

Balancing time online: healthy screen habits

Owning and using a mobile or device is now part of everyday life for Australian kids, and 4 out of 5 of all 12-13 year olds own or have access to a device⁽¹⁾. While this is great for keeping up with homework assignments, playing games, using apps, and staying connected with friends and family, how do we encourage young people to balance screen time and build healthy digital habits?

This is a tricky question at the best of times, but with life in lock-down due to COVID-19, how can you balance home-learning and digital life?

Australian government guidelines recommended that children and young people (aged 5-17 years) limit their sedentary recreational screen time to no more than two hours per day. Great in theory, but what's actually happening? The good news is that screen time can be so much more than sedentary.

This guide provides practical tips on how to:

- Start the conversation
- Monitor time online for Australian kids
- Spot the signs indicating too much time online
- Balance screen time and healthy digital habits
- Seek more help if you need it

(1) <https://www.acma.gov.au/publications/2019-11/report/kids-and-mobiles-how-australian-children-are-using-mobile-phones>



How to start the conversation

- "What do you like doing online? What are your favourite apps, games and websites? Why?" Encourage your child to ask the same of you.
- "How much time online do you think is OK? How much time do you think you actually spend online?"
- "How do you manage your time at school? Are there any productivity hacks from work/school that we can learn from each other?"
- "Have you ever tried a health and wellness video or app? My favourite one is/I'm thinking of trying (insert your favourite) – want to do it with me?"

Time online for Australian kids

Research by the **Australian Communications and Media Authority** into children and teen behaviour has found that:

- 83% of teens access the internet three or more times every day.
- 43% regularly use screens before bedtime; one in four report sleep problems related to screen use.
- The number of teens who access the internet between midnight and 6am has doubled in recent years.

COVID-19 makes it even harder as parents and kids increase their time online and the normal structure and routine in life is replaced by working from home and home schooling. Work together to agree study times, take regular screen breaks, and be mindful that more time online can mean more exposure to risks and negative behaviour. It's important to get across good digital practices such as protecting privacy and restricting contact from strangers. Check out our guide on **How to safeguard your child's privacy on popular apps and games**.



Too much time online? Signs to look out for

According to the [Office of the eSafety Commissioner](#), the signs that your child's digital life might be having a negative impact on them or your family include:

- Less interest in social activities like meeting friends or playing sport
- Not doing so well at school
- Tiredness, sleep disturbance, headaches, eye strain
- Changes in eating patterns
- Reduced personal hygiene
- Obsession with particular websites or games
- Extreme anger when being asked to take a break from online activity
- Appearing anxious or irritable when away from the computer, phone or device
- Becoming withdrawn from friends and family

Balancing screen time and healthy digital habits

Whether it's two hours a day online or a whole lot more, focus on quality time online and remember to build in physical activity – even if it's digital.

Use study apps to create flashcards/quizzes, study schedules and block distractions

Research has shown that retrieval practice is one of the most effective ways of studying. Retrieval practice is testing yourself regularly about the key ideas in any new subject you're learning. One common way to do this is creating flashcards on key ideas as you're reading the material for the first time and then testing yourself on these later. Research also shows that if you spread out what you are studying so that you revise material just before you're about to forget it, your long-term learning will be much better.

There's a lot of free apps to help with retrieval practice out there and, like any digital platform, we recommend you read the Terms of Service and reviews to see if they're right for you. Some we found are:

- [Anki Flashcards](#)
- [Brainscape Flashcards](#)
- [Memrise](#)
- [Supermemo](#)

Getting distracted by apps, games and websites when homework needs to be done is also a challenge. The [McAfee® Safe Family App](#) allows you to manage your kids' device use including content restrictions and screen time rules. You can find out more about this here.

Check out health and wellness videos and apps

The global COVID-19 isolation of 2020 has seen an explosion of health and wellness videos and apps. If you've got a child in primary school you've probably heard of the Body Coach or #PEwithJoe who went from 800,000 YouTube subscribers to 2.2 million in three weeks. Check out his page for workouts for all ages as well as the Smiling Mind app for mindfulness and meditation.

Agree device-free times and zones

This will vary from family to family and according to the age of your kids, but you could consider:

- Making dinner time device-free
- Switching devices off an hour before bed
- Discussing spaces where not to use devices, i.e. bathroom or toilet
- Setting time aside for family activities, e.g. a walk, sporting activities, making dinner together – something that is quality time for your family



How to report inappropriate content

The eSafety Commissioner is Australia's national independent regulator for online safety. The Office of the eSafety Commissioner has developed an **eSafety Guide** with reporting links and information for a range of social media services, games, apps and sites. Reporting of inappropriate images, content, and cyberbullying can also be made directly to <https://www.esafety.gov.au/report>

What to do if you need more help



If your child ever sees or receives anything online that makes them uncomfortable, they should feel supported in discussing it with you or their friends or teachers. Alternatively, they can call Kids Helpline, Australia's only free, private and confidential 24/7 phone and online counselling service for 5 to 25 year olds. **1800 55 1800 kidshelpline.com.au**

About Optus Digital Thumbprint

Optus Digital Thumbprint is a free and award-winning educational program that supports young people and families to be safe, responsible and positive online.

Since 2013, we've delivered workshops and developed digital tools that have educated more than 320,000 primary and secondary school students across Australia.