

Screen time - suggested swaps

DfE guidance adapted for Childcare.co.uk

As part of their new screen time guidance the Govt has released information on the 'Best Start for Life' website about what it calls 'suggested swaps' - ways to engage children in activities that don't involve screen time.

<https://beststartinlife.gov.uk/screen-time-under-5s/>

The new guidance on the **Best Start in Life website**, includes key tips including:

- **Under 2s** - avoid screen time other than for shared activities that encourage bonding, interaction and conversation.
- **2 to 5-year-olds** - try to keep it to no more than one hour a day. Avoid at mealtimes and in the hour before bed.
- **Content** - choose slow-paced, age-appropriate content. Fast-paced, social media-style videos and AI toys or tools should be avoided for young children.
- **Co-viewing** - watch or use screens together - talking, asking questions and engaging with the content - is better for children's development than solo screen use.

<https://beststartinlife.gov.uk/screen-time-under-5s/>

What does this mean for providers?

You will need to talk with parents about how much screen time you allow children in your early years setting. Parents might, for example, want the entire screen time for home use and you will need to adapt to accommodate their wishes. What if you want to watch a short programme linked to children's interests or learning? - you will need to discuss this sort of scenario through with parents.

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The 'Best start in life' guidance advises a number of 'safe screen swaps' - strategies that support young children to stop using screens, for example -

Safe screen swap - DfE suggests that shared activities could include video calling with friends and family or looking through digital photo albums together.

What does this mean for providers?

You will need to share this information with parents, to support their decision making at home.

Better content

DfE provide guidance on what they call ‘better content’.

They remind us that, ‘Young children’s brains are stimulated much more easily than adults’, so they need content specifically made for them’ and recommend -

- **Slow-paced content** - slow-paced, predictable content is better for young brains. Fast-paced, over-stimulating social media-style videos may affect how young children learn to concentrate, so it’s best to avoid them.
- **Safe content** - use parental controls to block inappropriate, harmful content.
<https://kidsonlinesafety.campaign.gov.uk/parental-controls/>
- **Avoid social media** - it isn’t made for young brains, so it should be avoided.
- **Avoid AI:** Don’t let young children use AI toys, tools or chatbots until there’s more evidence on how they affect your child. This includes devices or apps such as interactive robots, smart speakers or AI chat apps.

DfE make another suggested safe screen swap - DfE advise parents to ‘check what your child is watching – look for content with simple stories, fewer scene changes and characters speaking slowly. It should be easy to hear what people are saying and to see the emotions on characters’ faces.’

What does this mean for providers?

You will need to review children’s viewing if you allow screen time in your early years setting. Check the content - is it slow paced? Check the parental controls - are children fully supervised? Check what children are doing - are they on websites without your knowledge? Review the use of AI in the setting - if you use it, how do you protect children from accessing it if they are online?

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Your / parental screen use

There is further guidance for parents on how their own screen use affects their child, for example, suggesting parents -

- **Lead by example** because children’s brains are like sponges – they’ll copy your screen use habits. Be mindful of how often you use your phone around your child.
- **Being present with your child** - spending long periods on your phone can make it harder to notice what your child is doing or feeling. Young children need attention, interaction and shared moments with their parents and carers to feel secure and supported.

What does this mean for providers?

This guidance is also useful for early years providers who are looking to cut down on screen time use during the day. However, if you currently send parents regular updates about their child's day you will need to communicate the changes you are making to them before suddenly stopping the information sharing.

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When screens are ok

DfE go on to talk about when and where is okay for children to use screens. They suggest parents -

- **Set clear boundaries** for when and where little brains use screens to ensure time for other activities that support their development.
- **Avoid young children using screens alone** as it reduces opportunities for social time and active play. Try watching and discussing content together with your child as it supports their development and helps you protect them from harmful content.
- **Screen-free zones** - keep bedrooms and mealtimes free from screens. This can protect valuable family time and interaction.
- **Background watching** - try not to have screens on in the background particularly during family time, meals or playtime. Screens can distract from beneficial activities for your child such as social interaction and active play.

There are 2 more safe screen swaps suggested -

Safe screen swap - another time when DfE suggest parents stop using screens is at mealtimes when they suggest parents 'try swapping screens for background music, simple conversation, table games, colouring or even 'I Spy' with colours or letters.'

Safe screen swap - DfE also suggest parents don't give screens at bedtimes and 'swap screens for reading bedtime stories together. Try to avoid screens for the hour before bed, as this could affect sleep.'

What does this mean for providers?

You might want to go through each of these points with parents and discuss how you support children in the setting. This will help them when they are making safe screen decisions for their child at home.

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You can also read the full expert-led **summary of evidence** report on GOV.UK

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/screen-use-by-children-aged-under-5>

DfE go on to talk about **how screen time affects children's development** and share the following information for parents -

- **90% of brain growth happens before age 5.** Young children learn best through warm, responsive interactions with parents and carers.
- **A large amount of screen time is linked with negative effects** on children's health and development. It can affect social, emotional, language and brain development, sleep, eyesight and healthy weight.
- Reading together, simple games, play and back-and-forth conversations all help them develop language, problem-solving skills, self-control and social understanding. **These early interactions, even before children can talk, create the foundations for every area of their lives.**
- Ensure screen time of any kind doesn't replace sleep, physical activity, active play or direct parent-child interaction.
- Read more about **how much sleep** your child needs -
<https://www.nhs.uk/best-start-in-life/baby/baby-basics/newborn-and-baby-sleeping-advice-for-parents/your-babys-sleep-patterns/#how-much-do-babies-sleep-?>
- Find out about physical activity **in the first year** and **from age 1 onwards**.
<https://www.nhs.uk/best-start-in-life/baby/baby-moves/>
<https://www.nhs.uk/best-start-in-life/toddler/activities-for-toddlers/#activity>
- Make **healthier food choices** for your child.
<https://www.nhs.uk/best-start-in-life/baby/weaning/what-to-feed-your-baby/from-around-6-months/>

What does this mean for providers?

You might find the guidance and links useful for sharing with parents, especially if you need to justify any changes you are making in the setting.

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DfE share some guidance on screen use for **children with SEND** -

- Some children with special educational needs or disabilities (SEND) may need a more tailored approach when it comes to screens. Screen-based assistive technology can be an important tool to help some children and families communicate and take part in everyday activities.
- Like all young children, children with SEND need plenty of time for play, sleep and interacting with their parents and carers. Protect screen-free time for these important activities, where possible.

What does this mean for providers?

You might need to make accommodations where a child's plan states they need access to screens but this must be carefully monitored using previous guidance.