

There is new guidance which will be part of the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) from September 2026 in relation to managing children's screen time. The guidance will be linked in the EYFS as 'should' which means early years providers will have to justify why they do not comply.

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

As a starting point, providers will need to speak to parents about the amount of screen time their child has at home and in the setting, so they can balance it through the day.

The new screen-time guidance states -

Under 2-year-olds

- No screen time – unless it is used for, for example, interactive video chats.

2 – 5-year-olds

- Less than 1 hour of screen time a day.
- Content should be educational, age-appropriate and slow.
- Parents / providers and children should watch content together.

For all early years children DfE also advise:

- Don't use screens during meals or before bed, to occupy or distract.
- Turn off the TV in the background.

7+ year olds - as children get older, DfE advise:

- Less than 2 hours of screen time a day unless the time is schoolwork related.
- Agree on a screen use plan or timetable with the child.
- Use parental control settings and check content is suitable for age.
- Talk to the child about what they are watching / doing online.

Further guidance states -

- No access to social media.
- No mobile device with unrestricted access to the internet.

The Govt advice is for parents, but early years providers need to be aware of it because it will be included in the EYFS - and so they can plan children's days to avoid screen time, especially if parents ask them to stay off screens, so they can have the full allowance to use for their child at home.

Childcare.co.uk has further guidance for children who need screens to communicate or regulate to follow.

For older children, specifically regarding mobile phone bans in schools, DfE advise -

- **Medical exemptions** - schools should allow phones if needed for managing medical conditions, such as continuous glucose monitors for diabetes.
- **Individual circumstances** - schools are advised to allow flexibility for pupils with specific needs, including young carers.

There are some **exemptions for early years children** as well. The government guidance states that normal time limits should not be applied in the same way to:

- Screen-based assistive technologies.
- Communication aids
- Tools supporting accessibility, learning or regulation for disabled children.

The government's press release specifically states that, 'Time limits shouldn't apply in the same way for screen-based assistive technologies to support children with special educational needs and disabilities.'

Research suggests that screen-free settings are increasingly attractive to families. You can explain how you have made an intentional choice to benefit their child's education in a calmer, more attentive environment. You can sell it to parents as a focus on real childhood experiences.

However, it's not always easy - you will need to be more hands on with the children, more energetic and creative for those moments when the TV might just fill a gap or allow you to have a quick cup of tea if you are a lone worker. Your daily routines planning will need to be better, so you fill the day with intentional activities and stronger adult-child interactions.

How to become a screen free setting

Some early years settings are already screen free.

If you use screens with children and you want to become a screen-free early years setting it will mean defining your values and designing your environment and routines so that children (typically ages 0–5) learn and play without exposure to digital screens such as TVs, tablets, phones and computers.

Screen free settings do not -

- Put on the television after lunch for quiet time - they play music instead.
- Use screens to occupy the children while they take a moment - they play games together instead.
- Look up answers to children's questions on a computer - they use reference books instead.
- Use a tablet, computer or phone in front of the children - they set a good example.

Here are some ideas for ways you can make changes to become a screen free (or minimal screen use) early years setting -

Define your values - explain to parents why you're going screen-free. Most settings base this on -

- Latest Government screen time guidance.
- Child development research - for example, supporting children's development and language, attention and social skills.
- Emphasis on play-based learning where there is no time for screens.
- Allowing more time for other activities that you do together such as physical activity and real-world exploration.

You might want to read more about and align with approaches such as Montessori or Waldorf education, both of which limit or avoid screens in early years.

Audit and remove screen use

Look at where screens appear in your early years setting - for example, as background TV or music, tablets for games or 'quiet time' while babies and younger children are sleeping and perhaps staff phone or tablet use in front of children, sending photos and updating parents about their child's day.

You will then need to review and -

- Remove screens from child-access areas - if you have a television in a shared home / setting space, you can cover it with a blanket or sheet while you are working.
- Restrict staff phone use to emergencies and admin only, keeping phones out of sight of children.
- Replace any screen-based routines - for example, television after tea with quiet focused activities.

Replace is key - don't just remove screens and expect everything to carry on as normal. You will need a plan with strong alternatives, especially if you use screens to update parents during the day (they will need to understand this has to stop) or if children are used to settling with a screen after lunch (they will need alternative activity ideas). Some suggestions from screen-free settings include -

For engagement

- Storytelling, puppets, role play.
- Open-ended toys - for example, mark making, blocks, loose parts.
- Music, singing and musical instruments.

For calm / quiet time

- Books and cosy reading corners.
- Sensory play with sand, water, playdough etc.
- Guided relaxation or simple breathing.

For learning

- Real-world experiences - cooking, gardening.
- Outdoor exploration every day, supported by staff who want to be there.

For information sharing with parents - set aside time after the working day to update parents with information about their child's time in the setting. This is not always a practical solution, however, as it cuts into a childminder's precious personal and family time and settings would need to provide staff with protected planning / release time.

Train and align staff

That brings us nicely onto staff engagement because staff need to be on board with the changes. Talk to them about the new Govt guidance, go through the different documents that are available and ask them to read blogs or guidance and make sure they -

- Understand why screens are avoided.
- Know how to engage children without digital fallback.
- Feel confident supporting children's behaviour without screens.

You will need to remove screens from the childcare rooms, but this will be difficult if staff are not aligned with your thinking.

Communicate with parents

Talk to parents about the new screen time guidance from DfE and explain that you have decided to become a screen free setting so they can use the suggested screen time at home with their child.

You might also want to -

- Include the screen-free policy in your welcome pack.
- Explain benefits for their child's imagination, attention, sleep and language development.
- Reassure them children won't be missing out and they can still have an hour a day of screen time at home - it will be their decision.

Some parents might not be happy with the changes, especially if they want you to use educational apps with their child. Explain that they can do this at home, but in the setting, you are going to refer to books and play more closely with the children.

Embed the changes into your curriculum

Make 'we are a no screen setting' part of your identity and unique selling point when you are talking to new parents who are interested in using your service. You might also -

- Highlight the changes and impact on children's outcomes during Ofsted inspections.
- Include information about screen-free in your advertising and documentation.
- Reflect screen-free changes in planning with more hands-on, sensory and social activities.
- Link to frameworks like the Ofsted expectations around communication, physical development and personal, social and emotional development (the prime areas of learning).
- Audit what other technology you use in the setting and reflect on how it balances with your ethos - for example, cause and effect toys, noisy books, buttons and switches, remote controlled cars etc.
- Think about how you will share information about online safety with parents and teach children about staying safe online in the future.

Work with the children

The struggle to break the gadget reliance is going to be hard for some children - but let's think about why the struggle is happening. Gadgets, games, constant flicking between screens, fast moving programmes etc give a dopamine boost to the brain which means they provide instant gratification. They are predictable - the same brief moments of enjoyment and they are safe because they are familiar to the child. This means that while the child is engaged in these activities, they are calm, focused and regulated - less likely to lash out physically or verbally and less prone to dysregulation.

An immediate stop to screen time will be a huge shock to the system. Experts advise a gradual reduction over the next few weeks, working with parents to reinforce the new rules at the same time. You can use visual timers and give verbal warnings to help them understand their screen time will be stopping soon and provide alternatives. Think, for a moment, about the function of the screen use. Why does the child rely on it so much? It might be for the sensory input or predictable routine, the way to overwhelm or a special interest. When you know the function, you can provide different activities that meet the same need.

Similarly, an abrupt ending to gadget use - stop now, put it down, come here, we need to go etc - can cause some children real distress because it feels like the only thing keeping their brain calm is being taken away from them. If a child has a meltdown, it's not just behaviour - look beyond the behaviour to understand what is happening and you will see a genuine feeling of loss and a struggle with the transition. A sharp reduction in screen time can lead to dysregulation, anxiety or behavioural distress.

It can help to give clear warnings rather than sudden removal - a countdown to the time when the child needs to stop using the device with a visual timer or countdown fingers. In many situations, this will help to prepare the child's brain for the transition rather than putting it in fight, flight or fear mode. You might also give the child a clear way forwards - remember we cannot use our device at mealtimes anymore and we are going to eat snack / lunch now or remember we have to play outside for 1 hour a day (or whatever timescale you have agreed) and we cannot use the device outside so everyone needs to get ready to move outside now. Children manage transitions better when they know what is happening next.

The next activity - whether it's mealtime, outside play or going on the school run needs to have value. It needs to be engaging for the child - for example, sensory play, mark making or favourite toys. That way, you are not removing everything the child enjoys doing - you are replacing one activity with another. Experts advise that the best language to use for these transition times is 'now' and 'next' or 'first' and 'then' - first you have 5 minutes to finish your game and then we are going to play with the sand. Keep your language predictable and structured so the child learns that this is how next steps are presented.

How do you manage a child who is used to having free access their gadget all day now the new 1-hour rules have been introduced? You will need to speak to parents and explain the new rules - it is likely they will want their child to have the full hour of screen time at home, so you will need to become a screen free setting for them, which will add its own challenges if your current daily routines are based around screens to allow you to get things done, regulate children after mealtimes or during transitions etc.

If you can negotiate some of the time for the child to use in your setting, you can set a limit at the start - you have 10 minutes and here is the timer - the rest of your time will be spent on the device at home. This is what your parent has agreed. Boundaries work best before emotions - so be consistent and set the limit. If the child becomes distressed, giving them one more or a little longer will only make things more difficult next time. You might need to mentally prepare yourself for upset at the start because it is a different routine for the child, but if their brain learns that crying gives them more time doing what their brain craves, keep your boundaries strong. Consistency reduces meltdowns long-term, even if it feels worse short-term.

Co-regulation with the key person in the setting is so important. When the child is upset you should acknowledge their grief - you can see they are sad, you know it's hard to stop but this is what is happening next. Don't say too much - the child cannot listen when they are in the middle of a meltdown because their brain isn't able to process. When you start using the same language consistently, every day, they will quickly learn that you mean what you say.

Will there be any exceptions?

Will your setting allow limited exceptions? - for example:

- Assistive technology for children with special educational needs.
- Watching active storytelling / books on YouTube.
- Looking up the names of birds you can hear in the garden on an app.
- Allowing a new child a short video to settle them before they start the day.
- Staff documentation - sending photos, observations and updates to parents.

If you are going to allow exceptions, you will need to define them or the 'limited screen time use' might slip.

The latest Government screen time guidance is clear - minimum interactive / supervised screen time for under 2s and only up to 1 hour a day for 2–5-year-olds.

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

While these might seem at first reading to be good aims, especially considering research which suggests that young children are spending too long unsupervised online, early years practitioners have raised concerns that some children need their gadgets with them at all times.

Children who carry a tablet or dedicated device to communicate are often using Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC). These devices help children who have difficulty speaking or being understood. Groups of children who might use them include some children with -

- Autism spectrum disorder - especially non-speaking or minimally speaking autistic children.
- Cerebral palsy.
- Down syndrome.
- Apraxia of speech.
- Selective mutism.
- Genetic or neurological conditions that affect speech and language.
- Children with acquired brain injuries or complex communication needs.

When thinking about children who carry a tablet with them constantly, the 1-hour screen time limit for 2–5-year-old children will likely affect them more for many reasons, for example -

- You are not just asking them to give up something they rely on - for some children, you are asking them to leave something rewarding and regulating or something they rely on to communicate - to do something that might feel unnecessary or challenging.
- A lot of early years (and older) children struggle with challenge - why should they take it on when there are so many easier things to do?

You must also consider your own wellbeing - you want to enrich children's time in the setting by removing screen time, but this must not be at the expense of finding a healthy balance to your days.

Supportive strategies

What other **regulation tools** might help the child? They might need to use sensory tools like weighted blankets, fiddle toys or chewy items and you could set up a calming space for them. Visual or repetitive toys like light up toys and spinning objects might provide a similar input. Some children might listen to audiobooks or music instead and others will respond well to cause and effect toys.

Does the child enjoy **social stories**? Books about what to do now and next can help them to understand that the option to have their screen in the setting has gone and they need to find another activity. However, if the child does not engage with the alternative activity and tries to negotiate with you, you need to stay strong and consistent. The gadget has gone now, that was the agreement with parents, so they have some time on it at home. If they don't want to snack - meal - activity you have set up for them, that is fine, but the gadget will not come back.

Close working partnerships with parents will be essential, so you have a shared plan. Will all the child's screen time be at home from now onwards? Giving it for a short time and then taking it away could cause more distress than not having it at all - however, leaving it in the car in the morning could be overwhelming for parents, so this will need to be discussed.

You might also need to discuss with parents whether some children need **reasonable adjustments** due to their additional needs. There has to be some flexibility for SEND children and a strict 1-hour limit might not suit their needs. Working with other agencies and professionals will enable you to take their advice and adjust the child's graduated approach and / or care plan to allow exceptions for them, especially if they need targeted help with regulation while in the group setting.

At the same time, build **new regulation routines** with the child when they are calm and receptive to suggestions. We cannot watch screens at mealtimes anymore, but we can read books instead; we cannot have the screen for longer than 10 minutes, but we can play with the sensory toys; we cannot have a gadget while we are outside, but we have set up your favourite activity in the tray. With support from the child's other agencies / professionals, you might be advised to offer these options alongside screen use to start with so you can gradually build up a list of toys and games the child enjoys using as alternatives.

However, to start with you need to prepare for dysregulation and increased emotional responses. Focus on co-regulation rather than consequences and ensure the child is in a space where they cannot hurt themselves, you or other children in the setting. Stay calm, consistent and reassuring to protect regulation where possible while building new skills.

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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