



HOW TO TRACK YOUR CHILD'S TIME SPENT IN FRONT OF THE SCREEN

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The ever-increasing presence and availability of digital technologies today makes the parental role both easier and more difficult. All parents sometimes find it easier to give their child a cell phone or tablet to calm them down, rather than to deal more seriously with them (e.g., dedicate time to free play together). A lot of obligations at home, tiredness after returning from work or just trying to free up a moment for yourself, can lead to too often allowing children to spend time in front of the screen, but in this way, we only make it easier for ourselves to perform the role of parent. For the sake of long-term effects, it is important that parents try to minimize such situations - however difficult it may be at times. This will make it easier to set healthy limits in the use of digital technologies as the child grows older.

And it is precisely the issue of setting healthy limits in the use of mobile phones, playing games, watching video content on YouTube (even age-appropriate cartoons) that troubles an increasing number of parents.

In 2016 and 2017, the [Zagreb Child and Youth Protection Center](#) conducted the first national survey on children's exposure to screens. 655 participants from rural and urban areas from different parts of Croatia, selected by convenience sampling, took part in the research. Participants were parents or other persons who take care of the child, who filled out a series of questionnaires through which researchers learned about the habits of children and parents in using modern technologies and the development of the child. In 80% of cases, the questionnaires were filled out by mothers, in 19% of cases by fathers, and in 1% of cases by



grandmothers, grandfathers or other adults close to the child aged between 22 and 59, most of them in their mid-30s.

Results showed that although 87% of parents spend more than 4 hours with their child on a weekday, only every second parent is satisfied with the amount of time they spend together. Parents would therefore like to spend more time with their children. However, it's not all about the amount of time spent with the child, the question is how much quality time is spent together.

Every third parent believes that the quality of time they spend with their children is impaired by the work they bring home, while 40% of parents believe that the quality of time together is negatively affected by the stress caused by work. **About 50% of parents give their children small screens to keep them entertained and occupied.** More than a third of parents believe that electronic devices are useful for children to learn, and some parents believe that children will fit in better with their peers if they use modern technologies. Similar results were obtained in a qualitative study by Martin-Biggers and associates conducted on a sample of 133 parents (2015). Results showed following reasons because of which parents' resort to giving their children "screens":

- Lack of affordable alternative entertainment for children
- Exhaustion of parents with business and household obligations
- Parents' bad mood (e.g., due to financial burden)

Additionally in [Croatian study](#), every tenth parent never or rarely tells their child what they can watch. Some parents set rules only for the TV, and some only for other screens, and the rules usually concern the total allowed time of use. Some parents reward the child with extra minutes in front of the screen, and some punish the child by eliminating minutes in front of small screens. There are fewer rules regarding the content that the child watches/uses on small screens, which is often much more important than the total time.

Almost every fifth parent declares that they never or rarely watch content together with their child. After the child sees some content on TV, a fifth of parents never or only sometimes talk to the child about what they watched. Talking to the child is very important. Through open questions, you can encourage critical thinking and support the child in thinking and making his own choices. For example, while watching television programs or movies together, it is advisable to try to discuss:

- what is the plot, how do the children feel about what is happening?



- what would happen in real life if they behaved as the negative characters in the movies might behave
- emphasize to the children that the people who appear in the movies are actors and that special effects make us think that what we see really happened, but it didn't. Here, it is important to take care that children do not distinguish reality from fiction. Not all news is good for children, and some information in the news could upset or worry them.

If parents decided to give their children a mobile phone already in preschool age, then they should choose quality websites and other media content with it, and encourage their child to follow educational content, as on the internet as well as on television. Some of following recommendations may be useful for parents:

- with children under 8 years old, DO NOT watch news programs, while with children from 9 to 12 years old, you can watch the news, but together with parents, to they explain to them what is happening in the news, especially those that could be disturbing (e.g., the war in Ukraine)
- look for those television programs and films that give children the opportunity to discover new things such as new places, more life, people, ideas, topics, and cultures that they would not otherwise encounter.
- films or television programs with good character roles can also have a positive effect on children. Good roles or characters are those who behave in an appropriate and acceptable way, so that children can learn from them how to behave in everyday life.
- some films can open children's eyes to respect diversity - ethnic, religious or some other, with which they were not familiar until then, which is certainly positive, and some applications and internet sites can stimulate their creativity.

The Erasmus+ cooperation through project STEPin aims to support parents to deal with excessive technology use and the online habits of their children. A key goal is to prevent the problems from occurring in the first place, whilst the collaborative partners are in the process of designing an intervention programme which will benefit both children and adolescents and their parents and families in terms of adolescent technology use. Parents will be provided with targeted upskilling programmes based on an evidence-based competence framework developed by the international collaboration team. The STEPin project aims to support parents and families in supporting their children to foster healthy and mindful technology use and prevent



problems from developing as a consequence of problematic technology use, and also to help parents in building healthy relationship with their children.

There are various ways you can help your child maintain a healthy balance between online and offline activities for the benefit of their health and well-being. Here are just some of the ways to monitor and maintain healthy levels of your child's screen time:

- **Teach them from your own example** - reduce your own time spent in front of the screen ("what children see; children do").
- **Be involved** - come up with joint activities that you will enjoy. For example, playing board games on weekends, afternoon walks, going to the playground or the park every day or several times a week.
- **Plan screen-free activities** – for example, draw together, plan a day trip, nature walk, bike ride, board games, etc.
- **(Try) not to give your child a mobile device during outdoor activities** (e.g., while walking, going out for a drink, etc.) - instead, you can, for example, bring their favorite toy to give to the child in case of boredom or your need for a "minute" to yourself.
- **Agree daily limits** on the time they can spend in front of the screen - the goal is to set healthy limits and acquire healthy habits for the child.
- **Start by gradually reducing the time they can spend in front of the screen** - in this way, you will reduce the likelihood of resistance in the child.
- **Provide TECH-FREE time and space at home** - for example, you can introduce a rule about not using modern technologies (e.g., mobile phones, laptops) 1-2 hours before going to bed or introduce a rule about not using mobile phones at the dining table.
- **Include the child in an agreement about the rules for using the screen** - let the child just propose a part of the day when he can use his cell phone, games and the like, and within the agreed time. When the child participates in defining the rules, it is more likely that the agreement will be followed.
- **Use applications for access management** (so-called parental control applications) - in this way, you will be able to disable the installation of inappropriate applications, the use of applications that may lead to additional costs or limit the time of Internet use during the day. You can find one such application at the following link:
<https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=master.app.screentime&hl=en&gl=US>



Resources:

1. Martin-Biggers, J., Alleman, G., Hongu, N., Worobey, J. & Byrd-Bredbenner, C. (2015). Beliefs and Barriers to Limiting Screentime Behaviors by Parents of Preschoolers. *Journal of Nutrition Education and Behaviour*, 47(4), DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jneb.2015.04.161>
2. Zagreb Child and Youth Protection Center (2017). SCREEN TIME: The first national survey of the Polyclinic on the exposure of preschool children to all screens. Available at: <https://www.poliklinika-djeca.hr/aktualno/rijec-ravnateljice/screen-time-prvo-nacionalno-istrazivanje-poliklinike-o-izlozenosti-predskolske-djece-svim-ekranima-2/>

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