

In this series of guides, we have been looking closely at the use of screens in early years settings. However, technology is not just about screen time.

It is important to audit what technology resources you offer for early years children to ensure you are providing them with a range of different opportunities to get the most out of the technology you offer.

You need to buy the right technology to support child development - and, of course, you will need technology to support your work - doing courses, checking safeguarding documents etc.

DfE has introduced new online safety guidance - which will be in the EYFS from September 2026 - so now is a good time to see what you have and to make sure that it's working for you and the children.

Technology sits in all areas of learning of the EYFS - while it used to be part of 'understanding the world' it is now expected to be used throughout the curriculum, to enhance children's learning.

To comply with the EYFS you must have a Mobile Phone and Camera Policy which also covers other online devices - for example, smart watches and glasses and keeps pace with technology as it develops - for example you might want to talk about AI use.

Technology and Ofsted inspection

Let me tell you the cautionary tale of a childminder who cared for an older child. The child sat next to the Ofsted inspector, on the sofa and took her mobile phone out of her pocket. She proceeded to show the inspector the age-inappropriate game she was playing and said she had permission from her parents.

This inspection did not end well for the childminder - online safety was not followed, the phone was not secured (the childminder didn't know she had it) and the child was using the phone inappropriately. The childminder had a Mobile Phone and Camera Policy, but it had been disregarded by the parent.

Introducing technology

You should always introduce technology with a short reminder that children should never use it on their own and should always be supervised by an adult. Push-back on expectations to over-use technology and talk to parents about what they are doing / saying to their child at home.

Technology must not replace play and interactions and both consumption and online safety should be carefully monitored. Technology should be introduced and used as one tool among many - alongside sand, water, blocks, books and outdoor play.

There are some useful online safety books from Jeanne Willis and Tony Ross, including 'Chicken Clickin' and 'Goldilocks: #A cautionary tale'.

What technology is useful?

Think about what you might need to ensure you comply with the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS). Technology should support - not replace - play-based learning and adult interactions. For example, you should look for technology that -

Supports children's communication, language and social development.

For example, if you are going to watch online media with the children, it should be slow paced and well made, so it both supports and enhances the curriculum. examples include BBC iPlayer Kids and other developmentally appropriate software, so screen time is kept minimal and purposeful and there is active rather than passive engagement.

Enhances observation and assessment - not just data collection.

For example, a safe and efficient system to record observations, assessments and ongoing planning, share information with parents to support home learning, allow you to complete your tax returns etc.

Saves you / staff time rather than adding workload.

For example, a number of childminders report that they have downloaded HMRC approved software to help them comply with making tax digital (MTD) requirements but have found it to offer far more features than they want or need, leading to confusion and frustration.

Is safe, secure and GDPR-compliant.

Ideally, you should ensure technology is covered by GDPR / UK data protection legislation. This will ensure it is covered by your Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) registration and safe for use.

Allows you to engage with training.

For example, you must complete 2 yearly safeguarding training and regular updates. Childcare.co.uk webinars are easy to access, free for all on the night they are presented and allow providers to engage with essential, high quality training. Similarly, there are regular updates that you need to access - these might not be easily available to you if you do not have an online system.

Allows you to do your job effectively.

For example, you need to invoice parents, complete your income and expenses for HMRC, send messages and, if relevant, schedule staff. If you record children's learning, development and progress you will need an effective system to do this as well. Administration is part of early years life and should be as easy as possible.

Useful resources for early years

What makes technology useful?

A strong early years technology setup is -

- Minimal - a few, well-chosen tools to get the job done.
- Integrated - with systems that talk to each other.
- Child-centred - not admin-heavy - allowing more time to play with the children.
- Staff-friendly - with quick, intuitive workflows rather than heavily over-burdensome.
- Reasonably priced.

It's more about how the technology is used - in the early years setting you should be playing and interacting with the children. If you want to use technology it should enhance adult involvement - to talk, question, extend learning etc during short, purposeful sessions which link digital experiences to real-world play.

There should be real-world relevance - technology children see in everyday life such as microwaves and road crossing buttons which teach cause and effect.

For early years and pre-school children, useful technology is about supporting play, language, curiosity and relationships. The best resources are simple, interactive and used in short, purposeful bursts alongside real-world experiences, for example -

Interactive learning apps

Good apps, when used sparingly, can help to support the curriculum - for example, early literacy, numeracy and problem-solving - but should only be used when an adult is involved.

They are useful because they offer clear learning focus (phonics, counting, language) and open-ended or exploratory play - they also encourage talking with adults.

Audio and storytelling technology

This is often more valuable than screen-based tech at this age, for examples, online books, songs and rhymes and watching short programmes together to learn about something new.

This sort of technology use supports listening and attention skills, builds imagination when the screens are put away and encourage engagement with an adult.

Be mindful of avoiding apps with lots of ads or rewards but little learning

Simple programmable toys

These types of toys - for example, Bee-Bot and sequencing or directional toys, teach children early coding and introduce sequencing and problem-solving through play. Children develop logical thinking skills and learn about cause and effect. They also teach children how to follow instructions through use of directional language - left, right, back, forward, turn etc which can be further developed in free play and games planned later.

Digital creativity tools

Technology works best when children use it to create - for example, tablet drawing apps and simple music apps can be used to develop self-expression and fine motor development.

Children will also experiment with sound, colour and ideas while playing and these concepts can be developed later during planned activities.

Video and media

When carefully selected and offered in a limited capacity, after consultation with parents, video and media can support learning - but it must be used intentionally. Slow programmes such as 'Bluey' and 'BBC iPlayer Kids' can be used to spark conversations, model social situations and introduce new ideas or vocabulary.

Cameras and recording tools

These can be very powerful ways of engaging children in the world around them - taking photos of flowers on outings, spotting birds in the trees and zooming in etc. Children can use tablets and cameras and be supported to document their own learning, listen to their voice using audio recording tools, take photos of each other and use what they have done later during storytelling. When playing together, staff / you and children will develop vocabulary and the children have the opportunity to revisit and talk about experiences which supports language and storytelling and encourages reflection.

Be mindful of avoiding overly complex tools that frustrate young children

Interactive whiteboards

These are commonly found in nurseries and reception classes - less so for childminders. They can be used for, for example, group storytelling, movement games and shared drawing or mark making. The key is not to sit children passively in front of them, but to use them for positive interactions.

Be mindful of avoiding long periods of passive screen time

Everyday technology

Let's make a list -

- Remote controls - like the children use at home.
- Kitchen appliances - real or pretend.
- Keyboards - in a role play office.
- Calculators - to experiment with number.

These types of technology help children understand how technology fits into daily life. They build vocabulary as children press, swipe and turn things on or off and encourages role play

Cause-and-effect toys

Especially for babies and toddlers, useful cause and effect toys might have buttons, music, pop-ups or press-to-activate. They might have levers or lift the flaps in books.

The toys teach children that when they do something, something happens and link through early problem-solving (brain development) as well as fine motor skills (physical development).

Risk / benefit assessment

Ensure technology adds values - it might look impressive, but does it support you?

- Are you spending more time uploading than interacting with the children?
- Are the systems you use disconnected and fragmented?
- Can you use the technology easily, without stress?
- Is data privacy secure? - especially relating to children's private / personal data.
- Are you / staff overusing screens? - think about time spent actually playing with the children.
- Do you / staff over-use screens? - most of children's learning needs to come from real-world exploration.
- Is the technology overly expensive? - for example, some childminders subscribe to multiple platforms, which cost them a lot of money every month, for fear of 'missing out' when one provides them with everything they need.

Reflection

What are the impacts of the new government screen time guidance that will be in the EYFS from September on using technology in an early years setting?

The new government screen-time guidance isn't a statutory EYFS requirement yet, but it's good to prepare. The new guidance won't stop you from using technology in the early years setting but it might shape parental expectations, Ofsted inspections and practice in early years settings from September - especially around safeguarding, curriculum balance and pedagogy. In practice this likely means...

The new guidance

The 2026 government guidance for under-5s sets a clear direction -

- **Under 2s** - avoid screens - except shared, interactive use.
- **Age 2–5s** - aim for no more than 1 hour of screen time per day.

The emphasis is on co-viewing and interaction - the adult and child together watching high-quality, slow-paced content. There is also guidance for parents on avoiding screens at mealtimes and before their child goes to bed which would cross over into the setting - for example, no screen time before a young child's daily nap.

There is a strong message that screen use should not replace play, talk, sleep or physical activity and the guidance highlights risks of excessive screen use, including impacts on language and social development, sleep and attention and physical health and wellbeing.

Impact on the EYFS

When it is included in the EYFS from September 2026, the use of technology in the setting will need clearer justification. When Ofsted inspects, you will be expected to explain why you are using technology and how you have communicated this to parents.

For example, passive use where children are sitting watching videos independently will be harder to defend and settings will need to show technology is purposeful, interactive and supporting learning, rather than replacing it. You should expect Ofsted to probe about why the screen is being used instead of play, talk, or hands-on learning.

There has been a shift towards quality of interactions recently and the screen time guidance supports this co-engagement. In practice, Ofsted will expect to see adults sitting with children, talking, questioning and extending learning. In this scenario, technology becomes a tool for interaction, not entertainment. This aligns with EYFS curriculum expectations - communication & language and sustained shared thinking.

Reducing screen use

During inspection, you might be asked - for example, how much time children spend in front of screens in the setting and at home and how you have reduced passive or routine screen use in the setting. Think about the following scenarios -

- Do you put videos on during transitions? - what can you use instead?
- Do you use tablets as ways to give yourself a break during the day? - what can you set up for them to play with instead?
- Are children watching a quick programme while you get out their meal? - what alternative activities can you plan?
- Do you use the TV at the end of the day to keep children calm when parents are arriving - what can you replace it with to promote calm?
- Do children watch TV or videos at mealtimes? - what can you do instead?

Stronger safeguarding

You might also expect Ofsted to look more closely at safeguarding around screen time and online interactions, for example -

- The risks of children watching inappropriate content.
- Information sharing with parents about online safety.
- Sharing the new guidance especially for under 2s with parents.
- Updated policies on screen time and device use (if in place).
- Training or professional development to cover the new guidance.
- Supervision in evidence if / when devices are used.
- Staff / you commit to using less devices / spending less time online during the working day to set a good example to the children.

The curriculum

This will lead naturally to a greater emphasis on balancing the curriculum to prioritise play-based learning, physical activity and communication and language.

During inspection, you might be asked to demonstrate how technology has been replaced by hands-on, real-world experiences. If children are asked about watching TV or using a tablet in the setting, they will say honestly that it doesn't happen - they play outside instead.

To find this balance, you will need to show consistency between home and setting because the guidance is aimed at parents so settings will likely be expected to model good practice, share advice with families and align approaches - for example, limiting screen exposure so parents can use the 'allowance' (1 hour for 2 - 5 year olds and homework for after school children) at home.

Children with SEND

As part of your reflections, consider the impact on children with special educational needs and / or disabilities (SEND). There is a time when screen-based tools may still be appropriate for some children - for example, as communication aids.

There are other children who carry around a screen all day to self-regulate.

You will need to discuss this with parents and other agencies and professionals who support the child, to ensure appropriate and inclusive use. You can then let Ofsted know the outcome and show them the child's updated graduated approach plan / care plan.

Next steps

What this means for you...

- Audit your current screen use - how long do you use it for during the day?
- Review technology - how can you include technology use and safety lessons in children's days without screen use?
- Think about supervision - are children passively watching or actively engaged?
- Speak to parents - how much of the time do they want for their child at home?
- Review your policy - are you going to limit or remove screen time entirely?
- Think about when you might want to use screens - for example, to introduce a new idea, to watch a book, active storytelling, yoga demonstrations, nature watch etc and share this with parents. Can you find a balance they are happy with, considering the new guidance and their wishes for home use.
- Implement new daily routines to increase talk, play, books, outdoor learning etc.
- Share daily routines with parents - statutory requirement (EYFS).
- Train staff (if relevant) - on your new routines.

Technology use isn't being removed from early years settings, but it is being repositioned as a carefully used tool, not a default activity.

References

- DfE Early Years Foundation Stage for childminders for early years children.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-foundation-stage-framework--2>

- DfE screen free guidance for parents.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-screen-time-guidance-for-parents-of-under-5s>

- Ofsted Early Years Inspection toolkit.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/early-years-inspection-toolkit-operating-guide-and-information>

Other references when used are noted in the text.

Further information

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