parentzone

Screen Time: Impacts on education and wellbeing

Parent Zone submission, October 2023

About Parent Zone

Parent Zone sits at the heart of modern family life, providing advice, knowledge and support to shape the best possible future for children as they embrace the online world. We were founded in 2005 and since then have gone on to collaborate with many organisations who share our vision. The online world offers enormous opportunities to children, young people and families. But we also know it can pose huge challenges. Our mission at Parent Zone is to improve outcomes in a connected world, so that children will be:

- safer online
- resilient to the challenges of the online world
- educated for a digital future

Introduction

Screens can be a really effective tool for learning; they can encourage the development of skills[1], connection and creativity, but they are most effective where there is balance.

Schools are well-placed to model this balance. With education becoming increasingly digitised - Google Classroom was downloaded over 1.34 million times in the UK in 2021[2] - schools should ensure they are protecting screen-free learning. Acknowledging the role of subjects such as Physical Education, Drama and Art in creating screen-free moments in the school day is crucial when encouraging students to foster healthy habits. Having this balance during school hours also provides an opportunity to model to parents the decisions and conversations that can support their child.

Protecting Screen-Free Lesson Time

It is important to first acknowledge that not all screen time is equal; passive screen time (e.g. watching television) often has negative health and psychological outcomes, whereas educational screen time does not[3]. But using screens intentionally to benefit learning, engage students and encourage creativity, only works when done in moderation[4].

Plans for the Advanced British Standard system, announced by the Prime Minister this month, clearly demonstrate the digitisation of education. The digital platform for tutoring maths and the consideration of on-screen assessment for GCSEs outlined in the plans illustrate how screens are used throughout school learning. That is why we were pleased to see that "creative activities [and] physical activity" won't be compromised in order to increase funded teaching hours. Protecting this lesson time is also essential for students' physical health. Ensuring that students carry out the minimum of 2 hours a week of sport, for example, helps to counter the inactivity that often comes with screen usage.

However, in the shorter term, we are concerned that low levels of participation in these subjects, for example, music[5], could lead to these opportunities for screen-free learning to be reduced. As well as this, current recommendations on screen time limits often discuss non-educational screen time, for example from the American Academy of Child

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[1] [Alicia Blum-Ross and Sonia Livingstone, Parenting for a Digital Future, LSE](#)
[2] [Digital Futures Commission](#)
[3] [Type of screen time moderates effects on outcomes in 4013 children: evidence from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children](#)
[4] [Type of screen time moderates effects on outcomes in 4013 children: evidence from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children](#)
[5] [Ofsted](#)

and Adolescent Psychiatry[6]. As a result, schools are often left in the dark as to how often screens should be used. Without clear guidance on how much screen time students should have at school, and with companies such as Google and Microsoft promoting online learning, there is the risk that students could spend their whole day using screens.

In order to have ring-fenced opportunities for screen-free learning, schools should be provided guidance from the Department for Education on how much time should be spent on screens throughout the school day.

Fostering healthy digital habits as part of schools' wellbeing responsibilities.

Creating a healthy balance of screen use is part of schools' wellbeing responsibility - in a report by our sister organisation VoiceBox, young people shared that being online impacts their wellbeing, both positively and negatively[7].

Complementing a ban on mobile phones in schools with screen-free lessons and learning on how to find a healthy balance of screen usage can help students to foster habits that improve their overall wellbeing.

The Department for Education should encourage schools to find opportunities to discuss the impacts of screen time on students' wellbeing. Parent Zone has developed Ollee, a digital friend for children aged 8-11 that aims to help them explore feelings around topics such as school, family and friends. Funded by BBC Children in Need as part of their A Million & Me programme, the free app considers how children are feeling and offers ideas about what to do. There are also lesson plans focusing on what feelings students have, and what these might look like, that are available to teachers. Similarly, the Be Internet Legends programme, delivered by Google in partnership with Parent Zone, features a Digital Wellbeing module.

These resources are important as they give students and teachers the opportunity to discuss how screen use makes them feel. Often wellbeing focuses exclusively on mental health, but digital wellbeing is crucial to children's development and formation of digital resilience. Having specific resources to look at these issues make understanding what healthy screen use looks like possible, both in school and at home.

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[6] Screen Time and Children, AACAP
[7] VoiceBox

Schools modelling behaviour for parents

Managing screen usage is a great opportunity for schools, parents and the government to work together, be aware of issues and respond in ways that help children and young people.

Government should take steps to help families create a healthy balance of screen time use across the day, by ensuring that parents are informed about how much time their child has spent on screens during school hours, and what those screens have been used for. As an example, a year 6 pupil may spend 3 hours of their school day using a screen. This could be a one hour ICT lesson, 30 minutes working on a Geography assignment in Google Classroom, 30 minutes watching a documentary in History, and so on. Parents need this information to help them decide what screen time their child should have at home.

Conclusions and recommendations

Learning is becoming increasingly digitised. Whilst screen use can provide great opportunities for students, there needs to be a balance. This balance can be modelled by schools for both students and parents, by protecting screen-free learning, particularly in subjects such as Physical Education, Drama and Music.

Alongside this, teaching digital wellbeing, using resources such as Ollee and the Be Internet Legends programme, can provide students and parents with the knowledge to make healthy decisions around screen time usage.

We have two key recommendations for the Department for Education:

- Schools should receive guidance on how much time should be spent on screens throughout the school day.
- Parents should be informed of how much time their child has spent on screens in a school day, and what those screens have been used for.

Schools could do significantly more to model positive digital behaviours. We hope this consultation will contribute to policies that support that.

If you have any questions about our response to this consultation, please contact policy@parentzone.org.uk.