SCREEN TIMEOUT

Instead of focusing only on strict time limits, experts recommend that parents adjust their approach according to their child's age and maturity. As children grow, setting rules together helps them develop the ability to self-regulate screen use.

Is all screen time harmful to children?

Duration of exposure does not matter as much as the quality of content and purpose, say experts

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Screens are everywhere – from YouTube videos that keep toddlers occupied and educational apps, to social media and games on teens' phones.

Many parents remain unsure: Is all screen use harmful, or can it be beneficial?

To seek answers, The Straits Times spoke to two paediatric experts, Adjunct Associate Professor Chong Shang Chee from the National University Hospital (NUH), and Dr Christelle Tan from KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH).

Q *What are common misconceptions parents have about screen time?*
A Many parents think that the duration of screen time matters most, but it is not that simple, said Prof Chong, head and senior consultant at NUH's Division of Developmental and Behavioural Paediatrics.

"If a child spends two hours collaborating on a school project online, that is very different from two hours of solitary, aggressive gaming," she said, noting that the quality of screen time also matters.

While setting limits is important, especially for younger children, both doctors stressed that what screen use displaces is equally crucial.

Dr Tan, a consultant at KKH's Department of Child Development, framed it as an "opportunity cost" question: "What could the child have been doing instead, if they were not on their screens?"

Time spent on screens could have been spent on physical activity, such as outdoor play, which she said helps reduce the risk of myopia. It can also delay sleep, causing attention problems at school, or cut into face-to-face family interactions during mealtimes.

Another misconception parents have is that children cannot cope when screens are taken from them. "Some parents may feel that if their children go cold turkey, it will be completely disastrous," said Dr Tan.

While removing devices may initially trigger resistance or meltdowns, she said there is "light at the end of the tunnel" as most children are "highly adaptable".

With consistent limits and alternative activities offered by parents, many adjust more easily than expected, she added.

"Many parents have shared with us that when their child faces problems like language delay, and they decide to put their foot down saying, 'From tomorrow onwards, no screens at all', they do see a lot of improvement."

Q *Is all screen use bad?*
A Prof Chong, who chaired the development of the Ministry of Health's national guidelines on screen use for children and adolescents, said screen use is not inhe-

rently bad.

It can support learning, creativity and social connection, especially for students who use devices for research, group work and communication.

Ms Tahira Alla Pitchay, 42, a mother of two who works in the bio-pharmaceuticals sector, said her family has a movie night every Friday at home. They also watch game shows, cooking shows, and even Crimewatch.

Watching programmes with her children, aged 10 and six, often sparks discussions and thoughtful questions.

"When my husband and I watch with them, they open up about things that they have experienced in school that are reflected in these shows... It gives us insight into what happens in their lives that we would otherwise not have known," she said.

Dr Tan said that for older children, devices can make learning interactive and provide access to information.

But problems arise when screen use is unsupervised, excessive or displaces sleep, relationships, physical activity or study time.

Prof Chong called it "overly simplistic" to view screen time as directly causing positive or negative outcomes, as its impact depends on multiple factors working together.

These include the child's age and experience with screen use, the type of content and parental roles, she said.

Q *Why is screen time not recommended at all for children under 18 months?*
A Doctors are clear that children under 18 months old should not have any screen use. At this age, children learn best through real-

world interactions.

This means touching, feeling, moving and engaging in "serve and return" exchanges with caregivers, said Dr Tan.

Research shows that infants struggle to learn from two-dimensional formats on screens, said Prof Chong – a phenomenon known as "video deficit".

"They do not have the real-life schema to connect what they see on screen to the world around them," she said.

Dr Tan added that emerging research, like from Growing Up in Singapore Towards healthy Outcomes (GUSTO) – a nationwide birth cohort study of Singaporean mothers and their babies – suggests excessive screen time in infancy is associated with changes in brain activity in toddlerhood. This may affect executive functioning when children are older.

Q *Is educational content always good?*
A This is not necessarily true. Age and developmental readiness matter, said Prof Chong. Even content labelled "educational" may not benefit very young children if they are not cognitively ready to process it.

For pre-schoolers, Prof Chong advises that content should not be overly stimulating.

"Nothing too fast-paced or with a lot of flashing lights, and noisy or multi-sensory... Very young brains are very quick to be over-stimulated by a variety of lights and sounds," she said.

For older children, educational content should be designed with clear learning objectives, and free of manipulative algorithms or reward loops.

With gamified learning content widely available, Prof Chong said

parental supervision and intentional use are key.

Parents should watch out for games that use algorithms that suddenly require more coins to progress, for instance, as this triggers a dopamine-drive, addictive cycle, she said.

Still, carefully curated educational programming may benefit children who lack language-rich environments, she added.

"There are studies that said if kids from very impoverished environments watch Sesame Street, they actually do better than others in the area who do not... They don't hear language as much or have caregivers with nurturing practices. So they then use screens in a positive manner to promote literacy and numeracy," Prof Chong said, citing a 2015 American study.

Q *What kind of screen time is good?*
A Beneficial screen use is purposeful – supporting learning, creativity or meaningful connection. It is also interactive rather than passive.

Problematic use often involves mindless scrolling, prolonged solitary use, and loss of control over duration. Red flags include screens displacing responsibilities, sleep, learning, relationships or health.

Instead of focusing only on strict time limits, experts recommend that parents adjust their approach according to their child's age and maturity.

Younger children require clearer boundaries and supervision. As children grow, setting rules together helps them develop the ability to self-regulate their screen use.

Ms Tahira knows that when her children get older, she will have to hand over the reins and trust that they can responsibly manage their screen time.

She does not allow screen use for all during mealtime, and regularly talks to her children about appropriate content, including why certain shows are rated NC16 or require parental guidance.

"We want them to be aware of how certain content can affect or change you," she said.

Prof Chong, who is part of the Ministry of Social and Family Development's parenting advisory panel, offered parents a simple analogy: Think of screen use as feeding a child.

Parents decide what their children should be fed, when meals should be given, and how long they should take.

They should supervise their child's screen use closely, just as they would to prevent choking.

Over time, children gradually learn to manage their own device use, just as they learn to eat on their own.

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Using screens positively

Here are some recommendations.

Infants and pre-schoolers
- Ban screen time for children under 18 months
- Limit screen time according to national guidelines
- Choose content that is developmentally appropriate, slow-paced and not overstimulating
- Co-view with children

Adolescents (aged six to 12)
- Use screens intentionally for schoolwork, research or group work
- Learn interactively rather than consume passively
- Use screens to connect with peers and not for cyberbullying
- Explore creative uses for making content or completing projects
- Watch movies together as a family

Teenagers (13 and above)
- Use screens purposefully for leisure, hobbies and skill-building
- Spend time learning together on screens through online discussions and group work
- Engage in social media for connection, not to seek validation
- Explore creative and productive engagement – projects, coding and design

Sources: CHONG SHANG CHEE, CHRISTELLE TAN
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