

## No devices for kids at meals and turn off the TV: Singapore issues stricter screen use guidelines



The updated guidelines are part of a new national health strategy to encourage children and adolescents to adopt healthier lifestyles. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN

Children younger than 18 months old should not be allowed screen use or be exposed to screens in the background.

Background screen use refers to having the television or other devices turned on in the background, even when the child is not watching them.

These are part of stricter and clearer guidelines on screen use that the Ministry of Health (MOH) has provided for children up to 12 years old. Previous editions had discouraged the use of screens and recommended that caregivers reduce background screen exposure.

The updated guidelines, launched on Jan 21, 2025 are part of [a new national health strategy to encourage children and adolescents to adopt healthier lifestyles](#). This will focus on those up to 12 years old, with plans to later extend it to older children.

In a joint statement, MOH, the Ministry of Education (MOE) and Ministry of Social and Family Development said children in Singapore face health risks from inactive lifestyles with excessive screen time, poor nutrition, and inadequate sleep and physical activity.

This new initiative, called Grow Well SG, aims to reduce the risk of poor health and development in children through the combined efforts of families, schools, healthcare institutions and the community.

### Corelation between screen use and cognitive development in young children

Speaking at a press conference at Temasek Primary School on Jan 21st, Health Minister Ong Ye Kung said that though the first set of screen use guidelines was released in March 2023, research since then has shown a stronger correlation between screen use and cognitive development in young children.

More decisive and effective measures are needed to shape children's device usage habits as these affect their physical activity, social interactions and emotional well-being, he said.

"Now, knowing more, we are strengthening that advisory... This is stronger than the previous guidance and includes even background screen use, such as TV, which some families tend to switch on while having meals," he added.

Other updates include limiting screen use outside of school to less than one hour a day for children between the ages of three and six, and double that duration for those aged seven to 12.

Parents should also not give their young children unrestricted access to mobile devices, or any access to social media.

Mr Ong said: "I believe if parents work together with us, these measures, even though not mandatory by law, will over time go a long way to shape the habits of our young."

At the press conference, Mr Ong was joined by Minister of State for Social and Family Development Sun Xueling, and Minister of State for Education Gan Siow Huang.



**(Standing, from right) Health Minister Ong Ye Kung, Temasek Primary School principal Alison Ho (partially hidden), Minister of State for Education Gan Siow Huang and Minister of State for Social and Family Development Sun Xueling observing a lifestyle prescription session at Temasek Primary School on Jan 21. ST PHOTO: NG SOR LUAN**

From February 2025, all pre-schools will also need to follow an updated Code of Practice, which will specify that infants up to 18 months old should not have any screen time.

Screens will be used only for teaching and learning purposes for children aged 18 months to six years. Pre-schools need to adhere to the Code of Practice, which is enforceable by the Early Childhood Development Agency (ECDA), said Ms Sun.

In the first six months, ECDA will counsel pre-schools that adopt inappropriate screen use to adjust their programmes and guide them on how they can engage children more meaningfully, she added. For centres that persist, ECDA will “direct them to cease such practices and may take further regulatory actions if children’s well-being is compromised”, she said.

The agency will update its early years educators’ guide by March to provide examples of meaningful screen time, to complement children’s learning experiences. These include using screens to explore educational websites for interactive storytelling and digital art creation.

Said Ms Sun: “You can use screens, but it must be purposeful... You cannot use screens as a time filler.”

# New MOH guidelines on screen use for children under 12



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## BELOW 18 MONTHS



- No screen use unless for interactive video chatting
- Do not leave screens on in the background when child is engaged in other activities

## 18 MONTHS TO 6 YEARS



- Limit screen use to less than an hour a day outside school
- Passive screen use not recommended
- View media together with children where possible
- Do not use screens to occupy or distract child
- Carefully choose age-appropriate educational content
- Do not leave screens on in the background
- No screens during meals and 1 hour before bedtime

## 7 TO 12 YEARS



- Limit screen use to less than 2 hours a day, unless related to schoolwork
- Develop a screen use plan or timetable
- Have regular conversations with children to find out their online activities
- Do not give children mobile devices with unrestricted access
- Use parental control settings to ensure children access age-appropriate content and apps
- Do not give children access to social media services
- No screens during meals and 1 hour before bedtime

### SOURCE: MINISTRY OF HEALTH

For primary and secondary schools, MOE has provided more detailed guidelines on managing students' use of smartphones and smartwatches from January.

These include having mobile phone storage spaces at designated areas for students to deposit their phones before lessons start, and using mobile devices only in designated areas at appropriate times like during recess and after school.

Some schools already have their own guidelines concerning devices. Primary schools, for instance, [do not allow any mobile phone use when pupils are in school](#) at all times, while secondary schools generally do not let students use phones during lessons.

**There is more capacity for learning on digital platforms for older children**

Ms Gan said there is more capacity for learning on digital platforms for older children. Therefore, it is more challenging for schools to adopt a standard set of guidelines for all to follow, she added.

“We have CCE (character and citizenship education) lessons, where we provide some advice to our students on cyber hygiene, what they should be looking out for when they are online... The screen use guidelines complement MOE’s existing guidance to our schools already,” she said.

Singapore’s national strategy – which also covers other aspects like sleep and nutrition – comes after then US Surgeon-General Vivek Murthy in June 2024 [warned that social media use could harm adolescents’ mental health.](#)

Amid increasing awareness of the harmful effects of excessive screen time, several countries have taken steps to regulate screen use among youth.

Earlier in January, a law was passed in Brazil restricting smartphone usage in elementary and high schools.

Australia late in 2024 passed a law banning children under 16 from accessing social media, in one of the strictest laws on online harms to date.

Locally, cohort studies such as Growing Up in Singapore Towards Healthy Outcomes and Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study have shown strong links between screen use and cognitive development in infants and toddlers.

One key finding is that inappropriate and excessive use of devices leads to poorer language skills and shorter attention spans in children.

For older children, screen use comes at the expense of other important factors of development such as sleep, physical activity and social interaction.

Most recently, a local study conducted by researchers from the Institute of Mental Health (IMH) found that 46.4 per cent of Singaporeans aged between 15 and 21 had problematic smartphone use.

Dr Ong Say How, a senior consultant at IMH’s department of developmental psychiatry, said: “We do not just live in a bubble any more. We have this connection to the whole wide world through the internet and social media, and more data has come up to show that kids can be affected by these things.”

### **Parents role**

Parents play an important role in modelling appropriate screen and device usage behaviours for children, he added.

Ms Cheryl Chang, lead principal at M.Y World Preschool in Woodlands Glade, said the school plans for children to have “meaningful digital learning”. For example, Nursery 2 and kindergarten children use iPads every two weeks for activities like basic photography when they go on field trips.

They also use smart “talking pens” that provide audio support for books and materials during English and Chinese language lessons.

Ms Chang added: “We do not use these tools to replace human interaction, but exposure to these forms of learning is crucial in early childhood development.”

Mr Junior Ong, 44, a real estate agent, said that he and his wife, a sales professional, limit how much screen time they give their seven-year-old daughter and four-year-old son.

Both children are allowed about one hour of screen use a week, apart from the rare occasions when they are allowed to watch Peppa Pig episodes during meals when their parents cannot attend to them.

“We want to sit down and talk with them... It is the bonding and attention that we want from them,” said Mr Ong.

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