

ST Screen Timeout

Engaging children during screen time boosts their social skills: A*STAR study

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SINGAPORE – Children whose parents actively engaged with them during screen time showed stronger social skills than children who used screens on their own, according to new research, which also found that [parental involvement was more significant than just setting time limits or rules](#).

These social skills, known as pro-social behaviour, include the ability to share, cooperate, show empathy, and interact positively with peers.

Conducted by the A*STAR, the study first tracked 2,449 children aged three to six between 2018 and 2019 to measure screen exposure and parental involvement.

They were part of the Singapore Longitudinal Early Development Study, which aims to look into factors that affect early childhood development.

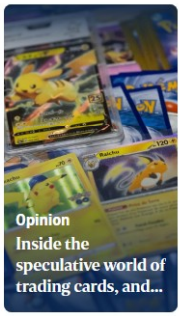
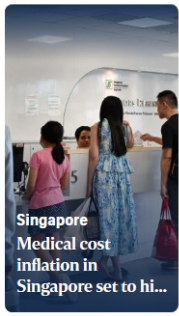
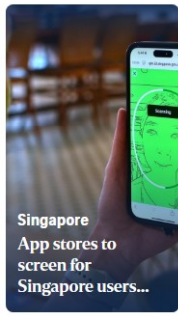
In 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, when the researchers followed up with the same children, who were then aged four to nine, they found that screen use without parental involvement had increased significantly.

According to combined data from the two time periods, among pre-school children aged three to six, up to 26 per cent spent more than three hours a day on screens. This rose to around 40 per cent among those aged seven to nine.

More than one-third, or around 33 per cent, of the pre-school children also used screens without any parental engagement; and among seven to nine-year-olds, the corresponding figure was 42 per cent.

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Parents were also queried on their children's behaviour both in 2018/19 and 2021 to see how the children's social skills had changed over time.

It was found that children whose parents were more involved in their screen time showed stronger social skills.

Published in the BMC Public Health scientific journal, the study found that when parents watch together with their children, talk about content, or play alongside them, it has positive impact on their children's social skills.

This in turn led to continued positive social development as the children grew older.

Quality of screen use over quantity

Dr Xuejiao Chen, the study's lead author, said what stood out from the data is that the amount of screen time is not what matters most for children's social development.

"When parents watch with their children, ask questions, and talk about what they see, screen time can become an opportunity for social learning," said Dr Chen, a senior scientist at the A*STAR Institute for Human Development and Potential (IHDP).

Professor Wei-Jun Jean Yeung, the study's co-author, said the study extends the understanding from earlier research, which has shown why limiting screen time in the first years of life is important for a child's brain development.

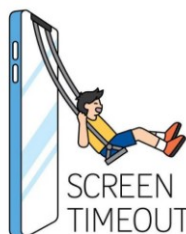
She added that as children enter the pre-school years, factors like duration or rule-setting are less significant, compared with active parental engagement during screen use, in supporting pro-social development.

Prof Yeung, who is the director of social sciences at the IHDP, said the study also complements other Singapore research on infants' screen use.

This includes the Growing Up in Singapore Towards healthy Outcomes cohort study, which found that high screen exposure before age two was linked to changes in brain development associated with slower decision-making, and increased anxiety into the teenage years.

Together, she said, the findings present a more complete picture.

"Limiting screen exposure remains important during infancy, while the quality of parental engagement becomes an increasingly significant factor in nurturing children's social-emotional behaviour as they enter the pre-school and primary school years," said Prof Yeung.



She added that early parental engagement can also lay the groundwork for healthier digital habits as children grow older.

While the findings from the study are not unexpected, Dr Chen said it aimed to consider more aspects of screen use beyond duration.

"Most studies we see actually only evaluate the duration. And in this study we want to bring in more context of screen use, like rules and parental engagement... So in this study, we want to argue that it's not only about the duration, it's also about how screens are used," she said.

She added that future research is already in the works, and the team plans to further examine children's screen habits during the third phase of the longitudinal study.

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Opt for non-screen activities if unable to engage during children's screen use

For time-strapped parents, Dr Chen suggested non-screen and outdoor activities as an alternative, so that children are not on screens on their own.

"We feel that, at least at a younger age, parental engagement is very important to children's development, as it has long-term impacts. This has been tested out, both locally and internationally," she said.

While the time children spend on screens should be monitored, Prof Yeung said guidelines for screen use should go beyond duration.

"A lot of campaigns are just talking about screen time, but parental involvement is particularly important. We would like to see that emphasised more in the policies, for guidance for parents with young children."

For Ms Tahira Alla Pitchay, 42, a mother of two who works in the bio-pharmaceuticals sector, watching programmes with her children is less about screen time, but more about shared time.

"When we watch together, it naturally opens up conversations that wouldn't otherwise happen. Watching Crime Watch in Tamil has also been a surprising way for the kids to pick up the language. Simple words stick," she said, adding that her 10-year-old son and six-year-old daughter enjoy family screen time.

However, with work and daily responsibilities, she acknowledged that it is not practical to be involved in every aspect of their screen use.

"We can't monitor everything, so for us, it's about being intentional and choosing moments to engage. And trusting that those experiences will help shape them," she said.

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Elisha Tushara is a correspondent at The Straits Times, specialising in Singapore's education landscape.

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