Is YOUR child at risk? Warning over toddlers and children using too much technology

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TODDLERS should not be watching any computers or televisions and children under five should have any viewing limited to an hour a day, parents have been warned.

The use of 'digital nannies' such as iPads and laptops for hours each day is risking the health and development of young children, according to a leading child psychiatrist.

And the UK should follow the USA where doctors have halved their previous recommended limit of two hours a day of screen time for children aged between two and five after reviewing new evidence.

Child and adolescent psychiatrist Dr Hayley van Zwanenberg, of the Priory Clinic group, said: "The ubiquitous use of smart phones amongst adults is now also the case among pre-school children.

"But there is ample evidence to demonstrate the negative effects of screen time on older children, particularly on those using screens for more than three hours a day; these include structural and functional brain imaging changes, increases in emotional distress and higher rates of anxiety and depressive symptoms, as well as lack of sleep.

"The pre-school years are particularly vital for developing non-verbal skills that young people miss completely when on screens.

"Although research is limited currently in the pre-school age group, I would advise parents to take even greater precautions in this age group than in school age children, as the findings in older children are likely to be similar for younger children and will probably be magnified.

"Screen time stimulates the 'reward centre' of pre-school children's brain (the nucleus accumbens), acting as a digital drug, so they will want more and more of it but young children should be active, investigating life in the real world and having lots of social interaction to develop healthily, physically and mentally."

Recent research by the American Academy of Paediatrics found too much use of iPhones, iPads, laptops and television was damaging children's sleep, fitness levels and ability to socialise with others.

10 common health myths

The Academy said very young children needed human interaction to learn, although slightly older ones could benefit from the occasional educational programme.

It added that children who watched excessive amounts of television were more likely to become obese, partly because they were influenced by food advertising and partly because they over-eat while slumped in front of the set because they are less aware of when they are full.

It also cited recent studies showing that children exposed to the blue light emitted by screens in the evening slept less well than others.

The Academy said: "Multiple developmental and health concerns continue to exist for young children using all forms of digital media to excess."Evidence is sufficient to recommend time limitations on digital media use for children two to five years to no more than one hour per day to allow children ample time to engage in other activities important to their health and development and to establish media viewing habits associated with lower risk of obesity later in life.

"In addition, encouraging parents to change to educational content and engage with their children around technology will allow children to reap the most benefit from what they view."

Parents should ensure their offspring watch high quality educational programmes or Apps and ban screens at meals.

The US experts also urged parents to cut down on their use of iPhones and iPads so their children did not copy their behaviour, which could otherwise increase conflict between parents and their offspring.