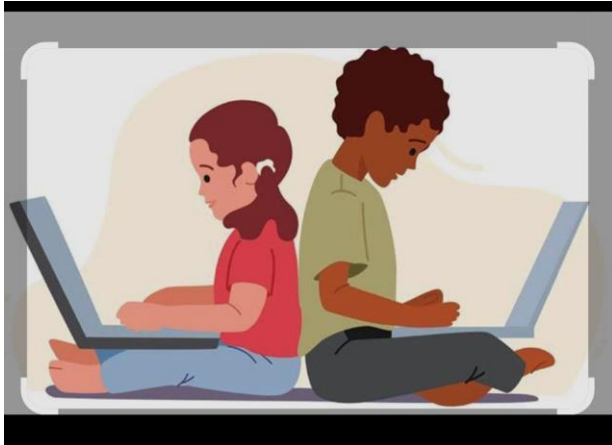


Parenting stress influences children's screen habits, study finds



Researchers at Florida International University (FIU) in USA have a message for parents: If screen time is part of getting through a stressful day, find a way to make it count. The goal should be to focus less on quantity and more on quality.

A new study from FIU's Center for Children and Families found that parents experiencing higher levels of stress are more likely to rely on screens to calm or occupy their children and are less likely to enforce consistent screen-time limits. The findings, published in *Family Relations*, suggest that helping families improve the quality of children's screen use may be just as important as encouraging stricter rules.

Researchers surveyed 822 caregivers across the United States with children ages 4 to 8, examining how different types of parenting stress influence family media habits. Parents experiencing emotional distress were less likely to consistently enforce screen-time limits, while those who felt overwhelmed by their child's behavior were more likely to use screens to manage difficult moments.

What stood out was the importance of caregivers' own stress in decisions about how screen media is used by their children. This is important because it points to the need to support caregivers as much as children."

Enid Moreira, lead author of the study and FIU psychology doctoral student

Rather than telling parents to simply cut back on screen time, the researchers say families should focus on choosing media that is meaningful, engaging and appropriate for their child's age.

"In the same way we think about nutrition, we can think about digital content as something that can be more or less healthy," Moreira said.

Recommendations align with guidelines from AAP

The recommendations align with guidance from the American Academy of Pediatrics, which encourages families to look beyond the number of minutes children spend on screens and instead consider the quality of content, how media fits into daily routines and whether it supports healthy development.

Researchers also recommend using the American Academy of Pediatrics' free Family Media Plan to create personalized technology guidelines and keeping the "5 Cs of Media Use" in mind:

- Child: Consider your child's age, temperament and individual needs.
- Content: Choose media that is age-appropriate, engaging and meaningful.
- Calm: Think about how screens affect your child's ability to regulate emotions and manage stress.
- Crowding Out: Make sure media use isn't replacing sleep, physical activity, family time or other important experiences.
- Communication: Talk openly about technology use and online experiences.

The researchers emphasize that using a screen to get through a difficult moment is not inherently harmful. The greater opportunity, they say, is helping parents make those moments more intentional by choosing high-quality content and creating healthy media habits that fit their family's reality.

For parents who feel like they are barely keeping up, researchers say the answer is not stricter rules but better support. According to Shayl Griffith, assistant professor in FIU's Department of Counseling, Recreation and School Psychology and senior author on the study, parents shouldn't be afraid to ask for help.

"When caregivers have the resources they need, they are better able to set consistent boundaries and engage with their children in ways that promote healthy development," she said.

For families seeking additional support, FIU's Center for Children and Families offers a wide range of evidence-based mental health services for children and families, available in person and through telehealth in both English and Spanish. Parents can also participate in free parenting workshops through The Children's Trust Parent Club at FIU, including *Let's Talk Tech*, which helps families create healthy, realistic screen-use habits and build positive routines around technology.

Source:

[Florida International University](#)

Journal reference:

Moreira, E. A., *et al.* (2026). Parenting in the digital age: How parenting stress shapes screen media parenting strategies. *Family Relations*. DOI: 10.1111/fare.70186. <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/epdf/10.1111/fare.70186>

Posted in: [Child Health News](#) | [Medical Research News](#)

- Florida International University, August 6, 2026