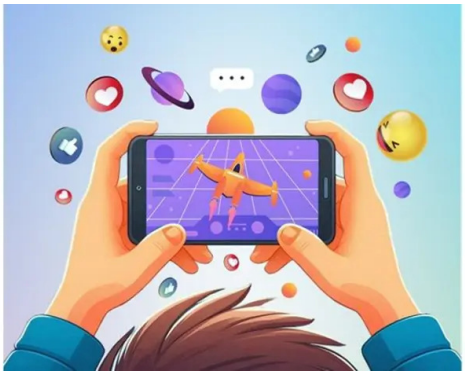
The Star

Smart screen time

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This visual is human created AI-aided.

SCREEN time is an inevitable part of our lives, putting entertainment, shopping, work and education at our fingertips.

While excessive screen time is known to have its ramifications, especially for children and adolescents, the benefits of devices are undeniable.

StarFamily, in its Aug 12 issue, reported that more children are experiencing developmental delays – likely a result of social isolation and excessive screen time during the Covid-19 pandemic.

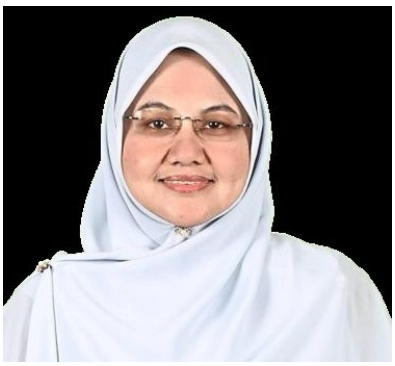
Academics, however, suggest that rather than restricting “digital nannies”, a more practical approach is to focus on content quality.

With working parents increasingly turning to smartphones and tablets to keep their children occupied, they call on parents to manage their children’s virtual experiences just as they would their physical environment.

Focus on the good

As devices and screen time are inevitable and here to stay, it is only valid to have concerns about their implications and consequences, said National Child Development Research Centre director Assoc Prof Dr Mazlina Che Mustafa.

“What’s crucial is how parents and teachers can effectively manage screen time for children. A straightforward method is to emphasise high-quality, interactive educational content to enhance children’s learning and development,” she offered.Mazlina, who is also a senior lecturer at the Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris Faculty of Human Development’s Early Childhood Education Department, called on parents and educators to vet all online content before allowing children to view it.



Mazlina

“Get to know the content and make sure it is educational. Select high-quality programmes and applications that promote learning,” she said, adding that studies have shown that carefully curated digital content can improve literacy and numeracy skills in children.Safe, quality content, she explained, should include interactive tasks for the viewer.

Educational content in games, for instance, can encourage active participation, which in turn promotes better problem-solving and critical thinking skills, she said.She encouraged parents to view the content with their children and to ask open-ended questions that can lead to deeper engagement and understanding.

“Such discussions can help young viewers process information and improve their communication skills,” she said, adding that asking simple questions, such as “What do you think will happen next?” or “Why did the character take that action or make such

choices?", can strengthen a child's understanding of the subject, enhancing both learning and personal development.

Mazlina also recommended that families establish a media plan to help regulate screen time for children.

She noted that such a plan could assist parents in setting clear and consistent guidelines for managing gadget use.The American Academy of Pediatrics website (healthychildren.org/English/fmp/Pages/MediaPlan.aspx) provides comprehensive guidelines for families to create media plans.

Parents, Mazlina said, can tailor these guidelines to their children's specific media use needs."For example, older children may need more media use to access the Internet for school projects, while their younger siblings may not have such needs yet.

"Boundaries like where devices can be used – for example, keeping gadgets off the dining table – and whether parents are allowed to check the device's viewing or chat history should be laid out and the rationale explained.

"While some may argue that such checks are an invasion of privacy, they are necessary as younger children might not fully discern what's appropriate and what's not," she said, adding that consequences of breaking the rules – for instance, turning off the WiFi – have to be agreed upon from the start.

Parents, said Mazlina, must be tech-savvy to exercise control over device usage and must set a good example by how they use devices at home.

Setting boundaries

Screen time is like going on a night safari with wild animals and other dangers lurking in the dark – you need to be cautious, Universiti Teknologi Malaysia Prof Dr Azlina Mohd Kosnin from the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities said.

"Everyone, including myself, has our smartphones with us almost all the time.



Prof Azlina

“These devices may be necessary for work, but more often than not, they become addictive without us realising it. Many of us destress by watching videos or scrolling through social media, which can produce dopamine and keep us engaged,” she said.

One simple way to check if a child or adolescent is addicted to screen time is to try removing the device from them.

“If a child becomes aggressive and starts throwing tantrums, it is a red flag and could be a symptom of addiction,” she said.

Prof Azlina emphasised that early childhood experiences play a pivotal role in shaping values and behaviours, which is why setting appropriate boundaries and monitoring content is essential.

“It’s not just about limiting screen time; it’s also about ensuring that the content children are exposed to is age-appropriate and enriching,” she said.

“Technology and screen time can do wonders if managed in a controlled manner.

“Parental control and supervision are highly important when children are allowed screen time.

“Pop-up advertisements can sometimes show inappropriate content that a child might click on out of curiosity, and this can imprint the content in their minds,” she said, adding that parents should take an active interest in their children’s digital activities, just as they would with other aspects of their lives.

It’s important to monitor children’s activities and explain the reasons behind certain control measures, said Prof Azlina.

“At the same time, cultivating good principles will help them make the right choices even when they have more freedom.

“It’s about instilling moral values and social skills from an early age so that they grow up knowing what is right or wrong when influenced by friends, whether in the real or virtual world.

“If they have good values ingrained in them, it will be easier to steer them back to the right path,” Prof Azlina explained.

She also highlighted the importance of fostering open communication with children, especially teenagers, to prevent excessive gaming or Internet use at the expense of schoolwork.

Unchecked exposure to short-form content on social media can lead to unrealistic impressions of the world and a lack of focus on long-term goals.

Most of the time, children cannot discern whether content is factual or not, as influencers are good at making things look nice and easy, which may create wrong impressions in young viewers, she cautioned.

But with proper control, she said screen time can be a valuable tool for learning, especially languages.

“Children learn by modelling, so it is very important for parents to ensure that their children engage with the right content.

“Ultimately, parenting in the digital age requires a delicate balance of guidance, control and freedom. By staying informed and involved in their children’s lives, parents can help them navigate the digital landscape safely and responsibly,” Prof Azlina concluded.

Virtual autism

One of the contributing factors for virtual autism, which refers to young children who display autism-like symptoms but are not diagnosed with autism, is excessive screen time. Virtual autism has become quite prevalent, with children showing delayed language development, limited eye contact, avoidance of social engagement and lack of sensitivity. These children don’t know what to do at the playground and lack interest in

imaginative play. To help alleviate the condition, parents can reduce the child's screen time and conduct more interactive activities that promote social interaction and organise play dates that do not involve digital devices. Speech and occupational therapies are helpful too. ***– National Child Development Research Centre director Assoc Prof Dr Mazlina Che Mustafa***

Physical play

In my 20 years of experience in early childhood development, I can tell you that parents and teachers play a crucial role in guiding screen behaviour as children learn by imitating adults. While educational videos can be beneficial, overexposure to screens with limited face-to-face interaction can lead to a lack of emotional warmth and human connection. Children learn about friendship, empathy, and how to repair relationships by interacting in the real world. Children can learn from screens, but nothing replaces the energy and emotions exchanged in physical presence. Physical play is essential for both physical and social development, which cannot be fully achieved in the disembodied and asynchronous virtual world. ***– Penang-based Little Tadpole Waldorf Care Centre co-founder and principal Tan Chiew Seok***

Learning aid

I started co-viewing digital content with my daughter, explaining to her what's right and wrong, when she turned one. Now that she is seven, I allow her short periods of solo screen time. Skyler's grasp of English is very good although we don't speak the language at home. I credit this to the careful selection of content she is exposed to. She even shares with me what she has learnt online. Co-viewing with her during the early years is key to her ability to use devices independently today. I taught her to wait for the "X" to appear without clicking on pop-up ads. Now, she can protect herself in the virtual world as she knows what games or videos to avoid. ***– A working mum who only wants to be known as Mei Oon***

