# Too much screen time

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How much is too much? At least two countries, Australia and Sweden, are considering a screen use ban for minors over fears that excessive exposure to social media could be harmful to their mental and physical health.

Here in the Philippines, former senator Panfilo Lacson, who is seeking reelection at the Senate, has picked up on the proposal and called it “one bold step to shield our children from exploitation and distraction.”

Unlike Sweden, whose proposal is merely recommendatory and focuses on the role of parents in restricting their children’s screen time, Australia plans to legislate a ban on social media for children under 16 through age verification methods like biometrics or government identification. The measure does not exempt children with parental consent unlike in countries such as France where users could go around the ban. If legislated, this could set a precedent for the rest of the world. “Social media is doing real harm to kids and I’m calling time on it,” Australian Prime Minister Anthony Albanese said.

## Sedentary lifestyle

No doubt that such proposals for screen use and social media consumption ban have good intentions. But as a representative of the Digital Industry Group (DIGI) said on Australia’s proposal, it could be counterproductive and encourage young people to explore the darker and unregulated part of the internet. “Keeping young people safe online is a top priority … but the proposed ban for teenagers to access digital platforms is a 20th Century response to 21st Century challenges,” news reports quoted DIGI managing director Sunita Bose.

Local social media users have reacted to Lacson’s plan to file a similar measure if he gets reelected, including raising the minimum age to under 18, by warning that it could just end up as another poorly implemented law especially when age limits are concerned. Perhaps, if legislation is pursued, the focus should be on how such a measure could help regulate the use of gadgets and exposure to social media especially for minors.

Several studies have shown that the use of gadgets is harmful to physical health as it promotes a sedentary lifestyle and affects eyesight. Experts have noted that high myopia or nearsightedness has been prevalent worldwide even among very young children. Philippine Eye Research Institute (PERI) director Dr. Leo Cubillan attributed this to the lack of time to play outdoors and exposure to bright lights.

## Important life skills

The World Health Organization, in guidelines released in 2019, said children should sit less and play more to grow up healthy. A local study, “Measuring Effects of Screen Time on the Development of Children in the Philippines: A Cross-sectional Study,” by Dr. Angel Belle Dy of the Ateneo School of Medicine and Public Health published last year also revealed that two-year-olds who have been exposed to excessive screen time exhibited lower receptive and expressive language scores. The study also linked prolonged screen use to diminished personal skills, interpersonal relationships, and play and leisure abilities.

These findings are supported by other studies that found that children who spent too much time with gadgets and therefore sedentary were less likely to have the fine motor skills necessary for writing when entering kindergarten and exhibited reduced vocabulary, communication skills, and eye contact. Their creativity and problem-solving abilities which are important life skills for children growing up were also affected.

The Ateneo study’s recommendations included limiting screen time for young children to no more than one hour per day and focusing on high-quality content to ensure that the use of technology could be a tool for learning instead of a detriment to their development. This must be balanced by physical activities like games that require interaction, help develop motor skills, and allow them to be children discovering and experiencing the real world outside the influence of a small screen.

## Double-edged sword

The Department of Health and PERI earlier recommended to the Department of Education (DepEd) to include at least three hours of outdoor learning activities per day in its curriculum—currently, DepEd has at least one hour of outdoor activity daily for kindergarten pupils and primary school students.

Technology should not be the enemy, it has tremendously helped in the vast development of tools that are useful in modern-day life. However, in terms of gadgets and children, it should be used in moderation. The same with social media—it’s a double-edged sword but when used properly and judiciously, it can contribute to learning and education.

Again, the focus should be on regulating gadget use and social media consumption for children who are impressionable and still need the guidance of adults. Anything excessive is harmful but an outright ban is not the solution. Instead, a better understanding of the digital era, its tools and platforms, is necessary to help shape the minds of children and young adults.