

New screen time guidance for parents of under-5s

26.3.2026 - | Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs

Government answers parents' calls for support on screen time with new evidence-backed guidance.

Parents of young children are facing a constant battle with screens. Now, for the first time, the government is stepping in with clear, trusted guidance to help families navigate it.

Following weeks of engagement with over a thousand parents who called for clear support on how much screen time is too much, and how to build healthy habits, the government is delivering on its promise to provide judgement-free, practical support if they need it.

Some will oppose stepping in, but we are clear: if the choice is between standing back or supporting parents to keep children safe, this government will always act.

Currently, parents are left to navigate fast-moving technology alone – with a quarter (24%) of parents of 3- to 5-year-olds finding it hard to control their child's screen time, and 98% of two-year-olds watching screens every day.

This underlines the need for support, which is why we are giving parents the clear, trusted tools they need to cut through uncertainty and conflicting advice online.

The new guidance is available for free on the Best Start in Life website, with key tips including:

- Under 2s: Avoiding screen time other than for shared activities that encourage bonding, interaction and conversation.
- 2 to 5-year-olds: Trying to keep it to no more than one hour a day. Avoid at mealtimes and in the hour before bed.
- Content: Choosing slow-paced, age-appropriate content. Fast-paced, social media-style videos and AI toys or tools should be avoided for young children.
- Co-viewing: Watching or using screens together - talking, asking questions and engaging with the content - is better for children's development than solo screen use.

This also forms part of wider action to support all children's wellbeing in the digital world – running alongside the government's consultation on further measures to keep children safe online.

Prime Minister Keir Starmer said:

Parenting in a digital world can feel relentless. Screens are everywhere, and the advice is often conflicting.

My government will not leave parents to face this battle alone. Our new guidance cuts through the noise with clear, common-sense tips to keep children safe and make sure healthy habits are baked in from the start.

There will be some who will oppose us doing this. But whether it's navigating technology, tackling the cost of living or balancing the demands of family life, I will

always stand on the side of parents doing their best for their children.

Education Secretary Bridget Phillipson said:

Every child deserves the chance to grow up safe, healthy and full of possibility - and this government is determined to ensure that happens.

I know how hard it is to navigate parenting in a world full of screens. They're unavoidable, but it often feels impossible to tell whether you're getting the balance right.

That's why we're giving parents the clear, trusted support they've asked for - so families can make informed choices, and children can have the childhood they deserve.

A report by early years charity Kindred Squared found that 28% of UK children starting reception cannot use a book properly, with many attempting to "swipe" or tap physical pages like a tablet.

With 90% of children's development happening before the age of five, parents are being supported to make safe screen swaps like reading bedtime stories together or playing simple games at mealtimes.

The suggested swaps prioritise straightforward activities to help children with the social, emotional and language skills to give them the best start in life, so they can start school ready to learn.

Health and Social Care Secretary Wes Streeting said:

Every parent and carer wants what's best for their child, and that starts with giving them the healthiest possible start in life.

We know that sleep, play and face-to-face interaction are fundamental to how children grow, learn and thrive. Screens, when overused in those crucial early years, can get in the way of all of that.

The early years are a critical period for development. That's why we are acting now, to give parents the clear, practical tools they've been asking for - backed by the best available evidence.

The guidance is underpinned by the findings of an expert panel report led by the Children's Commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza and Professor Russell Viner, a paediatrician and expert in children's health.

The expert panel reviewed the latest scientific evidence on screen use in under-5s, and found that long periods of time spent on screens alone can get in the way of activities critical for development like sleep, physical activity, creative play, and interaction with parents.

But not all screen use is equal. The evidence shows that watching screens with an engaged adult where parents talk and ask questions is linked to better cognitive development than solo use, that slow-paced content is far better for development than fast-paced social media-style videos, and that time limits shouldn't apply in the same way for screen-based assistive technologies to support children with special educational needs and disabilities.

Children's Commissioner Dame Rachel de Souza said:

Children are growing up in a world where screens are everywhere. Parents tell me they want clear, non-judgemental information about why limiting screen use is important, given in a way that reflects the realities of their daily lives.

That's why I was pleased to co-chair the group advising the government for this first piece of guidance on screen time for children under five, setting out why it's so important to avoid particular kinds of screen time, and how.

Young children need their parents to be confident in managing their screen use, but often this can be overwhelming for parents learning to navigate this. My hope is that this guidance helps to cut through the conflicting advice available and prioritise children's development and wellbeing, as well as their safety.

Professor of Paediatrics and Adolescent Health, University College London, Russell Viner said:

The evidence tells us that how young children spend their time really matters for their development.

Too much solo screen time can crowd out the things that make the biggest difference - sleep, play, physical activity and talking with parents and carers.

This guidance gives parents straightforward, evidence-based advice. The panel know that screens are part of modern life. We want to help parents feel confident about getting the balance right for their young children.

Professor Sam Wass, University of East London, Director of the Institute for the Science of Early Years said:

Children's screen use in the early years is changing rapidly, not just in how much they watch, but in the type of content they engage with.

Young brains process sights and sounds very differently from adults, and early experiences can have lasting effects on attention, learning and emotional wellbeing.

Guidance like this helps families make informed choices about media use, supporting healthy development and stronger family connections. This is an area where our understanding is changing fast, and where small changes can make a big difference.

Frank Young, CEO of Parentkind said:

It is right to recognise screen time as a battle for parents. Being a parent is tough and we need to help parents to reduce the amount of time very young children spend staring at screens, and especially social media style videos.

This is a huge issue for parents who face huge challenges when it comes to screens and

their children. Many parents struggle which is why we need to help parents without pointing the finger.

This is one of the biggest issues parents face so we welcome the support for parents.

Today's guidance is the latest step in the government's plan to break down barriers to opportunity.

Central to this is the rollout of Best Start Family Hubs, with hundreds of new hubs set to open across the country next week, bringing parenting advice, services and community support closer to families who need it most. The screen time guidance will be available through the hubs, giving parents access to the advice face-to-face as well as online.

The guidance is also supported by Dolly Parton, whose Imagination Library distributes free books to families in some parts of the country through the government's Best Start Family Hubs.

The guidance is also supported by The Dollywood Foundation UK, home of Dolly Parton's Imagination Library which sends free age-appropriate books to children aged 0-5 in parts of the country through the government's Best Start Family Hubs.

Steve Korris, Executive Director, The Dollywood Foundation UK said:

We're so proud that the Imagination Library is partnering with families and Best Start Family Hubs in some parts of the UK to help little ones get the Best Start in Life.

Dolly has always said you can never get enough books into the hands of enough children, because a book can spark dreams, grow imagination, and open up a whole world of possibility.

Those precious screen-free moments spent reading together can nurture language, curiosity, and a lifelong love of learning that children carry with them into school and far beyond.

Proposed measures in the government's wider consultation on social media include a minimum age for social media, raising the digital age of consent, overnight curfews for certain age groups, restrictions on AI chatbots for young people, and whether school mobile phone guidance should be made statutory.

New legal powers taken through the Children's Wellbeing and Schools Bill will allow the government to act quickly on the outcomes of the consultation.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/news/new-screen-time-guidance-for-parents-of-under-5s>