their early years, can have a significant impact on their brain development and behaviour. While some screen content can offer educational benefits, excessive or unsupervised screen time may negatively affect cognitive and social-emotional skills.

Babies and Toddlers (0–5 years):

Too much screen time at this age can slow down how children learn to talk and think. It can also make it harder for them to pay attention, manage their emotions, and solve simple problems. Children need real-world play and human interaction for healthy brain growth.

Preschoolers (3–5 years):

Lots of screen time at this age may affect parts of the brain that help children develop memory, empathy, and staying focused. They still learn best by doing things, not just watching.

Older Children and Teens:

As children grow, screen time becomes a bigger part of life—school, socialising, and entertainment often happen on devices. But too much screen time over time can impact how the brain develops, especially in areas that help with communication skills, managing emotions, relationships, and making decisions.

When screen use starts to take over daily life—interfering with sleep, physical activity, school, and family time—it can become a real problem. Some signs of unhealthy screen use include:

- Mood swings or aggression when devices are taken away
- Spending more time online than with real-life friends and family members
- Being exposed to violent or inappropriate content
- Skipping meals, activities, or homework to stay on a device

In New Zealand and around the world, more children and teens are showing signs of screen dependency—where they feel they can't cope without their devices. This can affect mental health, increase anxiety or loneliness, and lead to behavioural issues.

# How Screen Time Affects Learning and Thinking

Focus and Attention:

When children are glued to screens, their brains get a lot of fast-moving input. This can make it harder for them to concentrate during quiet, slower-paced activities like reading or schoolwork.

Talking and Language Skills:

Face-to-face chats help children learn new words and how conversations work. If screen time replaces these interactions, children might take longer to develop language skills.

Thinking and Problem-Solving:
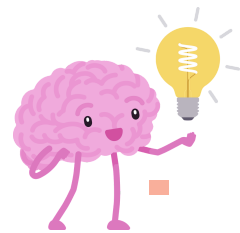
Children who spend lots of time on screens might struggle more with planning, self-control, and thinking creatively.

Empathy and Social Skills:

Children learn to read emotions and respond kindly by spending time with others. Too much solo screen time means fewer chances to build these important skills.

Behaviour and Mood:

Lots of screen time can sometimes lead to more tantrums, fussiness, or trouble managing big feelings—especially if screen time becomes a way to avoid boredom or tough emotions.

What You Can Do as a Parent – Screen Time Tips by Age

Babies and Toddlers (0–2 years)

- Avoid screens (except for video chats with family). Babies learn best through play, touch, talking and connecting with real people.

- Focus on interaction, not distraction—sing, read, cuddle, and play together.

- Model good habits by keeping screens off in the background and during family time.

Young Children (2–5 years)

- Limit screen time to no more than 1 hour per day (as recommended by the World Health Organisation).

- Choose high-quality content that's educational, age-appropriate, and engaging.

- Watch and talk together so children can better understand what they're seeing.

- Mix it up with plenty of screen-free activities like outdoor play, arts and crafts, and story time.

- Turn off screens before bed—at least 1 hour before sleep to support healthy sleep routines.