

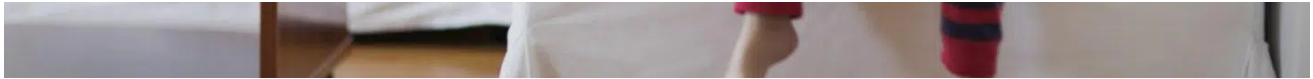
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# Most kids under 5 are getting too much screen time, study finds

And this was before the pandemic. Eliminating ads from kids' programming and apps would help, researchers say.

By [Jessica D'Argenio Waller, MS, CNS, LDN](#) • February 18, 2022





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A new meta-analysis finds that 2 out of 3 kids under age 5 are exceeding screen time guidelines of more than 1 hour per day. **The news that kids are getting more than the recommended amount of screen time is probably unshocking to pretty much everyone, but it's important: the habits around screen usage formed when kids are young are likely to be maintained over time,** say the study's authors.

In the 2022 study, published in *JAMA Pediatrics*, researchers from The University of Calgary examined results from 63 studies that looked at 89,163 kids under 5. The authors examined the



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young kids doubled after March 2020.

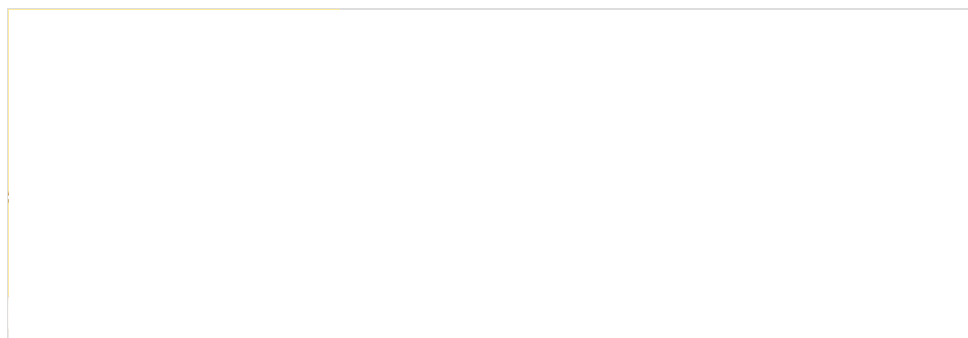
That said, the onus shouldn't just be on parents to protect kids from excessive media use. Tech companies need to make parental controls easier to use, and the industry as a whole should aim to eliminate advertising from kids programs and apps, Dr. Madigan and her co-authors argue.

# Kids' screen time usage is a concern for parents

“Young children are the fastest-growing users of digital media, and parents often report that their child’s screen use is a top parenting concern,” write Dr. Madigan and co-authors in the study.

That comes as no surprise: Who hasn’t turned to screens as a form of virtual babysitter? Childcare can be prohibitively expensive for many, and even before the pandemic, difficult to come by—a factor made more challenging once lockdowns were in place. Devices seem to be a necessary evil when it comes to parenting in normal times, but especially in pandemic parenting.

Still, the findings are cause for alarm. “When only 1 in 4 children are meeting the screen time guidelines, it’s telling us that very few families either know about, or can meet, the pediatric guidelines,” Sheri Madigan, PhD, an associate professor and director of the Determinants of Child Development Lab at the University of Calgary, Canada Research Chair (Tier II), and lead author on the study, tells Motherly. “There’s more work to be done in terms of getting this knowledge out to the public and also finding out from parents what barriers exist to meeting these guidelines.”



## Current AAP guidelines on screen time for kids

The most recent AAP screen time guidelines for kids were last updated in 2016 and are outlined below.

### For kids under 18 months

AAP discourages screen time usage for this age group outside of video chatting with long-distance family and friends.

### For kids 18 to 24 months

For parents who want to introduce digital media, AAP recommends choosing “high-quality programming/apps” and using them together alongside children, “because this is how toddlers learn best.” Letting kids under 24 months use media by themselves should be avoided, AAP says.

### For kids 2 years to 5 years

AAP recommends using media limits for this age group. Screen media should be limited to a

maximum of 1 hour per day of high-quality programming. They also advocate for co-viewing or co-playing (if using apps).

## How screen time affects kids

The years before a child reaches age 5 are a time of rapid brain growth and burgeoning development. An association between excessive screen time and altered brain development has been identified in preschoolers, especially on the integrity of white matter tracts, which may have repercussions on language and literacy.

Too much screen time can also affect behavioral outcomes. “Research has shown that the threshold or digital tipping point for this age range is 1 hour a day,” write the study authors. “For example, young children using screens 2 hours daily or 3 hours or more, when compared with 1 hour a day, show an increased likelihood of reported behavioral problems and poor developmental outcomes.”

Screen use also impacts children’s sleep and quality time spent with parents, siblings and friends.

“These findings are concerning because we know that when children are watching screens for long durations, they have less time to engage in other activities [e.g., engaging with caregivers and siblings, physical activity, sleep] that are crucial for healthy development in young children,” explains Brae Anne McArthur, PhD, clinical psychologist and the director of the University of Calgary Psychology Clinic and a co-author of the study.

## What needs to happen now?

While some changes can be made at home (see below for examples), the bigger picture relies on more oversight and support from the government and tech industry.

“We can’t put the entire responsibility on individual parents alone,” writes Jennifer Siebel Newsom, the First Partner of California, in an essay for *Motherly*. “This is also why California-based technology companies must do their part. They need to take responsibility for the addiction their products can create, and most importantly, better open the dialogue so they can listen to parents, coaches, and educators to ensure their technology contributes to bettering kids’ lives.”

As adults, with more fully developed brains, we’re better able to tune out the constant din of notifications, turn off those auto-play episodes on Netflix and skip past in-app ads so purposefully annoying that companies hope you’ll pony up for the paid version. But the kicker is that these same marketing techniques are used for younger audiences, too, Dr. McArthur notes. An industry-wide approach to reduce the addictiveness of digital media could help loosen its grasp on our youngest minds.

“Currently, there are few if any regulations related to what and how children access digital media. Greater policy level accountability for media companies could improve the nature and content of media accessed by children,” says Dr. McArthur.

## How you can be mindful of your kids’ screen time usage

Your best first step? Taking a good look at your family’s current screen time usage and then making changes to routines as needed.

**Start tracking.** Spend a day or two tracking how much screen time your child may be getting, Dr. McArthur offers. “Often adding up device use throughout the day can surprise parents. This can give families a good idea of where they are starting and can act as a baseline as they work towards reaching the goal of 1 hour per day.”

**Ask questions.** Once you have your actual data, now’s the time to decide whether changes are needed, says Dr. Madigan. Pose questions like, “Are we meeting the screen time guidelines?”, “Are we doing enough off-line activities as a family, like going to the park or playing face-to-face without devices?”, “Can we make screen time more meaningful, like having family movie nights together?”

**Make a plan.** Finally, create a family media plan outlining when and how media will be used, suggests Dr. McArthur. The AAP offers a template. “Like other health behaviors, it is helpful if routines remain consistent throughout the week and are incorporated into each individual family’s lifestyle and routine. Pick a time that works for your family, set a timer, and enjoy.”

#### Featured experts

Sheri Madigan, PhD, is a clinical psychologist, Associate Professor, Canada Research Chair (Tier II), and Director of the Determinants of Child Development Lab in the Department of Psychology at the University of Calgary and the Alberta Children’s Hospital Research Institute. Her research is primarily focused on understanding how children’s early social experiences and relationships can influence their learning and mental health trajectories.

Brae Anne McArthur, PhD, is a clinical psychologist and the Director of the University of Calgary Psychology Clinic. She received her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology: Applied Developmental Emphasis from the University of Guelph and completed her internship in Clinical Child and Pediatric Psychology at Alberta Children’s Hospital. Dr. McArthur’s program of research focuses on understanding individual and family level risk and resiliency factors that influence child development and mental health.

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