CareWorks
Hands on Health - Care that Works

CareWorks' Employee Wellness Programme

Children and Screen Time: Finding a Healthy Balance

In today's digital world, screens are part of everyday life—from school assignments and online learning to entertainment and socialising. While technology offers many benefits, too much screen time can affect a child's development, health, and behaviour.

For working parents in South Africa, managing children's screen habits can be challenging. But creating healthy boundaries is possible—and it starts with awareness and practical steps.

What Counts as Screen Time?

Screen time includes any time spent using devices such as:

- TVs and smart TVs
- Smartphones and tablets
- Computers and laptops
- Gaming consoles

It's important to differentiate between **passive screen time** (like watching cartoons) and **interactive or educational screen time** (like learning apps or video calls with family).

How Much Is Too Much?

Here are general guidelines from the World Health Organization and South African child health experts:

- **Under 2 years**: Avoid all screen time (except video calls)
- **Ages 2–5**: No more than 1 hour per day
- **Ages 6–12**: No more than 1–2 hours of recreational screen time per day
- **Teens**: Encourage balance, with screen limits and regular offline activities

Note: Screen time for school and homework is separate, but still needs to be managed with breaks and posture awareness.

Why Too Much Screen Time Can Be Harmful

Excessive screen time can lead to:

- **Sleep problems**
- **Poor concentration and lower academic performance**
- **Delayed social and emotional development**
- **Eye strain and headaches**
- **Physical inactivity and increased risk of obesity**
- **Increased exposure to cyberbullying, online predators, and harmful content**

For younger children, too much screen use may also affect **language development** and **attention span**.

Signs Your Child May Be Spending Too Much Time on Screens

- They become irritable or withdrawn when not allowed to use devices
- They resist non-screen activities like playing outside or reading
- They have trouble sleeping
- They rush through homework to get back to screens
- Family time is interrupted by phones or tablets

Tips for Managing Screen Time at Home

🕓 **1. Set Clear Limits**

Create daily screen time rules that are age-appropriate and consistent. Use apps or parental controls to help enforce them if needed.

🧩 **2. Encourage Alternative Activities**

Offer engaging screen-free options like puzzles, drawing, reading, baking, or outdoor play. Help children rediscover the joy of being unplugged.

🍽️ **3. No Screens at Mealtimes and Bedtime**

Make mealtimes and the hour before bed a screen-free zone. This improves communication, digestion, and sleep.

👯 **4. Be a Role Model**

Children copy what they see. Show them what healthy screen habits look like—put your phone away during quality family time.

👁️ 5. Know What They're Watching

Use kid-friendly platforms, check age ratings, and watch with your child when possible. Talk about what they're seeing and learning.

⏸️ 6. Take Screen Breaks

Encourage a break every 30–60 minutes to rest eyes and stretch the body—especially during homework or gaming.

Cultural Considerations in South Africa

In many South African homes, especially in urban areas, screens may be used to keep children occupied while parents are busy or working. While this is understandable, it's important to **balance screen time with human interaction**, storytelling, physical activity, and traditional play.

In rural areas, where screen access may be limited, it's still important to guide children on responsible use when devices are introduced.

How Employers Can Support Working Parents

As part of your employee wellness programme:

- Share parenting resources and tips on managing screen time
- Offer flexible work hours so parents can engage more with their children
- Encourage tech-free team-building events or wellness days
- Provide referrals to child development experts or counsellors if needed

---

In Closing

Technology isn't the enemy—but **how we use it matters**. With structure, awareness, and support, South African families can help children develop healthy screen habits that support their growth, creativity, and well-being.

Let's guide our children to use screens wisely—not as a substitute for life, but as a tool that enhances it.

Need Help or More Information?

- **Childline South Africa** (Advice & Support): 0800 055 555
- **South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG)**: 0800 567 567
- **Parenting Apps:** Try free screen-time management apps like Family Link or Screen Time

- **Community Clinics and Schools** often offer parenting workshops and support groups