

How much screen time is too much in early childhood?

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University of Canterbury (UC) researchers Dr. Megan Gath and Professor Gail Gillon of UC's Child Well-being Research Institute, Education Professor Brigid McNeill, and Health Professor Lianne

Woodward studied the impacts of screen exposure on early childhood development.

Using data from over 6,000 children collected from Aotearoa New Zealand's largest longitudinal study, [Growing Up in New Zealand](#), the researchers assessed children's screen exposure at nine months, two years, four years, five years, and eight years of age.

The UC researchers measured the amount of time children spent on screens at different stages of [childhood](#) against language, early literacy and numeracy skills, and peer-related problems while also considering factors such as maternal education and socio-economic status.

"The children who spent more time on screens throughout early childhood—nine months to five years—scored lower on measures of language and educational ability and higher on parent-reported peer problems at ages five and eight," Dr. Gath says.

Screen exposure included direct screen time spent watching TV or on a device, and indirect screen time where the child was in a room with the TV on but not actively watching.

The UC researchers also evaluated the impact screen time has on development due to reduced time participating in other activities.

Dr. Gath says children with high levels of screen exposure were less likely to be engaging in more socially and sensory-rich types of childhood activities, such as playgroups, museums, parks, and cultural events.

"Screen time is only one of many factors that determine children's outcomes but it's one that is becoming increasingly prevalent. Early childhood is the time where parents have the most influence over

children's habits and is a critical period for setting healthy habits, so if we can reduce screen time in [early childhood](#) there can be positive flow-on effects that influence [good health](#) throughout their lifespan."

The [2017 Ministry of Health Active Play Guidelines](#) recommend no sedentary [screen time](#) for children younger than 2, less than one hour per day for children aged between two and five, and less than two hours per day for children five years and older.

Provided by University of Canterbury

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