

HOW MUCH TIME SHOULD MY CHILD SPEND STARING AT SCREENS?



Screen time use is one of those big questions of parenting in the modern world, most likely because it is impossible to avoid screens on a day-to-day basis. Even before your child walks or talks, they are exposed to screens in their homes, taxi rides, or hairdressers, and look into the cameras of countless phones to take selfies with their many loving relatives. The question of your child looking at screens is not a matter of ‘if’ but ‘how long’.

The problem is that for large parts of your child’s life – when they are at school or with their friends – you cannot control whether they are looking at screens. It can also be difficult to go screen-free within the home. Read these six points to help you find an in-between that works for you and your child.



I. WHAT ARE THE EFFECTS OF SCREEN TIME?

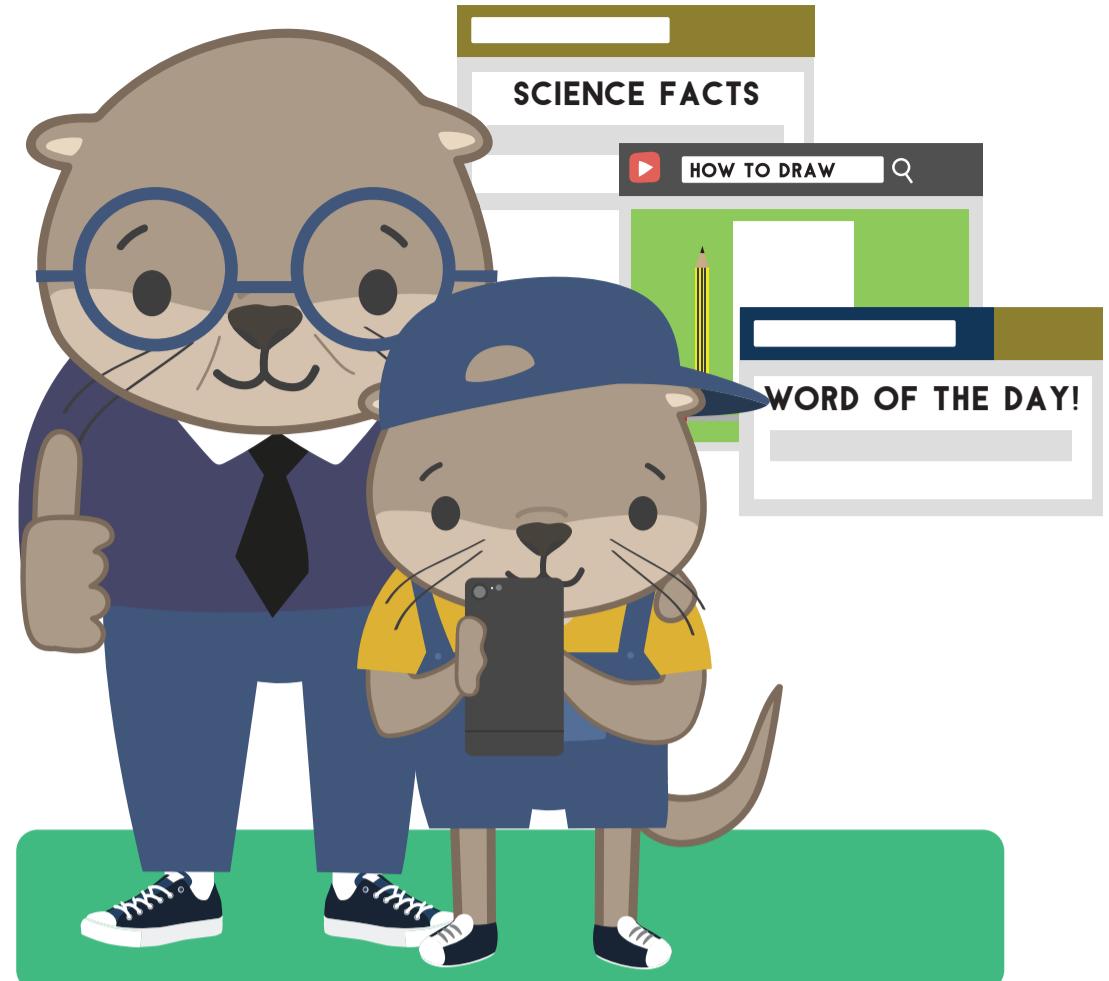
Before you can decide how much screen time is right for your child, it is important to understand the effects of too much screen time. There is a lot of evidence that links too much screen time with negative effects on the mind and body, such as poorer memory and losing sleep. As your child multi-tasks homework with scrolling through Instagram, he may lose his ability to stay engaged with tasks for longer periods of time. As she watches TV shows through the weekend, she may not develop as much patience and have less self-control when making choices.

Brain-imaging research also shows that glowing screens, like your phone or iPad, stimulate the brain's pleasure centre, literally making you feel better and happier (Kardaras, 2016). This is what makes screens so addictive even for adults – this effect is then heightened for kids who cannot cope with that level of mental stimulation.



There is also the problem of online connections. Early experiences of interacting with others, like playing with other kids at the playground, are crucial to developing the parts of a child's brain that understand empathy and interpersonal skills. If a child does not have access to touch and interaction from a young age – which becomes increasingly likely as games and movies act as comfort and entertainment – these areas won't develop as much. As your child grows, there is also the threat that social media takes the place of real-life connections.

On the other hand, screen time is not all bad – how else would we explain why we use our devices every day to do so much? Playing games and watching shows can be easy entertainment for an active child and tired parent, and have been shown to be helpful at reducing a child's anxiety during high-stress situations. Some even teach your child valuable lessons, from vocabulary lessons to softer skills, like creativity.



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Our friends at Montfort Care also suggested that children can use screens to bond too - instead of replacing their real-life friendships with online ones, they supplement them with opportunities from their screens. They consume and create media together to bond with their friends. After all, playing games like Fortnite with friends is not that different from the "catching" you might have played in your childhood. Screen time use also involves important avenues for communication. Your child can Skype and message their friends when they are apart, but also let you know if they are going to be late coming home or send you a funny meme to connect with you.

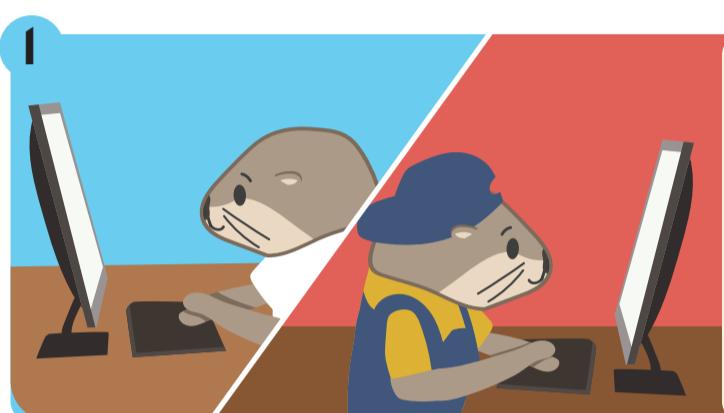


As parents, we need to think about these pros and cons, then decide what is right for our family. As a general guide, the American Academy of Paediatrics suggests limiting screen time to no screen time (except for video calls) for kids under 2, one hour per day of high-quality programmes for children between the ages of 2 and 5, and consistent limits on screen time for children over 6.

2. IS MY CHILD ADDICTED?

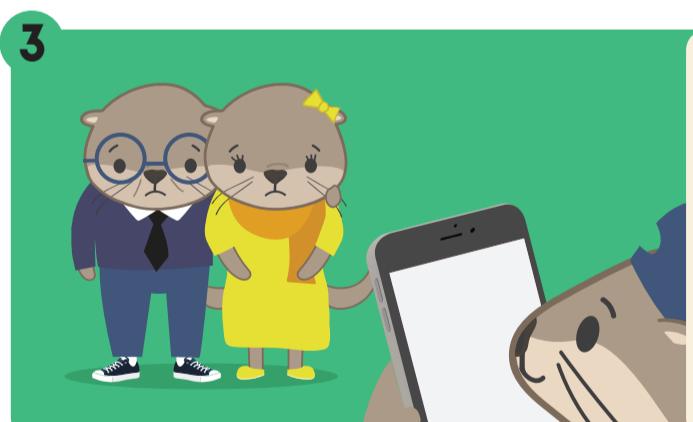
People use the word addicted quite loosely these days – I’m addicted to Netflix, my teenager is addicted to Instagram, my toddler is addicted to Baby Shark, and so on. However, screen time addiction is a serious problem, and it is not defined by just the number of hours that someone spends online.

According to American Psychiatric Association, Internet addiction is the excessive use of the Internet to the point that it gets in the way of everyday life, sleep, and relationships. Here are a few things to remember:



There is a difference between spending 5 hours a day on a computer as part of schoolwork, particularly in tech-heavy courses and curriculum, and skipping school to spend 5 hours gaming.

Falling asleep and waking up to their phones every day is problematic – both for their eyes and their ability to get restful sleep – but not necessarily addiction. However, if your child spends days unable to get sleep because they are constantly preoccupied with their phones, that may be a cause for concern.



It is okay for your child to occasionally chat or Skype with classmates or friends after school, especially for schoolwork. But you might want to pay more attention if your child is unable to hold conversations with you because they are preoccupied with their phones. This could be a sign of addiction (Leung, 2014).

Children who suffer from Internet addiction tend to have symptoms of other mental health issues such as depression and anxiety. This might show up as boredom with routine tasks, extreme mood swings, poor personal hygiene, or rapid changes in their weight (Young, 2004). If you spot any concerning signs, you can get professional help through one of the services listed on our website at www.betterinternet.sg.

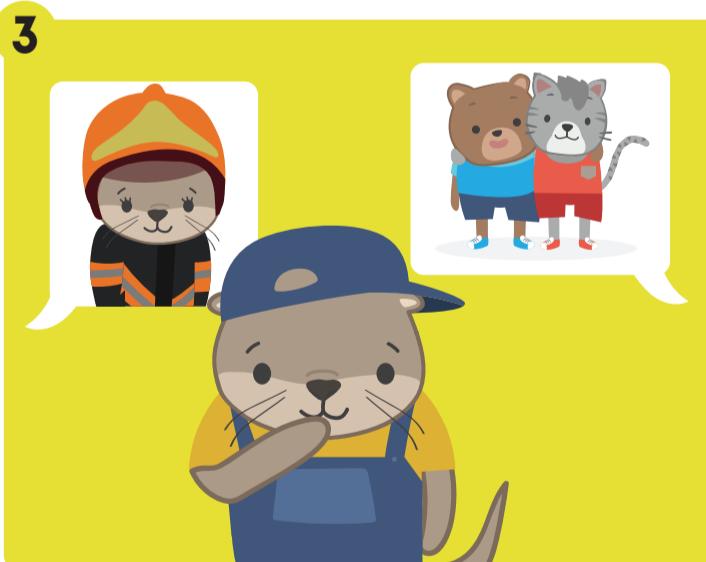
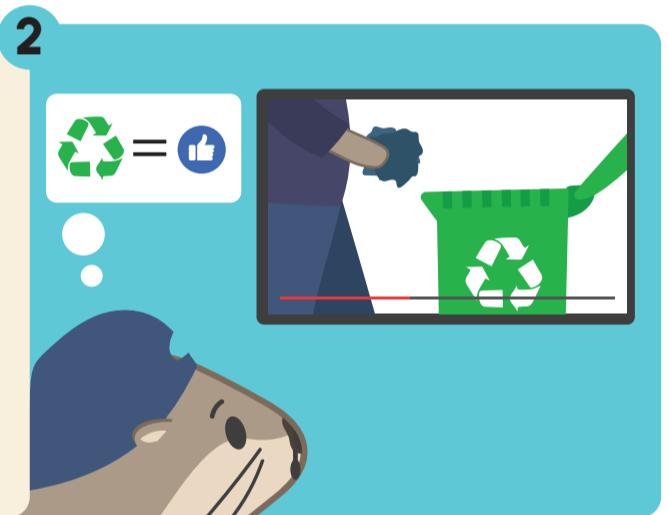
3. DOES QUALITY MATTER MORE THAN QUANTITY?

Chances are, you would be happier if your child spent all her time reading books instead of gaming the day away. But what if she was reading online? The quality of the content your child consumes matters because it is still worse to have too much bad content than too much of the good stuff. Here are some questions that help you decide whether something is good for your child:



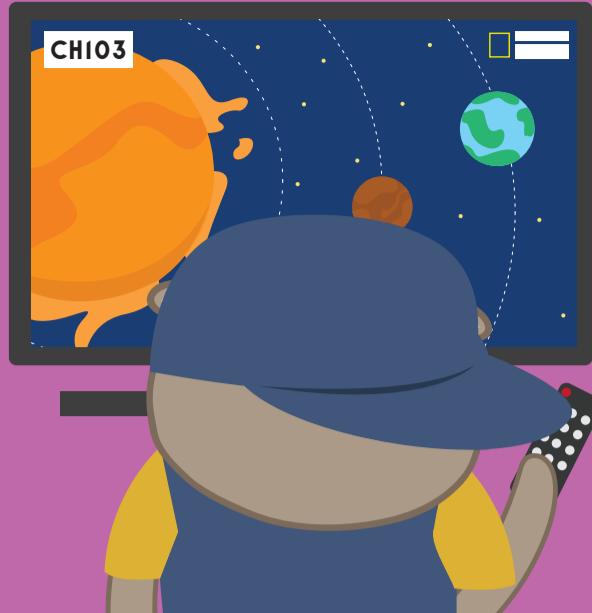
CHECK THE AGE RATINGS: Look for content that is appropriate for your child's age, which is often indicated on the game or movie through different ratings, like G or PG13.

FIND THE RIGHT CHARACTER TRAITS: It is important that the characters in a show have the type of positive traits you would want to see in your child, since people – even adults – learn and copy a lot of the things they see on media. Find characters that try their best, pick themselves up after failure, and care for people around them.



ENCOURAGE DIVERSITY: Try to avoid media that stereotypes people, especially in terms of gender or race. Instead, seek media that respects different opinions and avoids stereotypes – which show women as firefighters, men open with their feelings, and diversity in the characters in screen, even on cartoons!

4



LOOK FOR THE TRUTH: If the media takes place in the real world, make sure the content is as truthful as possible. Games should not make it seem like blowing up cars is legal, even if the hero needs to do it to escape the bad guys, and movies should be clear that the Earth goes around the sun – or your child will get very confused in geography in a few years.

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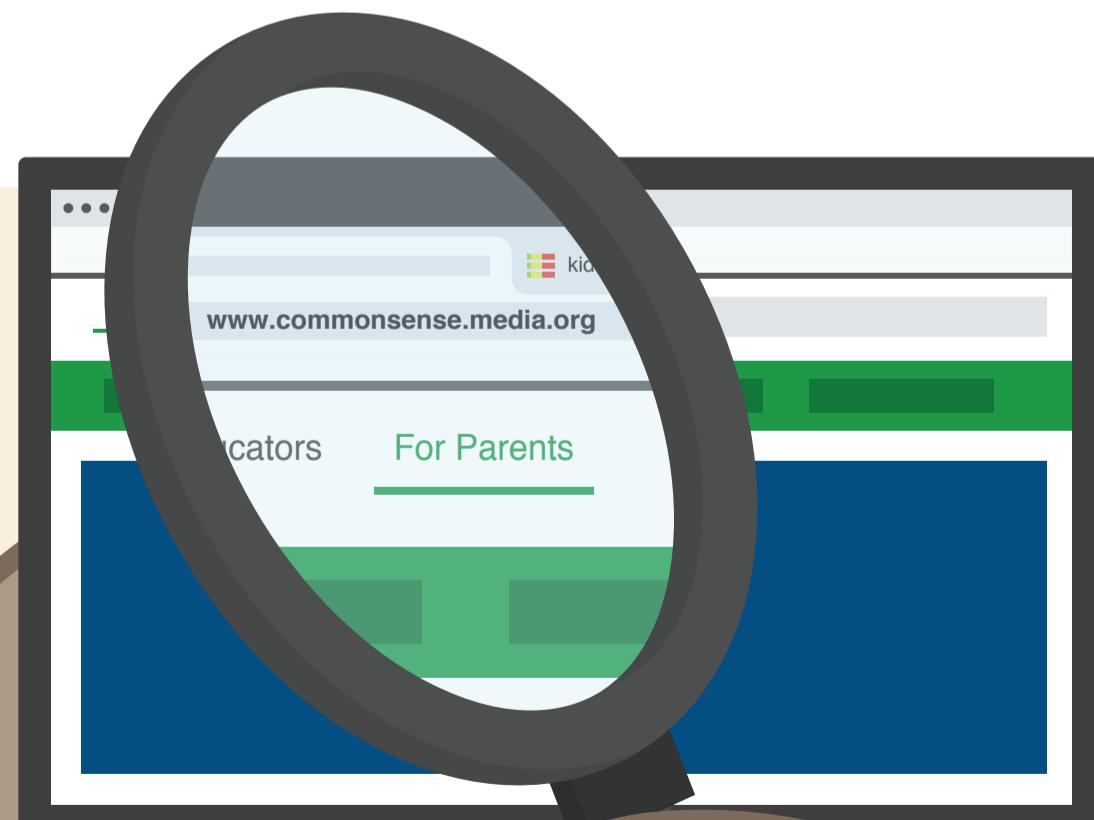


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REFLECT YOUR FAMILY VALUES: Your child finds different types of values in the media they look at. Figure out which values are important to you and your family, and that you want to instil in your child, so that you can look out for these in media too.

You can find reviews of popular shows, movies, and games before your child watches them on sites like CommonSenseMedia.org and Kids-In-Mind.com.

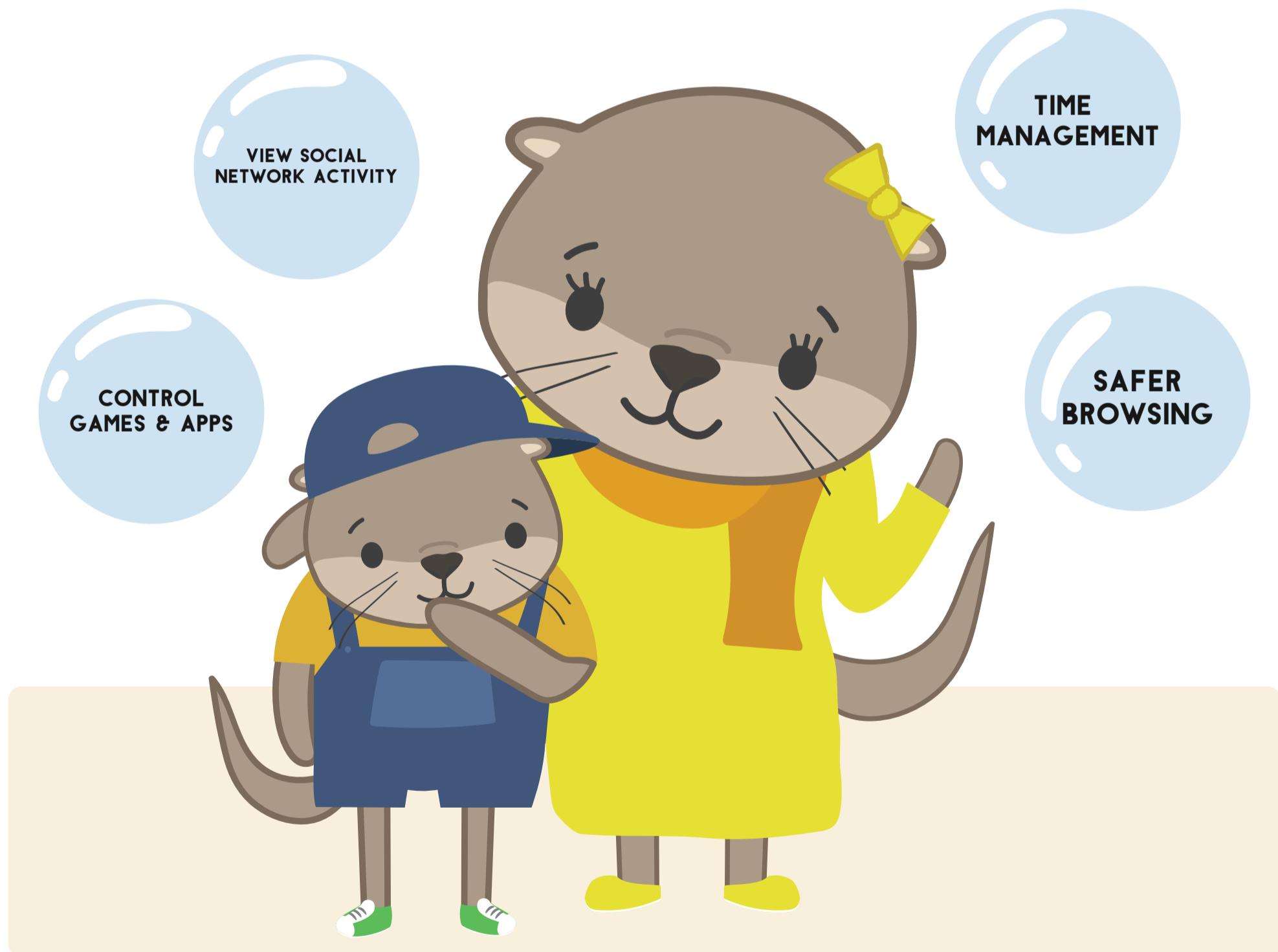


4. SHOULD I SET UP SOME RULES?

One solution to the problem of too much screen time use is to set up a screen time ‘contract’ and make it clear what you think works for the family. Avoid treating screen time like a reward for good behaviour. This can make it seem like a treat – and ice cream always tastes better when you know you can’t always have it. Instead, set up the contract after having a discussion with your child about what you both agree on. Go into the discussion with your non-negotiables, but keep the conversation open to their input as well.

To see what this contract might look like, flip to the back of this handbook.

Additionally, you can also use parental control apps like Kaspersky Safe Kids, Tittle for Parents, or Screen Time on your Apple devices. Set up the app on your child’s phone and sync it to your own, and you can track where they are, how much time they spend on an app, and even remotely restrict their access to data. Explain why you are using these measures and be prepared to tweak your rules as your child grows, or tighten them if your child is unable to show appropriate self-control.



At the end of the day, these measures should not be used to control your kids, but to teach them how to set boundaries on their own screen time use. As they grow older, this discipline will help them manage their devices on their own so that you can take a step back.

5. WHAT DO I NEED TO DO?

As a parent, one of the most important things to do when it comes to screen time is be a good role model. Children learn a lot watching their parents, especially when they are younger. If you think your child should be able to control how long they use their devices and stick to limits, you must show them that it is possible – if you manage to look like you aren't struggling, you might even convince them that it's easy. Here are some ways to set a better example:

1



Put your phone away during meal time to mark out screen-free times – this is also a great time to catch up with your child on their day.

2

Leave your phone behind when you go for outings. You might not get any photos, but your child will know they can have fun phone-free.



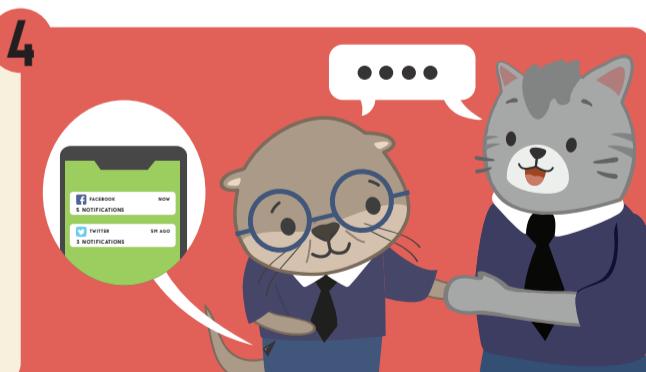
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Keep your devices outside the bedroom when you go to sleep so your child understands that good sleep always comes first.

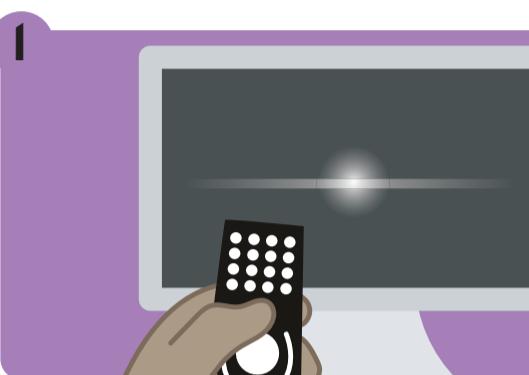
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If you get a message or social media update while talking to someone, finish the conversation before checking your phone. Make it clear that people come first.



6. SHOULD I JUST GO SCREEN-FREE?

You might feel like the dangers of screen time are so strong – the slope to addiction so slippery – that you should go screen-free until your child is a lot older. However, given how integrated our lives are with technology in Singapore, this may be challenging, much less a practical choice. However, you can take steps to change the way your family uses these screens on a daily basis.



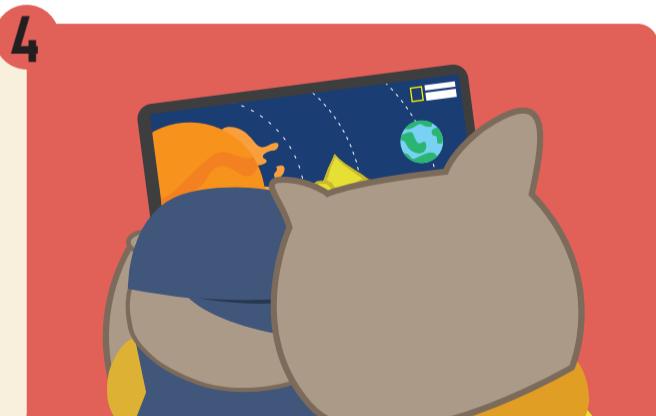
TURN OFF THE BACKGROUND TV: Regardless of whether you are eating or doing chores – unless everyone in the room is purposefully watching the TV, turn it off.

USE MEDIA MORE ACTIVELY: Instead of just consuming media passively, try to use it actively, like finding apps and playing games where you create music, art, or stories.



GO OUT FOR SCREEN-FREE FUN: Look out for activities you can do as a family without screens, like family days at the museums or a walk through the park.

USE MEDIA TOGETHER: Watch shows and play games with your child, as an incredibly easy way to monitor their media use while bonding with them. Co-viewing also lets them think of media as a family activity – not a solitary one.



These small steps make a difference in how your family thinks about screen time use, and makes it easier to set and stick to any limits you have.

For more information and parent resources, visit the Media Literacy Council's website at www.betterinternet.sg or email us at info@medialiteracycouncil.sg.

RULES ON SCREEN TIME USE

This contract applies to:

- Phone
- Computer
- Tablet
- Video games
- Television
- Other: _____ [Specify]

I, _____ [child] understand that having screen time is a privilege and not a right. I understand that this privilege may be taken away by my parents for bad behaviour, if my school grades fall, and if I do not follow the following rules.

- ✓ On school days, I will stick to this much total screen time: _____.
- ✓ On weekends and holidays, I will stick to this much total screen time: _____.
- ✓ This total screen time applies to all online activity except _____.
[e.g., schoolwork].
- ✓ I agree not to let screen time get in the way of my schoolwork or chores.
- ✓ I agree not to have any screen time for at least one hour before my bedtime at _____.
- ✓ I agree not to have any screen time during _____ [e.g., meals].
- ✓ I agree to stop my game, video, or other media without argument when my screen time is over.
- ✓ I agree to be honest and own up if I break any of the rules of the contract.

Child's signature

Parent's signature

Date

ABOUT MEDIA LITERACY COUNCIL

The Media Literacy Council works in partnership with industry, community and government to champion and develop public education and awareness programmes relating to media literacy and cyber wellness. In an increasingly interactive and participatory media landscape, the Media Literacy Council seeks to cultivate and encourage the public to become discerning media consumers with the ability to evaluate media content effectively, and use, create and share content safely and responsibly. It also advises the government on how to respond to emerging issues relating to internet and media content.

Find out more at www.betterinternet.sg.

We wish to thank the following Media Literacy Council members for their contribution:

- **Ms Anita Low-Lim (TOUCH Community Services)**
- **Dr Jiow Hee Jhee (Singapore Institute of Technology)**
- **Ms Iris Lin (Fei Yue Family Service Centre)**

ABOUT MONTFORT CARE

Montfort Care is a network of programmes committed to improving the lives of individuals, families and the community facing transitional challenges. Our team of social service professionals provide community-based social services to empower lives and strengthen communities. Services offered by Montfort Care include three Family Service Centres, child protection service by its Big Love Child Protection Specialist Centre, cyber wellness programme for youth by its MeToYou Cyber Care programme as well as GoodLife!and YAH! programmes to support active and frail seniors to age-in-place.

Find out more at www.montfortcare.org.sg.



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