

## Guidelines for Optimal Screen Time in Schools: Supporting Effective and Balanced Use

**Definition:** for this document, "screen time" is any time spent on a screen-based device such as an interactive whiteboard (e.g. SMART Board), computer (e.g. Chromebook, laptop), tablet, TV, smartphone, or gaming console, whether for educational or recreational purposes.

**Purpose:** To support school staff with guidelines that promote the best use of screen time during school hours, enhancing students' health, engagement, and academic success while minimizing harm. These guidelines aim to balance the benefits of screen-based learning with students' physical, social, and mental well-being by integrating movement, interaction, and purpose-driven technology use to encourage media consumption in more deliberate and mindful ways.

It is important to be conscious of our screen time choices, and these guidelines support school staff in making informed decisions about screen time, fostering a balanced and health-conscious learning environment. By promoting active engagement, reducing sedentary time, and providing tools for self-regulation, we aim to equip students for success both in and out of the classroom.

Excessive screen time for school-age children can have several physical, mental, and social impacts. These include:

Physical Health	Mental & Emotional Well-Being	Cognitive Development
<u>Reduced physical activity:</u> Increased sedentary behaviour contributes to obesity and other health issues.	<u>Addiction and overdependence:</u> Increased risk of gaming, social media, or internet addiction.	<u>Reduced attention span:</u> Constant exposure to fast-paced digital content may impair focus and patience.
<u>Poor posture:</u> Neck, shoulder, and back pain from slouching or hunching over devices.	<u>Heightened stress and anxiety:</u> Overexposure to online content can cause feelings of overwhelm or inadequacy.	<u>Lower academic performance:</u> Distraction reduces learning efficiency.
<u>Eye strain and vision problems:</u> Digital Eye Strain (DES) or Computer Vision Syndrome from prolonged screen exposure.	<u>Impaired emotional regulation:</u> Reduced opportunities to learn and practice managing emotions in real-world interactions.	<u>Delayed language and social skills:</u> Reduced time spent in conversations and real-life interactions limits development.  Behavioural and social Impacts

Increased risk of myopia (nearsightedness) due to lack of outdoor time		
<u>Sleep disturbances:</u> Blue light from screens suppresses melatonin production, delaying sleep onset and reducing sleep quality.	<u>Lower self-esteem:</u> Exposure to unrealistic standards and cyberbullying on social media.	<u>Impaired social skills:</u> Less time for face-to-face communication and relationship-building.
<u>Over/undereating</u> Screens are a distraction that prevents hunger and satiety cues, leading to over-/undereating at meal and snack breaks.		<u>Increased risk of aggression:</u> Exposure to violent or inappropriate content may lead to behavioural issues.
		<u>Dependency on instant gratification:</u> Difficulty coping with delayed rewards, potentially impacting long-term goal setting.
		<u>Digital footprint risks:</u> Early exposure to the online world can lead to privacy and reputation issues.

**Four M's of Effective Screen Time Use:** (*adapted from <https://www.sedentarybehaviour.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Recommendations-English.pdf>.*)

To support implementation and consistency, educators and families can use the Four M's approach:

1. Manage: Follow time limits and encourage regular breaks to reduce sedentary behaviour.
2. Meaningful: Prioritize screen use for specific learning purposes and mental engagement.
3. Model: School staff model healthy screen habits and minimize non-essential screen time.
4. Monitor: Watch for signs of problematic screen use and address them through supportive strategies. *This includes complaints about being unhappy without access to technology, difficulty accepting screen time limits, negative emotions following screen use, or screen use that interferes with school, family activities, sleep, physical activity, offline play or face-to-face interactions.*

## **Key Principles of In-School Screen Time Use:**

### **1. Prioritize Active and Purposeful Screen Use:**

- Use screen-based activities only when they provide a clear educational advantage over non-screen methods.
  - [SAMR Model](#)
  - Consider learning first and technology second when making decisions about the use of technology. Avoid using screens as the default method for content delivery or classroom management.
- Ensure all screen time has a defined purpose, contributing to learning goals and mental or physical engagement.
- Avoid passive use of screens (e.g., videos without interaction), and instead, focus on-screen activities that require active thinking or physical interaction.
- Use technology to support learners who can benefit from specific learning applications/tools for accessibility.
- In K-6 grades, avoid using screens for classroom management during meal and snack times, except when a student has an individualized learning or behaviour plan in place. Avoid screen-based classroom management apps\*.

*\*ITSS must approve all apps and software for the privacy and data collection safety of teachers and students*

### **2. Limit and Break Up Screen Time Periods:**

- For elementary (ages 5-11): Limit continuous screen use and take a break at least once every 30 minutes to stretch or move.
- For intermediate/high school (ages 12-18): Take at least one break every hour for movement, promoting varied types of physical activity (light to vigorous) throughout the day.
- Regularly replace sedentary screen time with movement-based or outdoor learning activities when possible.

### **3. Incorporate Physical and Mental Health through Breaks and Active Lessons:**

- Integrate both scheduled and spontaneous movement breaks within learning periods.
  - [Classroom Physical Activity Ideas and Tips](#)
  - [60 Classroom Brain Break Ideas](#)
  - [Energizing Brain Breaks](#)
- Consider implementing active lessons (e.g., moving around the classroom for discussions) and/or outdoor lessons to keep students physically and mentally engaged.
  - [Active Academics - Learning on the Move!](#) (Searchable by grade level and subject area)
  - [Combining movement and technology enhances learning](#)
- If homework is necessary, align assignments with these principles, limiting sedentary homework to no more than 10 minutes per grade level (e.g., 10 minutes for Grade 1, 60 minutes for Grade 6).



#### 4. Reduce Media Multitasking and Background Screen Use:

- Discourage multitasking (e.g. using a screen while doing other tasks) during classroom screen activities to promote focus.
- Turn off screens when not in use, including background media, to minimize distraction and encourage mindfulness.
- Avoid assigning screen-based homework to support healthy sleep habits.
- Classroom management (for example, apps on screen all day, monitoring student behaviours)
- Tech products\* used in classrooms (privacy, upselling, etc.)

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#### 5. Model Healthy Screen Use and Encourage Self-Regulation:

- Educators model balanced screen habits, prioritizing face-to-face interactions and outdoor activities.
- Educators set boundaries for email response times. (for example, respond only outside of instructional time)
- Educators set assignment due dates for early evening to avoid screen use right before bedtime.
- Teach students to recognize the signs of problematic screen use and support them in setting personal screen limits, focusing on physical activity and offline play. Support students in understanding internet safety as a key component of digital citizenship. [24-Hour Movement Guidelines for 5–17-year-olds](#)
- [Social-Emotional Learning Connections:](#)
  - [Self-Awareness and Self-Management Skills:](#) Encourage students to recognize their emotions and physical states when using screens, helping them identify signs of overstimulation or fatigue and make informed decisions about taking breaks
  - Foster Responsible Decision-Making: Support students in evaluating how screen time aligns with their personal, academic, and social goals, guiding them to prioritize meaningful and balanced usage.
  - Build Social-Awareness: Model and discuss the impact of screen time on relationships and in-person interactions, emphasizing empathy and respect for others in both digital and real-world settings.
  - Strengthen Relationship Skills: Encourage collaboration and communication to set shared rules/boundaries for screen time in class, helping everyone feel respected and responsible.

