

RECOMMENDED SCREEN TIME FOR CHILDREN AND GUIDELINES FOR USE OF MEDIA AND ONLINE CONTENT

INTRODUCTION:

The Council for Electronic Media took into consideration:

- the need of uniform policy with regard to media consumption by children in Bulgaria as part of the national media literacy policy, which should include healthy limiting the different age groups' screen time, the need of practical guidelines for attaining these objectives, of an awareness-raising and educational campaign, as well as of measures to support parents, teachers and professionals working with children and pupils;
- its powers under Article 17a, item 23 of Article 32(1) and Article 33a(3) of the Radio and Television Act and Article 33a of the Audiovisual Media Services Directive related to taking and encouraging the taking of measures and actions to promote the development of media literacy in society;
- the Code of Conduct on Measures to Assess, Label and Restrict Access to Programmes which are Harmful or Pose a Risk to Affect Adversely the Physical, Mental, Moral and/or Social Development of Children, elaborated jointly by the Council for Electronic Media, the Association of Bulgarian Radio and Television Broadcasters (ABRO), the Bulgarian National Television and the Bulgarian National Radio;
- the scientific data and evidence of the influence of screen devices on child development, including [Guidelines on physical activity, sedentary behaviour and sleep for children under 5 years of age](#) of the World Health Organization (WHO) concerning recommended screen time;
- a national survey, representative for residents of the Republic of Bulgaria aged 0 to 18, regarding the public attitudes, assessment of media content use and its impact on children, commissioned by CEM and conducted in 2024. The survey can be accessed at <https://www.cem.bg/controlbg/1507>;
- the fact that screen devices are part of everyday life for a large portion of Bulgarian children and they can be used within reasonable, proportional and healthy limits for learning and communications as well as for entertainment purposes.

By this document, the Council for Electronic Media aims to assist parents, guardians, custodians or other child caregivers, as well as early childhood professionals, in exposing children to screens gradually, to an appropriate and suitable extent, so as to avoid detriment to their physical, mental, moral and/or social development, including their sight, speech, psychosocial and emotional development.

I. DEFINITION OF SCREEN TIME

Screen time is the time that children spend watching various electronic devices (TV, computer monitor, tablet, smart phone, etc.)

II. RISKS ASSOCIATED WITH THE EXCESSIVE USE OF SCREEN DEVICES

Sufficiently compelling scientific evidence has emerged in recent years that the time spent watching screen devices may harm child health and development, especially in early childhood. This period is crucial for the development of the child's brain which learns best by experience and direct interaction with surrounding people and objects. It has been established that too much time spent watching a screen exposes child health and development to a risk in age groups.

The excessive use of screen devices exposes a child's **physical** health to risks mainly associated with:

- Sight deterioration and myopia;
- Sun allergies (caused by UV rays emitted by mobile telephones);
- Overweight and obesity due to lack of exercise;
- Chronic sleep insufficiency, etc.

The excessive use of screen devices exposes a child's **psychosocial and emotional development** to risks mainly associated with:

- Increased anxiety;
- Depression;
- Hyperactivity;
- Concentration and memory problems;
- Learning disabilities and/or decreased motivation to study;

- Aggressive behaviour and lack of impulse control;
- Increased risks of addiction to psychoactive substances;
- Deficient social skills and inability to make friends in the real world;
- Decreased feeling of empathy and skills to identify the emotions of others;
- Lack of self-confidence, especially as a result of excessive use of social media;
- Screen addiction, internet addiction, gaming disorder that may facilitate the development of another addiction.

III. RECOMMENDED ACCESS TO SCREEN DEVICES

Recommended screen time:

For children in the youngest age group, screen time should be as short as possible and should be phased in, the content should be carefully selected, and the daily exposure to screens should be avoided. It is every parent's responsibility to exercise their best judgment as to whether, when and how often to offer their children a screen depending on their attitudes and development in the following age groups:

1. **Infants (0–2 years):** the use of screen devices is not recommended;
2. **Preschoolers (2–5 years):** in this age group, it is recommended to gradually increase the screen access offered until it reaches 1 hour per day. It is recommended to balance screen time with breaks rather than spend it as a single uninterrupted period. At the same time, it is recommended to encourage children of that age to be physically active and avoid screens during meals and before bedtime. If content is provided, it must be suitable for the child's age and parents should encourage shared watching and discussion.
3. **School-age children (6–12 years):** it is recommended to limit screen time to 2 hours per day excluding study and other education pursuits in which the child is engaged. Healthy consistent time limits need to be set to screen time, and the types of media and other content need to be filtered. The time spent on the media has to be balanced with time for other activities such as practising a sport, strolling in nature, physical activity, sleeping, socializing, reading books, etc. Children of this age can already be familiarized with suitable information content involving, say, news for children.

4. **Teenagers (13–18 years):** responsible and balanced use of screen devices is recommended. In Bulgaria, children aged 14 and over are eligible to create social media profiles of their own and should be able to manage such profiles reasonably, safely and responsibly. This includes building media literacy skills, including reporting of inappropriate content and/or behaviour on the various platforms.

Recommended screen viewing distance and settings:

The distance at which a screen is viewed is another important aspect. The recommended distances are:

- for telephones: over 40–45 cm;
- for TV: over 3 metres.

This viewing distance should also be observed in the classroom, including for front-row pupils, and screen brightness and contrast should be adjusted to moderate for the youngest age groups.

IV. CONTENT:

Using media and online content:

- **Parents' involvement:** parents should actively share in children's activities, say, by watching and discussing content together with them. This helps children understand and critically assess what they view.
- **Age limits:** parents are bound to verify the age group for which the media content, programme or video game is recommended.
- **Content of programmes, video games and films watched by children**
 - Notice should be taken of inappropriate and harmful content, and children's access to it should be avoided. More specifically, content is harmful where it may include: violence, sex scenes, materials containing sexual exploitation of children, narcotic drugs, alcoholic beverages, tobacco products, smoking products other than tobacco products such as smokeless or heated tobacco products, harmful substances, quick weight loss advice (addressed to children and teenagers) or overeating, dangerous selfie-taking, online challenges, gambling, hate speech, etc.

V. FURTHER GUIDELINES FOR PARENTS:

Present-day parents employ different strategies to manage their children's digital life. Regardless of the specific approach, building a healthy digital culture and skills to cope with online hazards takes time, consistency, and effort. This is a process that happens gradually – it needs steady communication and active participation of parents.

The first step is open dialogue with the child. Conversations should begin with clear and intelligible explanations of cyberspace risks. It is important to explain to the child that the internet is both a valuable resource and a space that should be handled with caution. Randomly clicking links may result in exposure to inappropriate content, infection with computer viruses or other malware, or accidental contact with strangers. The child should therefore be aware that any suspicious action online may entail consequences.

Besides this, establishing trust between the adult and the child is of the essence. No matter what happens, the most important thing is that the child should tell the adult immediately, so that the response would be adequate, and the necessary measures would be taken. This includes calling the 124 123 helpline for online safety of children which is operated by the Bulgarian Safer Internet Centre. Professional help and advice on addressing the issues that have emerged are available there.

Cultivating critical thinking in children and encouraging them to ask questions are other key factors of children's digital protection. Parents should not just monitor but should actively teach their children how to identify and avoid cyberspace risks and balance their screen time.

Parents are recommended to follow these essential guidelines to ensure safe screen time to their children:

- **Parental control settings:** Most screen devices and apps have parental control settings which enable parents to monitor and limit children's screen watching time and time spent in the application concerned, as well as to restrict access to inappropriate screen content. Parental control apps are also available.¹
- **Online safety:** The significance of media content, including ads and social media, needs to

¹ [Oustodio](#): Activity monitoring, enhanced web content filters, real-time location tracking, screen time management tools, etc;

[Bark](#): Monitors over 30 social media apps and has good web filtering;

[Mobicip](#): Adaptive web filtering and essential screen time tools;

[KidLogger](#): Monitors the child's internet usage and limits the time for each app;

[FamilyKeeper](#): Real-time alerts and location tracking;

[Protect your kid](#): Application in Bulgarian.

be discussed with children both at home and at school. Children should be able to identify fake news and inappropriate content. They should also be encouraged to share if they run into something that has upset them in cyberspace.

- **Adolescents becoming digital media literate:** raising their awareness of online threats, of the risks of excessive use of digital technologies and their impact on physical health and psychological well-being, as well as building skills to balance screen and offline time.
- **Finding alternatives to screen time:** It is important that children should be able to spend time away from screens, including creative pursuits, reading, practising sports and outdoor activities, playing with their peers and games allowing active child-parent interaction. Activities should reckon with the child's age and interests and the family's individual needs. It is important to enable children to choose by themselves their leisure activities, which develops imagination and problem-solving skills, as well as children's ability to play and entertain themselves on their own.
- **Seeking support:** When children or parents need help or advice, they can use the National Helpline for Online Safety of Children. The 116 111 National Helpline for Children is also at their disposal. It is open round the clock and can be accessed at no charge from all mobile phone networks. If worried that excessive screen use has already affected adversely a child's health or development, parents should turn for help to a medical specialist, a psychologist or therapist experienced in diagnosing and addressing such conditions.

CONCLUSION

These recommendations are not mandatory or restrictive. The sole purpose is to inform and support parents, guardians, custodians and other tutors child caregivers so as to enable them to exercise their best judgment as to the extent, the timing and the terms under which they offer children access to screen devices.

These recommendations are not addressed to audiovisual media service providers or to online content creators. They are not intended to restrict a content type or group. They are part of the efforts of the Council for Electronic Media to promote media literacy through measures for building skills and knowledge enabling individuals to make an informed choice of media content and media services, to use media services and media content safely and to create media content by sharing in the various forms of communication responsibly, ethically and effectively.

These recommendations are mainly focused on child protection and adult support, considering that screens and above all quality content bring a number of benefits to education, digital literacy, and access to culture.