ASK THE EXPERT

Lauren Colvin addresses the tricky problem for parents of establishing guidelines for IT device use by young children.

How would you suggest keeping my child's 'screen time' to a sensible length?

As a parent it is essential to put in place boundaries that help your child to thrive and develop to the best of their abilities. The limitations and environment you create for your child should provide them with the freedom to explore and learn in the safest and richest way possible. A growing area of concern for many parents today is setting parameters around the screen time that their children are exposed to daily. This is a controversial area as there is still on-going research and differing opinions around the pros and cons of electronic devices' effects on our children's development. There are currently no medical or governmental guidelines on screen time in the UK. Other governments around the world however have now issued strict regulations and guidelines. In 2013 the US department of health recommended that children under 2 years of age should not be in front of a screen at all, and over that age the maximum screen time should be no more than two hours per day.

In order to understand why children under 2 years old should not be exposed to any screen time we have to return briefly to the child's developing brain. A child's brain develops rapidly during the first three years of life. The stimuli children experience during this period profoundly influence brain development. Images on screens behave in ways that differ dramatically from those in the real world and infants' brains are incapable of making sense of them. Children up to age 3 learn better from the real world than they do from any screen. The problem lies not only with what toddlers are doing while they're watching TV, it's what they aren't doing. Children are programmed to learn from interacting with other people, through face to face and social interaction, facial expressions, tone of voice, body language and so on. Whenever the parent or child is engaged with an electronic device these exchanges come to a halt.

The guidelines you set around the use of electronic devices in your home should be done from day one to prevent issues further

Q AND A

down the line. The way you view screens when you are young forms habits which are difficult to change as you get older. The limitations you set need to be agreed upon with your partner in order for you both to follow them successfully. When your child is very young it is much easier to control the amount of screen time they are exposed to. You might choose to set rules such as using your mobile phone and other electronic devices out of your child's view when possible, or limiting television and computer usage in the week until after your child's bed time. Just having the television on in the background is enough to delay language development. Normally a parent speaks about 940 words per hour when a toddler is around. With the television on, that number falls by 770. Fewer words mean less learning. I see so many young children these days fascinated by their parent's iPhone or iPad; children are naturally inquisitive about the things they see their mummy and daddy using a lot. Whatever rules you put in place, they need to be realistic and work for you and your family. Don't feel pressure to follow what other people are doing, what works for one family doesn't necessarily work for another.

As your child grows the main objectives should be to keep your child's screen time limited, safe and appropriate. When your child is old enough to use electronic devices it can be factored into their day in an agreed way, such as television or computer usage before or after dinner for a set amount of time. Avoid having televisions, computers or video games in children's bedrooms so that you can successfully monitor their usage. It is also a good idea to prevent the use of these devices close to bed time as the light and stimuli they emit can interfere with sleep. Monitoring the content your child is being exposed to during their screen time is of great importance. Make sure that what they are watching or playing is quality and age appropriate.

If your child is older and screen time is becoming an area of concern or a daily battle for you, then I would suggest sitting down and discussing the issue in a calm relaxed manner with your child. Together you can put into place some guidelines and rules around this that you can agree upon. Your child will feel a lot more respected and willing to co-operate if they are included in the ideas and decision making. It is also important that they understand that the limitations are for their own benefit and not a form of punishment.

Studies have linked prolonged periods of screen time to obesity. It is important for children to spend time on outdoor play and physical activities. After all, a screen offers a limited sensory environment and no physical exertion. You could suggest other fun activities that your child could do instead that offer a wide range of real life experiences and opportunities to learn new skills, such as baking together, playing sports, playing instruments, arts and crafts or building with constructive materials. Don't feel guilty about letting your child use electronic devices in moderation, make sure it's just one of many activities they get to learn from, explore, and enjoy.