

# Play Matters

## Play and Digital Technology



### Briefing Sheet 1

#### PLAY

Children have an innate urge to play from birth right through to teenage years. Freely chosen play (play which is directed by children) is critically important for all children as part of their everyday lives and access to quality, unstructured play is known to help improve children's overall health, well-being and development.

#### CHANGING WORLD OF PLAY

There are many reasons as to why children's play experiences today differ from those that we may have experienced as children; increased traffic, less natural space, concerns around safety and less time for play. Today's increasingly connected world also means that children are exposed to digital technology from a much younger age.

#### PLAY AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY

It is increasingly evident and accepted that digital technology is now part of our everyday lives and in our ever connected world it is becoming harder for parents to steer children away from electronic screens and devices. From a very young age children are exposed to iPads, tablets, smartphones, gaming consoles and online environments. On average, time spent online in the UK amongst pre-schoolers is 4 hours a day, 5-6 hours a day for the over five's and the average 12-15 year old can spend up to 20 hours a week online<sup>1</sup>.

#### SCREEN TIME – GOOD OR BAD?

There are varying debates about how good or bad technology is for children and many parents often question if their children are missing out on normal social interactions or have increased sedentary behaviour because of digital technology. Others would say that playing with technology affords their child opportunities to learn and have fun. There is no definitive research on the debate, however as a rule – parents should manage

children's time on-line in the same way they would do off-line and good advice is to abide by the old rule 'everything in moderation!'

#### SCREEN TIME – TOP TIPS

**Play Matters** and children should be afforded time for unstructured, self-directed play every day.

**Limit screen time as much as possible;** the younger the child the less time they should be on devices. Set limits and apply these limits consistently and be mindful of how you use digital devices (i.e. as a bribe, appeaser or pacifier).

**Keep times and areas as technology free zones;** such as mealtimes or before bedtime, when outdoors, or in bedrooms. Consider using screens within family spaces only (i.e. no TVs or computers in children's bedrooms).

**Don't be tempted to use screens to distract children or to keep them quiet;** talk to your children, play games or look at a book instead.

**Set a good example;** digital technology is very much a part of our adult life too and parents should abide by the same rules – limit screen time and don't be distracted by your phone or iPad – interacting, talking and playing with your children is much more fun!

**Join in your children's screen time;** just like off-line activity children will sometimes need adults to support their play. Interaction is key, join in online activity by engaging and talking to children. Passive screen time should be avoided especially for babies and toddlers.

**Provide choices;** remember the amazing play opportunities that children have around the home

1. <https://www.ofcom.org.uk/about-ofcom/latest/media/media-releases/2016/online-overtakes-tv-as-kids-top-pastime>

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and within communities. Encourage children to play both indoors and out and keep taking those little steps towards finding a balance between screens and other playful opportunities.

### WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH TELL US?

Research around the impact of children's usage of digital technology varies however what is known is that the usage of and time spent on screens by children is on the increase.

Many experts are concerned that too much screen time may be harmful for babies and children. The professional body for paediatricians, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health, says that children are exposed to screens for longer amounts of time than ever before and that widespread access to smartphones, tablets, games consoles, TVs and laptops is causing concern amongst doctors in the UK and internationally.<sup>2</sup>



It is important to remember that to support good brain development especially in the first three years children need as much time as possible positively interacting with those around them and access to a wide variety of play

experiences. Babies and toddlers need opportunities to explore the world and to participate in lots of physical activity. Passive screen time should always be avoided.

Time spent on screens takes away from time spent crawling, walking, climbing, interacting, playing or exploring. Physical play is needed throughout childhood and it contributes to children's mental health and emotional development.

Children of all ages need the opportunity to interact with others, which is crucial for language development and social skills. Children learn best through two way communication.

Screen time affects sleep and using screens last thing at night (playing online games, watching TV) may affect sleep quality. Screens should ideally be kept outside of children's bedrooms and not used in the run up to bedtime.



Older children should be encouraged to leave phones and devices outside of their bedrooms at night so that they are not disturbed or tempted to check for notifications throughout the night. Sleep is crucial for the developing adolescent brain and lack of sleep is often associated with lower mood and depression.

Having a TV on continually (in the background) may have an effect on children's listening skills and may impact on the interaction between the adult and the child.

Be aware of how much screen time you engage in at home. Children will follow by example. Consider turning off TVs and screens at mealtimes and at sociable times throughout the day.

Digital technology can have both positive and negative effects and children need adult support to navigate and stay safe online.

There are, of course, positive opportunities for using digital technology as children get older. When using apps or online games look for those which are age appropriate, interactive and playful.

2. <https://www.babycentre.co.uk/a25006035/is-screen-time-good-or-bad-for-babies-and-children#ixzz5FTnBhyRg>