



Helping Your Child Manage Digital Technology

Digital technologies can support learning and skill development, connections with others, and access to help. With limits and balance, these tools can offer meaningful experiences for children and youth, beyond their educational use. However, excessive screen use can impact your child's mental health and well-being. It is important to consider your child's relationship with digital technology.

The most common forms of digital technology devices used by children and youth are smartphones, computers, and game consoles. Beyond their educational use, children and youth often use these devices to keep in touch and connect with their friends through social media, to find information, or for entertainment (e.g., listening to music, watching videos, or playing online video games).

When young people use digital technology in ways that enhance their sense of fun, curiosity, and belonging it can be supportive to their sense of well-being. Research has shown, however, that the more hours per day that a young person spends on screens, the greater their risk of developing problems with their mental health. Some students will experience problems related to, or worsened by, their use of digital technology.

This resource was developed to support parents and caregivers in navigating their child's use of digital technology.

Note: While we use the term "child" throughout, we recognize that the child you are caring for may be a teenager or young adult.

How do I know if my child's screen time is problematic?

It is important to identify and address problems early on before they get too big. Here are some signs you may want to watch for:



Is your child spending more time on screens than on other enjoyable activities such as hobbies, physical activities and face-to-face interaction? Technology use can have a powerful "crowding out effect" by taking the place of other interests. You may notice your child prefers the virtual world over involvement in the real world (e.g., consistently prefers to play a basketball video game instead of joining their friends in a game of basketball outside). Perhaps your child reads less, spends less time on hobbies, or neglects their physical hygiene (e.g., showering, bathing, brushing their teeth). Canadian Screen Time Guidelines can be found [here](#). For children and teens aged 5-17, the recommendation is to limit screen time to less than two hours a day.





Does your child's use of digital technology get in the way of their ability to do the things that are expected of them at their age? When screen use is problematic, you may find that your child is not as involved in school, isn't attending class regularly (or on time), doesn't participate as much in family life, shows delays in their motor development, and/or neglects extracurricular activities and friendships.



Is your child's use of digital technology interrupting their sleep? Adequate sleep is important for a child's mental health and well-being. Screen use in the evening can be associated with later bedtimes, less sleep and poorer quality of sleep. If your child has access to a screen in the evening, particularly around and after bedtime, you may notice that they are staying up later and feeling more tired during the day.



Does your child seem more irritable, anxious, sad, or less interested in things they used to enjoy? Excessive screen use can negatively impact mental health and can change brain functioning (e.g., impulse control). This can show up as emotional outbursts, worries, or low mood. Or you may notice changes in friendships and family relationships (e.g., avoiding face-to-face interactions and struggling with friendship skills). Young people may also use digital activities to cope with stress and/or uncomfortable emotions or situations.



Is your child overly concerned about their online presence? Excessive use of social media can impact young people's self-esteem. Your child may compare themselves to images of others and may feel that they do not "measure up" to the people they see online. They may develop unrealistic views about body image and lifestyles. Some online content can also introduce traumatizing material or may normalize risky and harmful behaviours such as bullying, self-harm and suicidality among children and youth.



Is your child less engaged in school? When children and youth become preoccupied with the virtual world, they may not view school or in-person engagement as important. They also may not try their best as they may prefer the rewards they get in the virtual world (e.g., "likes") more than the rewards they get at school or in the community (e.g., grades, friendships).



Is your child spending money on-line? Many online games include ways for players to make in-game purchases, which can include gambling-based activities. There are also websites that provide opportunities to gamble on games and to buy and sell virtual goods/items. Knowing about the games your child plays and if they are spending money can help you to set limits. Early exposure to gambling can increase the likelihood of gambling-related problems later in life.



Could your child be experiencing withdrawal because of excessive use of screens? We typically think about withdrawal as something associated with excessive drug or alcohol use. Did you know that excessive gaming can also be addictive? Withdrawal symptoms may include intense cravings to use digital technology, irritability, anxiety, depressed mood, finding other activities extremely boring, being preoccupied with wanting to be on a screen and experiencing a fear of missing out. If your child is online excessively, they might also experience physical symptoms such as headaches, lack of energy and sleep difficulties when you (or others) try to limit their use.

If you are concerned about your child's digital technology use, the strategies and resources below may help. You can also reach out for assistance from a mental health professional through your child's school, or in the community (e.g., [CMHO Find a Centre](#), [Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](#)).



What should I do if my child’s digital technology use is problematic?

- **Try to model healthy use.** Your relationship with digital technology is the best example for your child.
- **Plan ahead for a conversation rather than reacting in the moment.** How you approach your child about concerns you have with their digital technology use is important. Choose a time when you feel calm and not rushed, and when your child is in a good frame of mind.
- **Use supportive language in your conversation.** In discussing your concerns, you can describe what you are noticing, and express any worries you have (e.g., I’ve noticed that you haven’t picked up your guitar in a long time, and you haven’t been going outside while the weather is good. I’m wondering how we can switch things up a bit?). Allow space for your child to share their thoughts and feelings. This resource provides conversation tips, including what teens find helpful: [Dear Parents: a digital well-being resource from teens to parents](#).
- **Support changes to digital technology use gradually.** It is difficult for anyone to change habits of behaviour. Studies have shown that young people are more likely to modify their technology use towards a healthier balance using a gradual approach, rather than methods that remove access to screen time entirely.
- **Set goals together.** Work with your child to establish goals for age-appropriate technology use and support them as they make needed changes so that they can learn skills for limiting their use. Canadian Screen Time Guidelines can be found [here](#). The focus should be on establishing a healthy balance between technology use and physical activities, face-to-face contact with friends, hobbies, healthy eating and proper sleep.
- **Set household expectations regarding screen use.** It can be helpful to establish technology-free times (e.g., no screens during mealtimes) and/or areas in your home (e.g. no screens in the bedroom). Think about creating a family agreement that sets expectations for technology use. Here are examples of agreements for [older children](#) and for [younger children](#).
- **Encourage non-screen contact with friends and family, hobbies, and activities.** When young people are regularly engaged in fun and rewarding non-screen activities, they will spend less time with screen-based devices. Introduce and explore new activities and interests together, and support your child as they try different sports, hobbies, and social connections.
- **Consider using digital control tools.** [Digital control tools](#), such as blocking access to certain websites can be helpful in some circumstances. However, it is encouraged that you use these tools in collaboration with your child.
- **Understand what needs are being met through digital technology.** There can be many reasons for problematic technology use. Try to determine what is fueling your child’s excessive use and work together to find non-screen outlets to address these needs. If your child is using technology to escape uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, or to avoid certain situations, consider consulting with a mental health professional.

Resources

Helpful Websites

- [Canadian Pediatric Society, Caring for Kids](#)
- [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health](#)
- [Common Sense Media](#)
- [Kids Help Phone](#)
- [Sickkids, AboutKidsHealth](#)
- [Media Smarts](#)
- [Screen Time Action Network](#)
- [Centre of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health](#)



Sources of Professional Support

- [Canadian Mental Health Association – Ontario Division](#) outlines services available to support youth experiencing addictions.
- [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health](#) has services related to problem gambling and technology use.
- [Children’s Mental Health Ontario](#) Find a Centre helps you to locate a Child and Youth Mental Health and Addictions organization near you.
- [Connex Ontario](#) provides free and confidential health services information for people experiencing problems with alcohol and drugs, mental illness or gambling/gaming.
- [One Stop Talk](#) provides direct and immediate access to a mental health professional for children and youth 17 and under for brief interventions and streamlined access to more intensive services when needed.
- [Youth Wellness Hubs Ontario](#) provide high-quality integrated youth services to support the well-being of young people aged 12 to 25, including mental health and substance use supports, primary health care, community and social supports, and more.

Your child’s school. Every school board in Ontario has a [Mental Health Leader](#) and most also have regulated psychology and social work staff who provide prevention and early intervention services. Ask about the school mental health services in your school and board.

Research Papers

- [American Psychological Association. Health Advisory on Social Media Use in Adolescence.](#)
- [Abi-Jaoude et al. \(2020\), Smartphones, social media use and youth mental health, Canadian Medical Association Journal, 192 \(6\) 136-141.](#)
- [Canadian Paediatric Society, Digital Health Task Force \(2019\). Digital media: Promoting healthy screen use in school-aged children and adolescents. Paediatric Child Health, 24\(6\):402–408](#)
- [Canadian Paediatric Society, Digital Health Task Force \(2023\). Screen time and preschool children: Promoting health and development in a digital world. Paediatric Child Health, 28\(3\):184–192.](#)
- [Hale, L., et al. \(2018\). Youth Screen Media Habits and Sleep: Sleep-Friendly Screen Behavior Recommendations for Clinicians, Educators, and Parents. Child and adolescent psychiatric clinics of North America, 27\(2\), 229–245.](#)
- [Idrees, B., Sampasa-Kanyinga, H., Hamilton, H. A., & Chaput, J. P. \(2024\). Associations between problem technology use, life stress, and self-esteem among high school students. BMC public health, 24\(1\), 492.](#)
- [Li et al. \(2021\). Screen use and mental health symptoms in Canadian children and youth during the COVID-19 Pandemic. Journal of the American Medical Association, Network Open, 4\(12\), e2140875.](#)
- [Office of the Surgeon General \(2023\). Social media and youth mental health: The U.S. Surgeon General’s Advisory. US Department of Health and Human Services.](#)
- [Ontario Agency for Health Protection and Promotion \(Public Health Ontario\). Sedentary behaviour indicators using data from the Canadian Health Survey on Children and Youth. Toronto, ON: King’s Printer for Ontario; 2024.](#)
- [Plackett, et al. \(2023\). The impact of social media use interventions on mental well-being: Systematic Review. Journal of medical Internet research, 25, e44922.](#)
- [Toombs E, Mushquash CJ, Mah L, et al. \(2022\) Increased screen time for children and youth during the COVID-19 pandemic. Science Briefs of the Ontario COVID-19 Science Advisory Table, 3\(59\).](#)

