

# Screen time: how to keep your child safe this Christmas

Know the risks, and what you can do to keep your child safe and healthy.

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## The risks

Spending time on mobile phones, tablets, laptops, computers and game consoles can be positive and trouble-free, but it can also put your child at risk of:

- Online bullying
- Seeing inappropriate images
- Grooming (when someone builds a relationship with a child to exploit or abuse them)
- Not getting enough exercise

UK doctors also say that children with higher screen time:

- Tend to eat less healthily and show more signs of obesity
- Tend to have more depressive symptoms
- Are likely to have worse educational outcomes, sleep and fitness levels

This may be because the screen time is replacing other activities, like exercise or sleeping. Face-to-face interaction also seems to be better for children's development.

## 4 steps you can take to protect your child

### 1) Set parental controls on devices

Use the instructions on the next few pages to restrict your child's access to things that could be harmful (e.g. explicit or age-rated content, in-app purchases, and how long they can spend on the device).

You'll most likely need to set a password for these parental controls, so make sure it's different from the password for unlocking or accessing the device – and that your child doesn't know it.

### 2) Agree rules on screen time

There's no recommended 'safe' amount of screen time, and what counts as 'too much' is still hotly debated.

As a starting point, agree some limits that mean screen time does not interfere with your child's sleep or what you want to do as a family:

- Make a plan with your child, and stick to it. You could set media-free times and zones, like during meals or in bedrooms
- Model the behaviour you want to see – which may mean no screen time for you at the times agreed with your child. Children are more likely to learn from example
- Avoid screens **an hour before** your child's planned **bedtime**
- Try to minimise snacking during screen time
- Turn the idea of not using screens into a game. For example, [Forest](#) is an app-based game where a child can grow a forest, but only by not using the phone or tablet until a timer runs out (<https://www.internetmatters.org/hub/expert-opinion/need-help-managing-kids-screen-time-the-forest-app-can-help/>)

### 3) Talk to your child about staying safe online

- Talk about what apps or sites they use and how they use them. Be aware of what they might come across on them (e.g. harmful photos, unkind comments, being contacted by strangers), and talk to them about what's appropriate
- Encourage your child to tell you if they see something they find worrying or upsetting. Reassure them that you're just looking out for them, and won't overreact
- Make sure they know how to report inappropriate content or messages on the apps they use, how to block someone, and how to keep their information private
- Tell your child not to give out any personal information or anything that can identify them or their location, such as their school name or street name

The NSPCC has more guidance for parents on this here: <https://www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety/talking-your-child-staying-safe-online/>

### 4) Encourage off-screen activities

- Get your child active for the recommended 60 minutes a day:
  - See [www.nhs.uk/change4life/activities](http://www.nhs.uk/change4life/activities) for free ideas for activities and games
  - Try an app that's designed to get children active – see the examples at [www.internetmatters.org/resources/apps-guide/apps-to-help-kids-get-active/](http://www.internetmatters.org/resources/apps-guide/apps-to-help-kids-get-active/)
- Find out if there are any free events for children at your local library
- Try out some of these child-friendly recipes to get your child involved in cooking – <https://www.bbcgoodfood.com/recipes/collection/kids-baking>
- Develop your child's communication and reading skills with the activities (for 0 to 5 year-olds) recommended here: <https://hungrylittleminds.campaign.gov.uk/>