

Screen Time Habits

A Guide to Managing Screen Time

Autistic youth spend more time on average in front of screens than their non-Autistic peers (MacMullin, 2015). While screen time can offer benefits like enhancing learning or promoting online social interaction (Gillespie-Smith, 2021), it can also lead to challenges which are a common cause of concern for families. The strategies and resources below are meant to promote healthy boundaries for screen-time.



Provide structure and predictability

- use visual schedules and timers to give advance warning of when screen time will come to an end
- implement tech-free spaces and times (e.g., at the family dinner table, 1hr before bed)
- use first-then boards to clearly explain that screen time comes *after* completing unpreferred tasks



Encourage offline activities and interests

- suggest offline activities as alternatives to screens (e.g., reading, outdoor play, colouring, music)
- lean into the person's interests (e.g., if the child likes to build in Minecraft, introduce them to Lego)
- where possible, build these alternate activities directly into the person's schedule



Teach alternative coping skills

- teach coping skills that do not include the use of screens (e.g., deep breathing, meditation, journaling, etc.)
- where possible, emphasize coping strategies that encourage offline interests (e.g., painting, hiking, playing a musical instrument)



Model healthy habits in your own screen use

- reflect on your own time spent in front of computers, televisions, tablets, phones, etc.
- prioritize active social interaction over passive consumption of content delivered via devices
- set a positive example for the person by modelling healthy screen time yourself

For best results, take a gradual approach to reducing screen time that allows time to adjust to the change. As needs and skills evolve over time, strategies may need to be adjusted to be a better fit for the individual.

Resources to Learn More

- ◆ [Neurodivergent Kids and Screen Time](#) - Katherine Martinelli, The Child Mind Institute
An overview of benefits and risks of screen time for Autistic children
- ◆ [Screen Time Use Guidelines and Strategies for Children and Youth with Autism](#) - University of British Columbia
Detailed guide including actionable strategies for parents seeking to manage the screen time of Autistic youth

Gillespie-Smith, K., Hendry, G., Anduuru, N., Laird, T., & Ballantyne, C. (2021). Using social media to be 'social': Perceptions of social media benefits and risk by autistic young people, and parents. *Research in Developmental Disabilities*, 118, 104081. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ridd.2021.104081>

MacMullin, J. Lunsby, Y., & Weiss, J. (2016). Plugged in: Electronics use in youth and young adults with autism spectrum disorder. *Autism*, 20(1), 45-54.

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For more information, contact Kerry's Place Autism Services:

+1-833-77-KERRY/1-833-775-3779

intake@kerrysplace.org

kerrysplace.org



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