

**MEDIA RELEASE**

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## **Not all screen time bad for kids, study**

**Children’s screen time is not the problem most parents fear it to be, according to world-first Australian Catholic University research which found productive digital content can be beneficial.**

Dr Taren Sanders from ACU’s Institute for Positive Psychology and Education led a meta-analysis review of 2451 studies on screen time covering almost two million participants under the age of 18.

The study found that longer exposures to screens may not have the harmful effects on child and adolescent behaviour and mental health as once thought – provided it is interactive, educational and does not reach extreme levels.

Social media, however, was consistently associated with depression, anxiety, and risk taking and had no evidence of benefits.

“Parents are being told screen time is bad and they are rightly very worried about it but maybe they don’t need to be,” Dr Sanders says.

“Evidence is pointing towards that it matters much more what kids are doing, not how much they do of it.

“If parents are sensible and are making good content decisions like they do choosing the books their children read, there’s probably less risk here than we originally thought.”

It was very clear, he says, that not all screen time is the same. However, current screen time guidelines are too simplistic and need to change inflexible ideas that encourage parental guilt.

The problem lies with the umbrella term ‘screen time’ which lumps very different screen-based activities together – not allowing for a distinction between positive interactive and passive screen time.

“If they spend time watching educational television shows, it might not be such a bad thing - there’s all this nuance that’s missed in current guidelines and messaging,” he says.

“Is there a difference between a kid sitting in a chair reading a book versus playing an educational app? The guidelines draw a distinction, and I don’t think there should be one.”

Published in [\*Nature Human Behaviour\*](#), the review provides a robust and comprehensive understanding of the impact and effects of screen time on children's health, education, social development, and overall wellbeing.

### **Key findings include:**

- **Interactive screen time, such as playing video games or using educational apps, has fewer negative effects and some beneficial effects.**

- **Passive screen time, like watching TV or YouTube videos, has negative consequences on children's physical, mental, and social health.**
- **Educational screen time, such as doing homework or using learning apps, has benefits in school achievement and persistence.**
- **Parents watching television with their kids has a positive effect on literacy rather than them watching alone.**
- **Touch screens and augmented reality showed strong benefits on learning.**

The researchers called for guidelines to change to discourage high levels of social media and internet use and adapt recommendations that promote the use of educational apps and video games.

“The guidelines as written now explicitly say to avoid screen time and I think it is hard to argue that all screen time is more detrimental to children’s health than other forms of sedentary behaviour,” Dr Sanders says.

“It should say avoid keeping your kids sedentary for long periods of time and if you are going to give them screen time choose to give them something that is engaging and beneficial.”

Dr Sanders says it matters much more to talk about what kids are doing rather than how much time they are spending on screens.

“The advice I always give parents is that, rather than stressing too much about the quantity of the screen time, think more about the quality.”

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