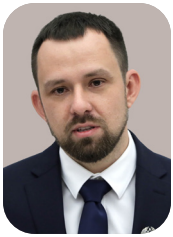
GROWING TOGETHER

ALL-RUSSIAN CHILDHOOD RESEARCH PROJECT

Recommendations for Parents
ON THE SAFE USE OF DIGITAL DEVICES
by preschool children





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These recommendations describe approaches to organizing the safe use of digital devices by preschool children. They consider the conditions under which device use can contribute to a child's development. Practical recommendations are provided on limiting screen time, selecting content, and supporting a child's interaction with digital devices. Particular attention is paid to the organization of children's digital experience and its influence on cognitive, communicative, and self-regulatory development.

The recommendations are intended for parents of preschool children, as well as anyone interested in how digitalization affects children's well-being.

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INTRODUCTION

Screen time (time spent in front of the screens of digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, computers, and televisions) averages around 2–3 hours per day among preschool children. This amount of screen time is excessive for preschool-aged children. Moreover, children spend substantially more time in front of screens on weekends than on weekdays (an average of 1.5 hours on a weekday and 3 hours on a weekend day), further increasing their exposure.

Preschool children's screen time consists mainly of watching videos, playing digital games, using educational and entertainment apps, and communicating. These activities can have both developmental benefits and potentially adverse effects on a child's cognitive and socio-emotional development. On the one hand, high-quality apps and cartoons designed specifically for children can help develop important skills and broaden their understanding of the world. Digital literacy and the ability to evaluate information critically provide a foundation for successful adaptation to life in the modern world and may become an important step toward future interests or a profession. On the other hand, apps, videos, and games that are inappropriate for a child's age or in their content carry risks of behavioral, communication, and emotional problems. Excessive screen time may also lead to problematic digital-media use, difficulties with learning and communication, health problems, and difficulties in physical development.



Digital devices are tools that can affect a child's development in very different ways depending on how they are used. When these tools are placed in the hands of a knowledgeable and well-prepared adult, a child can gain the greatest possible benefit from digital devices while minimizing the risks. Conversely, without informed parental involvement, the same tools can harm a child's development. These recommendations explain how parents can make the use of digital devices safe and beneficial for their children.



HOW CAN CHILDREN'S USE OF DIGITAL DEVICES BE MADE SAFE?

Tip: use a combination of approaches to regulate your child's use of digital devices—monitoring, support, and education. It is important not to rely on only one of these approaches, but to use them in a balanced way. Each plays an important role in organizing safe and developmentally beneficial digital leisure for a preschool child.

1 Monitoring the child's use of digital devices

- Monitor the child's screen time:

1. Screen time is not recommended for children under age 3.
2. For children aged 3–5, the recommended total screen time is no more than 30 minutes per day.
3. For children aged 5–7, the recommended total screen time is no more than 60 minutes per day.

- Monitor how frequently digital devices are used. Ideally, a preschool child should use them less often than every day *(for example, on several days each week)*.

- Personally select and test digital games, apps, and video content before your child begins using them. The content should be high-quality, child-oriented, age-appropriate, and free from scenes of cruelty and excessive fast-paced stimulation.

At first glance, it may seem that an adult's main task is to control the child's screen time. In fact, the content a child consumes is considerably more important for preschool development than screen time alone. Content that is excessively fast-paced, contains cruelty or aggression, or is inappropriate for the child's age can adversely affect children's socio-emotional and cognitive development and can model destructive patterns of behavior.

Content created specifically for children with clear educational goals can have beneficial developmental effects. Research has shown that high-quality cartoons and digital games can develop language, mathematical, and social skills and broaden children's knowledge of the world. These positive effects are particularly important for children growing up in disadvantaged social environments, because high-quality content can partly compensate for a lack of educational information and examples of socially appropriate behavior.



- Apps and programs that involve cooperation between the child and an adult or other children are among the most beneficial for cognitive development.

- Regularly keep track of what your child plays and watches.

- Parents should be consistent with one another and apply all restrictions in the same way. Screen-time limits should be followed consistently, and the child should know them well. Explain to the child why each restriction exists.

- Parents may use parental-control software to manage screen time and content automatically. However, such tools cannot replace personal involvement: technical controls do not eliminate the need to discuss the rules and the reasons behind them with the child.

Research has shown that, among preschool children, screen time of more than two hours per day is associated with behavioral problems (such as irritability, tearfulness, and conflict-proneness), lower independence, anxiety, irritability, emotional difficulties, poorer family relationships, and lower levels of cognitive and motor development.

SCIENTIFIC FACT
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2 Supporting the child while using digital devices

- Stay nearby when a preschool child is using digital devices.
- Help the child with technical issues.
- Discuss the game or video content with the child, as well as the child's impressions, emotions, and thoughts about the content.

Examples of Questions for Discussing Digital Content with a Child

Sphere	Examples of questions
Video content (cartoons, films, short videos):	• What was this video/cartoon about? • What do you remember most? • Who was the main character? How did they behave? How did they feel? • Why do you think the character acted that way? • What did you like? • What seemed strange or unpleasant? • Do you think it was real or made up? • What would you have done in the character's place? • Would you like to be like that character? • What new thing did you learn? • What was the most interesting part?

Digital games:	• What did you play today? • What is the goal of the game? • What did you do best? • Was anything difficult or unpleasant? • Was there anything in the game that upset or angered you? • Who did you play with? Were they people you knew or strangers? • Did you communicate with anyone in the game? What did you talk about? • If something goes wrong in the game, what will you do?
Communication on social media and messaging apps:	• Who did you communicate with today? • What was interesting or fun? • Was there anything unpleasant or confusing in the conversation? • Did anyone you did not know message you? • How did you decide that this person could be trusted? • Were there any messages that made you feel uncomfortable or upset? • What will you do if someone sends you something unpleasant?

When discussing a child's digital experience, it is important to teach the child to evaluate the information they receive critically.

Face-to-face communication with close adults, educators, and peers plays an important role in preschool development. It is within human relationships that children learn compassion and empathy, learn to consider another person's point of view, and develop initiative in communication. A child's digital experience should therefore be accompanied by real-life interaction. The same applies to programs and apps designed to teach children. Such applications can provide genuine benefits only when an adult is actively involved. For example, children often do not retain new words from films and apps unless parents subsequently use those words in everyday communication.

3 Teaching the child to use digital devices

- Teach the child not to share personal information online *(home address, photographs of the home, documents, etc.)* without parental permission. These measures can protect the child from fraud and unsafe contacts. For additional online protection, specialized products can block messages containing personal data *(names, telephone numbers, account details, addresses, etc.):*

• **Kaspersky Safe Kids**	Kaspersky Safe Kids
• **Qustodio**	Qustodio

- Teach the child to be polite and friendly when interacting with strangers online so as not to provoke hostility. Also teach the child not to engage in an argument if a conflict occurs, but to ask a parent for help. Discuss how the child can turn to you for help if something online frightens or confuses them. Give concrete examples of phrases the child can use, or agree on a simple code phrase that signals a need for support. These measures can help protect the child from cyberbullying.

A survey of first-grade children showed that when they encounter frightening or distressing situations, including in digital environments, most children do not seek help, become confused, and do not know how to respond. It is therefore important to develop simple, understandable strategies that children can use in such situations, including seeking help from an adult, parent, or educator.

НАУЧНЫЙ ФАКТ
РАСТЁМ ВМЕСТЕ

Examples of phrases for asking for help:

— “I feel uncomfortable right now. Can I tell you about it?”
— “I saw something strange online.”
— “Someone strange messaged me.”
— “Can I show you what happened?”
— “Something happened to me in a chat.”
— “I think someone is being mean to me.”

- Teach the child that it is important to obtain parental permission before downloading anything onto a digital device and before making purchases online. This protects both against unnecessary spending and against downloading malicious software or viruses.

- If the child is interested, they can be taught digital skills that may later be useful for creative and cognitive development. These may include programming skills and media-content creation (editing photographs and videos), among others.

The first three recommendations on teaching children to use digital devices are basic and universal and relate to safety. The final recommendation is relevant when a preschool child is interested in learning more advanced ways of using digital devices.

HOW CAN RULES FOR CHILDREN'S USE OF DIGITAL DEVICES BE REINFORCED?

Tip: create family rules for using digital devices based on the recommendations above. All rules should be stated clearly and simply so that the child can remember them. Introduce them gradually and make them concrete and understandable. It is helpful to write the rules down and display them prominently as an attractive visual poster that you can make together with the child.

- Develop rules concerning screen-time limits:
- (1) How long the child may use a digital device and on which days.
- (2) In what situations the child may use a digital device, preferably together with you (for example, half an hour after returning from a walk, 20 minutes on the way to sports practice, 40 minutes on Saturday morning, etc.).
- Develop rules concerning content restrictions: specify which games, apps, and video content the child is allowed to use and which are prohibited.
- Develop rules concerning the child's digital safety: for example, personal information must not be given to anyone, and new apps must not be downloaded without parental approval.
- Develop rules concerning practical and technical matters: how to switch devices on and off correctly, how to charge them, and where and how they should be stored.

- As the child grows older, some rules should be reviewed, while the child's degree of freedom and personal responsibility should increase. For example, the range of accessible resources can gradually expand and the permitted amount of screen time can increase.

When introducing rules, it is especially important not only to state and discuss them, but also to apply them consistently. Rules that are followed regularly and predictably are easier for a child to understand, accept, and use as a guide for their own behavior.



HOW CAN YOU "PULL" A CHILD AWAY FROM THE SCREEN?

Tip:

1. Focus on filling the child's and the whole family's life with interesting activities that do not involve digital devices; organize the child's daily routine so that screen time is limited and appropriate.

2. Monitor your own screen time and develop the necessary digital-literacy and digital-hygiene skills.

1 How can you organize a child's life so that digital devices do not take center stage?

1.1. Alternatives to Digital Leisure: Communication, Play, Creativity, Outdoor Activities, Clubs, and Sports

Parents' task is not simply to monitor, restrict, and regulate the use of digital devices, but to offer the child other engaging activities: communication within the family and with other children, and a variety of recreational and educational activities. It is also important to leave children time to invent activities independently and to engage in free, unstructured activity—and even to experience boredom.

- Provide the child with interesting and varied leisure activities and opportunities to communicate with family members and peers. Organize the child's daily routine so that it includes outdoor time, play, including active play, and creative and developmental activities both at home and in clubs or classes.

- Try to spend enough time with the child and help with ideas and materials for play, creativity, and learning.

- Organize the child's life so that digital devices are present but do not become the child's main activity. The effect of digital devices on development depends on how they are used and on meaningful adult involvement in that use.

Examples of digital and non-digital activities for preschool children

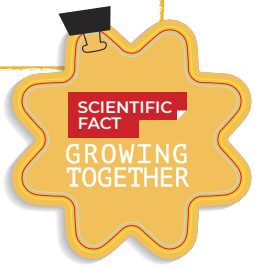
	Independently (child alone)	**Together with an adult**	**In a group with other children**
PLAY	• pretend play with toys with toys • construction play *(LEGO, preferably not only by following instructions, and blocks)* • play with imaginary characters	• board games • games with rules • joint pretend play • active games indoors or outdoors *(hopscotch, ball games, obstacle courses, etc)* • card games	• board games • games with rules *(hopscotch, ball games, obstacle courses, etc)* • joint pretend play • card games

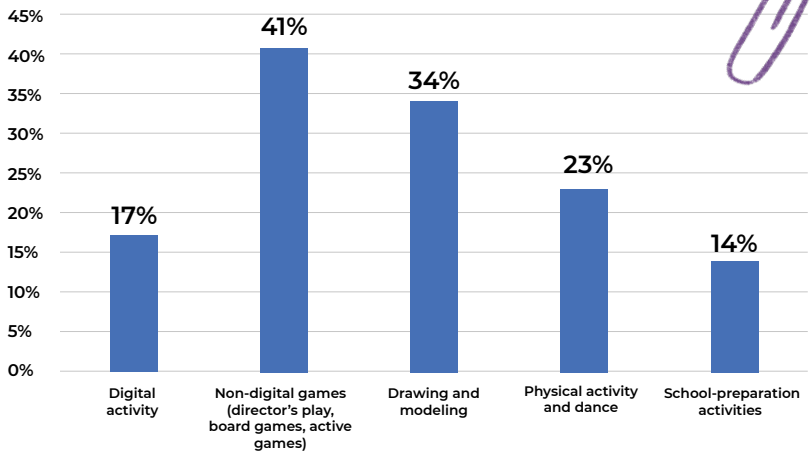
	Independently (child alone)	Together with an adult	In a group with other children
CREATIVITY	· drawing, modeling, collage · inventing stories · constructing things from everyday materials	· drawing or making crafts together · inventing and acting out stories · creating animations or short videos · photography · making projects	· collaborative crafts · group theatrical performances
COMMUNICATION		· talking about the day · discussing the child's emotions and experiences · discussing educational topics · looking at recordings/photos involving close family members and discussing them	· free conversation
ONLINE LEISURE	· viewing educational content selected by adults	· watching and discussing cartoons together · playing digital games together · discussing content together	· watching and discussing cartoons together · other shared digital activities
ACTIVITIES	· puzzles, brainteasers, mosaics · maze games · magnetic or board games · coloring	· shared reading and discussion · puzzles and logic tasks · music and dance · museum, concert, and café visits with follow-up discussions · collaborative card-based tasks	· group classes *(clubs and sports)*
OUTDOOR ACTIVITIES	· observing nature · playground games	· walks and discussion of what you see · active games	· playground games with other children · team active games

	Independently (child alone)	Together with an adult	In a group with other children
EXPLORATION	• examining objects and experimenting *(for example with water and sand)* using simple, safe materials • building collections	• simple experiments • observations and discussion • collecting objects	• shared experiments
EVERYDAY TASKS	• tidying toys • helping to care for animals	• cooking and cleaning together • caring for plants • shopping together and similar activities	• helping together *(for example, tidying a room or playground)*

Do not use a digital device as a way of helping the child avoid boredom or other difficult emotions. Parents often give a child a digital device when they notice that the child is bored, crying, or demanding something unavailable. It is better to give children the opportunity to learn to experience and manage these emotions without digital devices. You can discuss how they are feeling, suggest alternative activities, or encourage them to find a solution themselves..

Despite children's apparent absorption in digital devices, face-to-face interaction with family members and peers is in fact much more attractive to them.





Results of interviews with children aged 6–7: responses to the question of what they enjoy doing

Family factors are also important for preschool children's development. Research has shown, for example, that preschool children's level of self-regulation is associated primarily not with screen time itself, but with the quality of the home learning environment: the availability of books at home, shared activities with parents, learning new concepts and words, access to toys and other learning materials, as well as the quantity and quality of parent–child interactions.

1.2. Mealtimes without digital devices



- Try not to use screen devices during meals. It is important that neither the child nor the adults eat while watching television or videos.
- Ask the child not to use digital devices while eating.
- Ask other family members to avoid digital devices during shared meals as well, and follow the same rule yourself.

Research indicates a direct association between children's screen time and body mass index. In addition to the sedentary lifestyle associated with screen use, there are other reasons why greater screen time may be linked to higher body mass index in children. First, food advertising frequently appears in video content and can encourage snacking. Second, using digital devices while eating distracts attention from the body's signals of satiety.

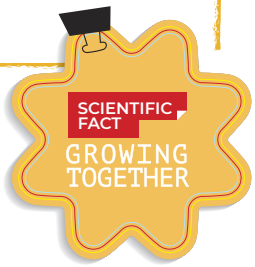
1.3. Bedtime without digital devices

Consuming media content before bedtime has a stimulating effect on the nervous system. In addition, blue light emitted by digital-device screens suppresses melatonin production.



- Organize the child's routine so that they do not use digital devices before bedtime, preferably for two hours before sleep.
- Where possible, avoid keeping digital devices in the room where the child sleeps so that the child cannot use them without your knowledge.

A study involving one hundred healthy children aged 1.5–4 years found that children who watched television before bedtime more often experienced nightmares, talked in their sleep, and felt tired on waking. It has also been shown that having any digital device (smartphone, tablet, computer, or television) in a child's bedroom is associated with shorter total sleep duration.



2 How Can Adults Manage Their Own Use of Digital Devices So That It Does Not Harm the Child?

Parents' own example is particularly important for developing healthy digital-device habits in children. Research shows that children reproduce their parents' patterns of digital-device use.



2.1. Parents' management of their own digital-device use

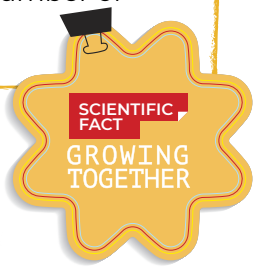
- When you use a digital device in the child's presence, state clearly how long you will be occupied.

For example: "I need to work on the computer for half an hour. I'll be busy, so please don't interrupt me. In half an hour I'll be free and we can play together."

- When interacting with the child, try not to become distracted by a digital device outside specifically designated times. Avoid aimlessly scrolling through news feeds or social media in the child's presence.

- Do not watch content in the child's presence that you prohibit the child from watching.

Parents' use of digital devices in a child's presence disrupts face-to-face interaction. Research has found that high parental absorption with digital devices is associated with fewer parent–child interactions and a greater number of conflicts.







In our interviews, many younger schoolchildren reported that adults' use of digital devices interferes with communication with them and negatively affects their well-being and mood. Children are sensitive to how adults use digital devices, and this can make them feel anxious, unimportant, or deprived of attention.

2.2. Learning about digital-device use

To regulate a child's use of digital devices successfully, parents should demonstrate a high level of digital and media literacy.

- Familiarize yourself with existing programs for limiting children's use of digital devices, as well as programs for monitoring a child's digital activity.
- Learn about the age ratings and characteristics of cartoons, digital games, and children's apps so that you can make appropriate content choices for your child.
- If necessary, take a basic digital-literacy course so that you are prepared to help your child in a difficult situation *(for example, cyberbullying, fraud, or online purchases)*.

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