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CAREGIVERS' EXPERIENCES OF CHILDREN'S SCREEN TIME DURING THEIR BABY'S FIRST 1001 DAYS

STUDY REPORT

May 2026



Caregivers' Experiences of Children's Screen Time During Their Baby's First 1001 Days

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Executive Summary

The '1001 Critical Days' refer to the period between conception and the age of two, during which time the human brain develops at an accelerated rate. It is believed that during this crucial stage of development, the foundations are laid for lifelong health and well-being. The impacts and occurrences of screen time during this period are little understood, and this study helps to address that, by exploring the ways in which parents and caregivers have reported screen time use for their under 2s and how they describe their experience. 174 parents across the UK shared their views of young children's screen time and use. 156 parents took part in an online survey and 18 parents participated in focus group interviews. The following findings are taken from analysis of both data sets.

How many babies and early toddlers are using screens?

From our data, 30% of newborns (aged between 0 and 3 months) are using screens. By the time babies are aged between 4 and 12 months, 70% are using screens. Of those who are classed as young toddlers (aged between 13 and 24 months) 86% are using screens. Screen use is more common as children get older and by the time children reach 2 years old. 15% of newborns in our study are using screens every day.

For how long are under 2s using screens?

Among those who experience screen time, durations for newborns (aged between 0 and 3 months) are reported as being between 30 minutes and 6 hours a day. Screen time durations for older babies (aged between 4 and 12 months) are reported as being between 30 minutes and 7 hours a day. Screen time durations for young toddlers (aged between 13 and 24 months) are reported as being between 30 minutes and 9 hours a day.

Why are under 2s using screens?

According to parental perceptions, young children are using screens for a variety of reasons including educational purposes, entertainment, play activity, and to communicate/bond with others. Parents deliberately use screens to occupy or distract the under 2s, which helps them to complete domestic duties, complete paid employment duties, and undertake other caring responsibilities. 11.5% of parents reported that their child regularly fell asleep with a screen device. Giving under 2s screen time is also used to provide some parents a degree of respite from childcare, particularly for those with toddlers and for those with little or no childcare support. Nearly 1 in 5 parents (18.4%) either had no childcare or they were not aware of the government's early years offer. 40.2% of parents reported that they rarely or never co-played or co-watched screens with their children under two.

How does this happen?

Despite there being guidelines warning parents to avoid screen time for the under 2s, such as those provided by the WHO (World Health Organisation), 46% of parents across the full study were 'not aware' or 'not sure' of any screen time guidance for under 2s at all. Our survey data

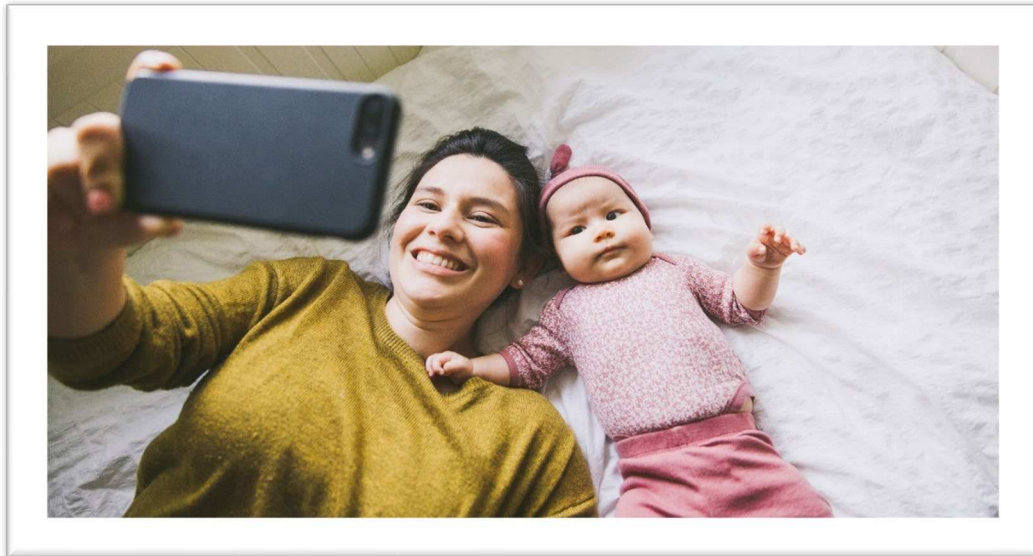
showed that there was little consensus among parents about the potential harms caused to babies and only 28% expressed concern about their children's screen time and use. Parents' dominant perception seemed to be that the use of screens can offer children several benefits in terms of their development and learning. 87.4% of parents do not use any screen time monitoring applications for children. 9% of parents across the study indicated that they only sometimes, rarely, or never supervise their child's screen time.

Parental concerns

Despite only 1 in 3 expressing concerns about their under 2s screen time, 61.49% of parents expressed concerns about their own adult screen use. For parents that were concerned about screen time for their under 2s, they were mostly concerned that screen use may affect their children's health and well-being, development skills, socialisation abilities, their relationships with others, and about the negative impacts of screen content itself. These parents were particularly concerned about signs of, or possible screen addiction amongst infants and toddlers. 60% of parents requested advice regarding screen time limits for their under 2s that is practical and realistic. These parents also want to understand better alternative non-screen-based activities for children and seek to gain a better understanding of developmental impacts from screen use. 85% of parents had not spoken to professionals about screen use during the first 1001 critical days. Pregnant individuals reportedly felt more compelled to use screens compared to non-pregnant parents.

Policy and practice recommendations

1. Given the significance of caregivers as role models, parental screen time should be taken into consideration when developing guidelines and screen advice for young children.
2. Parents would benefit from having clearer guidance about the risks and potential harms of screen time.
3. Effective professional support needs to be sympathetic to parental circumstances and individuality of children.
4. Increased awareness and uptake of funded early years education and childcare would provide support for parents with young children and enable early years' practitioners to advise families about babies', infants', and toddlers' screen use.
5. Professionals (e.g. midwives, health visitors, GPs, educators) have opportunities to play a key role in advising families about screen time for children aged two and under.



Methodology

Background

The effects of digital screen use have long been debated within academia and policy circles,^{1,2} yet screen time effects during the first 1001 days have been under-explored, particularly in comparison to older age groups. In September 2025, iADDICT (interdisciplinary Action on Digital Device Immersive Conditions Team) responded to a call for tender shared by the 1001 Critical Days Foundation to undertake a systematic review of the impact of screen time in the 1001 critical days of life – from pregnancy to age two. iADDICT comprises of a diverse group of academics from four universities across the UK, which includes (in alphabetical order): Carmen Clayton (Leeds Trinity University), Rafe Clayton (University of Leeds), Richard James (Loughborough University), James Wolffsohn and Amy Sheppard (Aston University). The team are drawn together based on their shared belief that answers to the questions challenging screen time researchers lie within a multi-disciplinary approach, leading towards interdisciplinary analysis and outputs. After successfully applying for the tender, and whilst undertaking the systematic review, this additional study was also commissioned by the 1001 Critical Days Foundation as a secondary arm of research to explore parental experiences and

¹ House of Commons Education Committee. (2024). *Screen time: Impacts on education and wellbeing* (Fourth report of session 2023–24). House of Commons. <https://committees.parliament.uk/publications/44004/documents/219356/default/>

² Stiglic, N., & Viner, R. M. (2019). Effects of screentime on the health and well-being of children and adolescents: A systematic review of reviews. *BMJ Open*, 9(1), e023191. <https://doi.org/10.1136/bmjopen-2018-023191>

was led by Carmen Clayton and Rafe Clayton of the iADDICT group. Six focus group interviews (online and in-person) and an online survey were conducted during February and May 2026 to enable a better understanding of babies', infants' and toddlers' screen use and caregivers' views. This report presents anonymised findings from the parental survey and interviews.

Ethical approval for the study was granted through Leeds Trinity University under approval code 2025-SEC-STA-0071.

Primary Research Questions

1. To what extent are digital screens being used at home during the 1001 critical days period and in what ways?
2. What impacts, if any, does screen use have for children and parents/carers?
3. What support, if any, would parents/carers like to receive on babies and toddlers' screen use and during pregnancy.

Methods and Analysis

Focus Groups

- Six semi-structured qualitative focus group interviews were undertaken in February and March 2026.
- Interview questions were informed by the existing literature. Parents were then asked to complete a post-interview online survey to capture socio-demographic and additional screen use information.
- Five focus groups were held online and one was conducted in-person (at Leeds Trinity University). Participants had the choice of attending an in-person or online Microsoft Teams focus group.
- 3-4 parents attended each focus group which were mixed in terms of parental backgrounds, ages and genders.
- Online participants had the choice of using their cameras or not.
- Some focus group participants had multiple aged children. In such instances, parents were reminded to restrict their accounts for the child who was aged two or under as per the study criteria.
- The average length of each focus group was 70 minutes.
- Interviews were transcribed verbatim, anonymised, then thematically analysed by applying Braun and Clarke's framework (2022).³

³ Braun, V., & Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). *Using thematic analysis in psychology. Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101. <https://doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>

Survey

- After the completion of the focus groups and the preliminary coding of the transcripts, an online survey was developed to capture a larger number of parental views of screen use by babies, infants, and toddlers.
- Survey questions were informed by the existing literature and initial focus group analysis. To minimise response fatigue, the inclusion of all interview questions was not possible.
- The survey was created and distributed on Microsoft Forms.
- The survey was open to parents across the UK from February to April 2026.⁴
- Completion time was 10 minutes on average.
- Survey results were downloaded to Microsoft Excel and analysed using descriptive statistics. Not all questions were completed by respondents which is reflected in the analysis.
- If a survey participant had more than one child under the age of two, we asked parents to report on one child only who met the criteria.
- Where questions allowed for a multiple-response answer, each response was treated independently to represent the proportion of parents' accounts (i.e. percentages for such questions would not add up to 100% therefore).
- For statistical data, percentages may not total 100% due to rounding.

Recruitment

An advert for the study was shared on social media by national organisations and local children centres. Parents who responded to the advert were provided with additional information about the focus groups including the consent form. 18 participants took part in the focus groups and participants received a £35 gift voucher for their time and participation.

The online survey was shared in the same way as the focus group interviews. Focus group participants were also invited to share the survey advert with their networks (such as parent and baby groups, with family and friends). The information sheet and consent form were provided with the advert itself. Participants who completed the survey had the option of entering a prize draw to win a £35 Love2Shop voucher (randomly drawn). 156 parents took part in the online survey.

Inclusion Criteria

Parents, carers, or parents-to-be with a minimum of one child aged two and under and/or pregnant individuals were invited to take part in focus group interviews or the online survey.

⁴ Focus group interviewees were not permitted to take part in the national survey.

Participants had to be aged 18+ to take part. We welcomed parents from diverse backgrounds, circumstances and family arrangements to take part.

Survey and Focus Group Participants

- 174 parents in total participated in the survey (n=156) and focus group (n=18).
- Mothers predominately took part in the focus groups and survey representing 82% (n=141) across the study.
- 22 participants were pregnant at the time of the survey (n=20) or focus group (n=2), of these, 4 were first time mothers.
- The age range of parents was 18-54 years of age. Most parents were either in the 25-34 age bracket (n= 96, 55.17%) or 35-44 age bracket (n=69, 39.65%).
- Parents in the research were from diverse backgrounds which was self-defined based on the UK Census categories.⁵
- 71.83% of parents self-identified as White English, Welsh, Scottish, National Irish or British (n=125). Smaller number of parents identified as being Mixed or multiple ethnic groups (e.g., White and Black African and White and Black Caribbean), Asian or Black ethnicity.
- Most parents were married (n=122, 70.11%), with a smaller number of single parents, divorcees, and those in civil partnerships.
- Most parents were in employment, education, or training across the study (n=153, 87.93%).
- Focus group participants completed the interviews before the announcement of the April 2026 Government 0 to 5 screen time guidance.⁶
- The survey was open to parents from the 28th of February to the 15th of April 2026. 45.51% of parents (71 out of 156 participants) completed the survey shortly after the Government screen time for under 5s publication was released (26th-27th of March) and the topic was being discussed broadly in the national news.

Children of Participants

- There was a broadly balanced gender distribution among current children in the entire study. Representing 46.55% of boys (n=81) and 51.14% of girls (n=89).
- When breaking down the age groups of children across the focus groups and survey, most parents had a child aged 12-24 months representing toddlerhood. There were 75 toddlers in the survey and 15 from the focus groups (n=90, 51.72%).

⁵ Office for National Statistics. (2022). *Ethnic group, England and Wales: Census 2021*.

<https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/ethnicity/bulletins/ethnicgroupenglandandwales/census2021>

⁶UK Government. (2026). *Screen time guidance for under 5s*. <https://beststartinlife.gov.uk/screen-time-under-5s/>

- For children aged 4-11 months (infants), there were 53 in total (30.45%) representing 50 from the survey and 3 from the focus groups.
- Only the survey parents had young babies (newborns) aged 0-3 months (n=20, 11.49% across the study).
- 22 parents were pregnant across the study (12.64%) with a first (n=4) or successive child (n=18). 20 parents were pregnant in the survey and two mothers from the focus groups.
- 6 parents reported that their child had SEND (Special Educational Needs and Disabilities) in the focus groups compared to 2 parents in the national survey. Two parents in the survey also indicated that their children were undergoing a SEND review. When taking the figures combined, 10 parents in total (5.74%) alluded to some level of SEND in the household amongst children.

Classification of Children

The NHS (National Health Service) use the term ‘baby’ to refer to both an unborn child (foetus) and a born child up until the age of 1 year old. The NHS also use the term ‘newborn’ to refer to a baby who is 0 to 12 weeks.⁷ The NHS then uses the term ‘toddler’ to refer to a child who is aged 1 to 3 years old. We use these classifications but also, for the benefit of analysis and discussion, we are including an additional descriptive term (in keeping with the Munich Age Classification System (MACS)⁸ – to refer to a baby who is in between a newborn and a toddler as an ‘infant’ (in our case 3 to 11 months). Finally, for those who are aged 1 to 2 years, we sometimes refer to them as a ‘young toddler’ to differentiate them from toddlers who are over 2.

Findings

Babies’ and Toddlers’ Screen Time

- Children are introduced to screens at an early age as indicated by the focus group data.
- 27.77% (n=5) of focus group parents had introduced screens during the newborn period (0-3 months) and 61.11% (n=11) during infancy (3-11 months).
- For children of focus group participants, often their introduction to screens was due to older siblings’ or parental screen use (e.g., TV or music in the background).
- Both the survey and focus groups data demonstrated that children under two used a variety of digital screens, the most popular being smartphones, tablets and television (see table 1).
- In the focus groups, 33.33% of infants and toddlers had their own tablets.

⁷ NHS. (2026). *Caring for a Newborn Baby*. <https://www.nhs.uk/baby/caring-for-a-newborn/>

⁸ Springer Nature Link. (ND). Table 3 Munich Age Classification System (MACS). [Table 3 | Systemic review of age brackets in pediatric emergency medicine literature and the development of a universal age classification for pediatric emergency patients - the Munich Age Classification System \(MACS\) | BMC Emergency Medicine | Springer Nature Link](#)

Table 1: Devices Used by Participants (Multiple Responses Permitted)

Device type	Survey responses and % (N = 156)	Focus group responses and % (N = 18)
Television	95 (60.89%)	15 (83.33%)
Smartphone	43 (27.56%)	13 (72.22%)
Tablet	18 (11.53%)	13 (72.22%)
Laptop	7 (4.48%)	2 (11.11%)
Computer (desktop)	5 (3.2%)	3 (16.66%)
Games console	3 (1.92%)	4 (22.22%)
Other devices	7 (4.48%)	0 (0%)

“Well in a nutshell, my child first started using screen for mainly educational purposes and for interactive learning. So, I allowed it because I believed it’s good support for early literacy, numbers and problem solving”. Amber (mother of a toddler)

“I think around five months or so is when I started leaving him with screens, so he doesn’t have to throw tantrums on me or cry a lot if I’m not active with him”. Wyatt (father of a toddler)

“Towards the third trimester, I did listen to a lot of music videos... From birth, in the hospital, there was a screen in my room... During the first few weeks and months, the screen was always present”. Amal (mother of a toddler)

Daily Screen Time Use

- Screen time amounts varied from no screen time up to 9 hours per day for newborns, infants and toddlers.
- Amongst the 20 newborns in the survey, 70% (n=14) had no daily screen exposure. 20% (n=4) used screens for up to 30 minutes a day. One newborn used screens for over 3 hours but no more than four hours per day. Another newborn was reported to use screens daily for over 5 hours but no more than 6 hours. Newborns who were high

screen time users (3+ hours) represented 10% of the newborn sample (n=2) within the survey data.

- For the 50 infants in the survey, 30% (n=15) were reported to have no screen time. 34% (n=17) of infants in the survey had up to 30 minutes of screens per day. A further 34% (n=17) of infants were using screens daily for more than 30 minutes, with five of these children using screens for over two hours, and in one case, an infant was using screens for over 6 hours per day but not exceeding 7 hours. One parent did not complete this answer fully so there are only 49 responses recorded for infants in the survey.
- All infants in the focus group (n=3) were said to have daily screen time from approx. one hour up to 6 hours.
- Screen time per day for toddlers in the survey (n=75) indicated that 17.33% (n=13) had no screen time, 37.33% (n=28) had up to 30 minutes, 22.66% (n=17) experienced more than 30 minutes to 1 hour, 12% (n=9) experienced more than 30 minutes but less than 2 hours, 5.33% (n=4) for 2-3 hours, 1.33% (n=1) for 3-4 hours, 2.66% (n=2) for 5-6 hours and 1.33% (n=1) for 7-8 hours.
- Focus group participants shared that all toddlers used screens daily in their household (i.e. 0% of non-screen users in this age group). Toddlers' screen time per day ranged from 60 minutes up to 9 hours.
- Of the 15 toddlers in the focus group, two children were using screens for approximately 30 minutes daily (13.33%). 46.66% (n=7) of toddlers used screens for 1-3 hours each day and 40% (n=6) of toddlers were using screens to a higher level of 4 hours plus, including a maximum of 9 hours of use.

"Mine is a daily use... It is a survival skill in my house". Harriet (mother of an infant)

"I'd say around eight to nine hours a day because most of the time, since my daughter doesn't have a sibling yet, she just spends most of her time on the screen". Samuel (father of a toddler)

"At most, if it's more like an educational programme, I would say an hour and thirty minutes and it doesn't go above that. After that, my [son] has his toys which he plays with". Alan (father of a toddler)

Weekly Screen Time

- Newborn screen use was only reported in the survey (n=20). 70% (n=14) of newborns were reported by parents as having no weekly screen time. 15% (n=3) of newborns were using screens every day. One newborn was said to use screens 1-2 days per week (5%). Two newborns were reported to use screens 3-4 days per week (10%).

- For infants in the survey (n=50), 28% (n=14) were said to never use screens during the week compared to 26% (n=13) of infants who use screens every day. Some infants were using screens 1-2 days per week (n=4, 8%), 3-4 days per week (n=12, 24%), or 5-6 days (n=5, 10%) per week. One child was reported to use screens for less than once a week and one parent did not answer the question fully.
- One focus group infant used screens 3-4 days per week, another used screens for 5-6 days per week, and the last infant used screens every day.
- For toddlers in the survey (n=75), 14.66% (n=11) never used screens during the week, 8% (n=6) used screens less than once per week, 12% (n=9) used screens 1-2 days per week, 30.66% (n=23) used screens 3-4 days per week, 14.66% (n=11) used screens 5-6 days per week, and 20% (n=15) of toddlers used screens every day.
- Of the 15 toddlers in the focus group, 40% (n=6) used screens every day. 13.33% (n=2) of toddlers used screens for 1-2 days per week, 33.33% (n=5) used for 3-4 days per week and 13.33% (n=2) used for 5-6 days per week.

"I have a timetable I follow and she is supposed to use her screen three times in a week". Amber (mother of toddler)

*"For me, it's a maximum of twelve hours in the week. So, they can choose how to divide out the twelve hours in the whole week. I have the tablet set to parental control that limits the amount of time they spend. Once the twelve hours clocks in, the tablet doesn't respond".
Hank (father of a toddler)*

"During the week probably not a lot cause he's busy with nursery. On the weekend is when screen time takes precedence sometimes". Stella (mother of a toddler)

Reasons for Screen Use

- From both sets of results, parents indicated common reasons for their babies and toddlers using screens, such as: occupying and distracting the child, educational purposes, communication with family and friends, play and entertainment, to support bed time routines and mealtimes, to support children with additional needs, using screens as a reward for good behaviour, and for shared bonding time.
- Screen use by the youngest population was a part of family life for many households at various times occurring sporadically from morning till night, with screens appearing at mealtimes, playtime, naps, potty training, and bedtime for instance.

- 11.5% of parents (n=20) reported that their child regularly fell asleep with a screen device.

Through the focus groups, parents provided detailed accounts of why screens were used by children under two and the benefits of screen use at a young age.

- In terms of occupying the child, focus group accounts suggest that under 2s screen use allowed adults to complete paid work at home, domestic duties, and other caring responsibilities. Screens were also helpful devices when outside the house, for instance when travelling or eating at a restaurant.
- Screens helped with time-pressured routines, such as feeding children, helping children to fall sleep and during cleaning regimes (e.g., washing hair).
- When asked about screen content, focus group participants expressed that this was mostly cartoons, films, online videos, music, games, and educational material.
- Focus group participants reported that children viewed low and high stimulation content such as ‘Miss Rachel’, ‘Cocomelon’, and ‘Bluey’. ‘Miss Rachel’ was particularly popular within these households for infants and toddlers.
- Parents suggested that screens could help some children to feel calmer or to improve a low mood.
- Screen time also allowed parents some level of respite from childcare. This was particularly relevant to single parents and those with little or no informal help or childcare.

“Sometimes when we are busy with other activities like work... it keeps them occupied”. Terry (father of toddler)

“That’s the only time I get to breathe when they’re distracted with devices they love”. Harriet (mother of an infant)

“My child uses the TV or videos on my phone. Mostly it's for music, nursery rhymes or to help my child calm down, you know, during feeding or when my child is unsettled”. Hazel (mother of an infant)

Perceived Benefits of Screen Use

- Nine focus group participants (50%) expressed perceived benefits of screen use for infant and toddlers in terms of learning and educational purposes. This included

language development, music, potty training, and learning about animals, colours, letters, shapes, and countries.

- Co-watching and engagement with the child's screen use helped some parents to bond with their children, this was particularly so for toddlers.
- A small number of parents mentioned that children were "tech savvy" from a young age (e.g. from 6 months) because of screen use.
- Screen time was sometimes thought to help relax and calm some children down (both neuro-typical and neuro-diverse children).

"It's one of the ways where we bond as a mother and daughter". Sophia (mother of an infant)

"It's a really good learning tool for him and he's picking things up like colours and saying hello". Stefan (father of a toddler)

"They get to learn some things which I cannot teach them myself". Jason (father of a toddler)

"My child has global developmental delay. That affects how I think about and use screen time. So sometimes I use videos or music to help with engagement or just to encourage attention, especially during play or short activities. So, I also try to use screens intentionally rather than as a default". Hazel (mother of an infant)

Parental Concerns about Screen Use

- When asked how concerned parents were about their child's screen time and use, 12.82% (n=20) of survey parents were reportedly 'very concerned' and 13.46% (n=21) felt 'concerned'. From the focus group data, 38.88% (n=7) were 'very concerned' and 44.44% (n=9) were 'somewhat concerned'.
- 8.62% (n=15) of parents across the study considered their child's use of screens to be 'problematic' or 'excessive'. 10.34% (n= 18) of parents from the survey and focus group were 'not sure'.
- Survey participants expressed several worries about children's screen use. The most frequently selected concerns were (in order): reduced attention span of children, eye sight/health, impacting socialisation skills, impacting child's concentration, impacting child's physical activity, developmental concerns, limiting outdoor play, perception that

the child is addicted to screens, perception that the child is showing signs of screen addiction, affecting the child's sleep, affecting child's mood negatively, child does not want to complete other activities or play, screens being used as an incentive and reward, impacting relationships with parents, or other family members, no outdoor play resulting from screen use, and 'other' concerns.

Table 2: Survey Parents' Concerns About Children's Screen Use

Concerns (multiple responses permitted)	Number of responses per category	As a percentage (survey participants, N=156)
Reduced attention span	37	23.71%
Eyesight / eye health	33	21.15%
Impacts socialisation skills	29	18.58%
Impacts child's concentration	29	18.58%
Impacts child's physical activity	26	16.66%
Development concerns	26	16.66%
Limits outdoor play	25	16.02%
Child is addicted to screens	22	14.10%
Child showing signs of addiction	20	12.82%
Affects child's sleep	18	11.53%
Affects child's mood negatively	16	10.25%
Child does not want to play / complete other activities	15	9.61%
Screens used as incentive or reward	15	9.61%
Impacts relationships with parents	13	8.33%
Impacts relationships with other family members	13	8.33%
No outdoor play	10	6.41%
Other concerns	4	2.56%
No concerns	63	40.38%

- For focus group participants, the emphasis of their concerns were rated in a slightly different way with eye sight/health being the top concern, followed by impacts on the child's physical health, reduced attention span, perception that the child is addicted to screens, impacting child's concentration, affecting child's mood, impacting socialisation skills, affecting child's sleep, impacting relationships with parents, perception that the child is showing signs of screen addiction, impacting relationships with other family members, developmental concerns, and a child does not want to play due to screens.

- When asked if screen time preventing parents from interacting with their child, 5.12% (n=8) of survey parents suggested 'always', 7% (n=11) reported 'mostly', and 42.94% (n=67) suggested 'a little'. For focus group participants, 11.11% (n=2) suggested 'often' and 50% (n=9) reported 'sometimes'.

Table 3: Focus Group Parents' Concerns About Children's Screen Use

Concerns (multiple responses permitted)	Number of responses per category	As a percentage (focus group participants, N=18)
Eyesight / eye health	14	77.77%
Impacts child's physical activity	11	61.11%
Reduced attention span	11	61.11%
Child is addicted to screens	10	55.55%
Impacts child's concentration	9	50%
Affects child's mood in a negative way	9	50%
Impacts socialisation skills	8	44.44%
Affects child's sleep	8	44.44%
Impacts relationships with parents	7	38.88%
Child showing signs of addiction to screens	7	38.88%
Impacts relationships with other family members	6	33.33%
Development concerns	5	27.77%
Child does not want to play due to screen use	5	27.77%

"Sometimes she struggles in her sleep to let go of the tab". Sophia (mother of an infant)

"I'm really concerned about how much time my child spends on screen time and how it might affect their attention span, their sleep and social interaction. Sometimes it becomes really difficult to transition them away from the device and I worry about over exposure to content that may not be age appropriate". Amber (mother of a toddler)

"There are times where she's so glued to her screen that she's not bothered about her environment. So, I could literally want mother and child time with her and she doesn't even care. She just wants to be on the screen". Harriet (mother of an infant)

"I feel like it has impeded his speech a little". Stella (mother of a toddler)

- In addition to screen use concerns, focus group participants were concerned about screen content.
- There were general remarks about unsuitable screen time content that children under two could be exposed to through accidental exposure or parental screen use (e.g., watching films or gaming).
- Parents also commented that children had copied inappropriate behaviours from screen content, which had put their child at risk (e.g., jumping from high up places such as furniture when copying characters).
- Focus group parents also noticed that toddlers were copying and mimicking characters' attitudes, mannerisms, and speech (such as American English), which they perceived as negative.
- 'Brain rot' content was recognised as being popular with older children that parents knew (family and friends) and they wished to avoid such content for under twos.
- Some parents reported that they could identify signs of excessive screen time for children, such as rubbing eyes, red eyes, refusing screen devices and/or wanting adult attention instead, crankiness, headaches, difficulties falling asleep, hyperactivity, aggression (especially if screens were removed), restlessness and crying.
- In response to signs of excessive screen time, parents will try to remove children's screens, distract children, play with children, or go outside. Removing screens would lead to protests from infants and toddlers and a range of difficult behaviours (e.g., aggression, crying, clinginess).

"My child is under two years old and he's basically addicted to Coco Melon already and I'm fighting hard to make sure that I find an effective way to withdraw the screen from him". Wyatt (father of a toddler)

"Screen time is making him behave in a bit of a different way from how normal humans should behave". Mitch (father of a toddler)

"If I say enough's enough [screen time] ... he'll go and do things that I don't want him to do". Sean (father of a toddler)

"She can get a bit fussy or unsettled when the screen is turned off". Hank (father of a toddler)

Parental Supervision of Screen Time

- Regarding screen time monitoring features and applications, a small percentage of parents across the study (12.64%, n=22) used these for their children under two.
- Focus group participants used parental controls, using applications specifically designed for children, or child- friendly versions of adult applications (such as You Tube Kids), iPhone screen monitoring features, blue light screen protectors, and setting screen time limits on devices (such as Smart TVs) were also mentioned. The survey did not ask parents to provide specific examples.
- Although focus group parents were concerned about inappropriate content and online safety for children in general, many felt that the various digital tools/apps/parental controls were adequate safety mechanisms.
- As a result, focus group parents felt comfortable leaving their children unsupervised or partially unsupervised whilst using screens. When asked how often they supervised infants and toddlers on screens, 38.88% (n=7) of parents responded 'always', 33.33% (n=6) suggested 'often' and 22.22% (n=4) remarked 'sometimes'. One parent did not answer this question.
- When compared to survey participants' responses, 64.10% (n=100) of parents 'always' supervised screen time for children under two, 17.94% (n=28) said 'often', 1.92% (n=3) suggested 'rarely', and 5.76% (n=9) responded 'never'.
- For focus group parents, 33.33% (n=6) of participants reported that they 'often' used screens with their young children under two (such as co-watching or co-playing), 55.55% (n=10) suggested 'sometimes' and 5.55% (n=1) 'rarely' did so. One parent did not provide an answer.
- For survey respondents, 21.79% (n=34) of parents 'always' used screens with their child under two and a further 28.84% (n=45) reported 'often' using screens with under twos. A proportion of survey participants indicated that they 'rarely' (19.23%, n=30) or 'never' (25%, n=39) used screens with their child.

"If you sit with them and watch it with them... you can develop on that". Lucy (mother of a toddler)

"Sometimes I keep tabs... sometimes I don't". Sophia (mother of an infant)

"I wouldn't say it's strict supervision since it's just games and videos already on the device". Amal (mother of a toddler)

Parental Views on Guidance

- Just over half of the study participants (53.4%) were aware of screen use guidance or advice for children under two.
- For the focus group parents who were aware of guidance and advice, this information came from the internet (e.g., research articles, websites), social media, friends, and family.
- Similarly, survey respondents received advice online, through apps, leaflets, professionals, family, friends, parenting groups, and other sources.
- For parents in the survey, they cited screen time recommendations from sources such as American Paediatric Association (AAP), World Health Organization (WHO), and the National Health Service (NHS). Given the publication of the new Government screen time guidance for 0–5s part way through the survey data collection, a number of parents specifically referred to this also (7.05%, n=11).
- Focus group parents were less able to recall where official information had come from, but one parent cited the WHO.
- 37.82% (n=59) of survey participants were unaware of screen time guidance or advice.
- Similarly, almost a third of focus group parents were not aware of any screen time advice or guidance.

“I think max an hour, but it’s recommended to use it for less... I think I came across it on the internet- a first-time parenting group online”. Harriet (mother of an infant)

“I know that that no screen time is actually the best way. I’ve not heard of any guidelines. I’ve not looked into them. And at nursery, they’ve not really given me any guidelines or anything. So yeah, I don’t know if there is any, but I’m assuming”. Stella (mother of a toddler)

“I’m aware that the World Health Organisation recommends no sedentary screen time for children under two years old”. Amber (mother of a toddler)

- 55.12% (n=86) of survey parents wished for more guidance and advice on screen use for children under 2. In contrast, 35.89% (n=56) of parents did not want more guidance and 7.69% (n=12) were not sure. 94.44% (n= 17) of focus group parents wished for more guidance and one parent did not comment.
- When combining both sets of data, 60% (n=103) of all parents across the study would like more advice and guidance on screen use for under twos.
- Parents from the survey and focus groups were most interested in guidance regarding screen time limits for children under 2, managing screen time, appropriate content and

quality, non-screen-based activities and alternatives to replace screen use, and understanding developmental impacts.

- Focus group interviewees were keen for screen guidance that acknowledged “real life challenges” that parents faced when bringing up children in a heavily digitalised world and considering the demands of parenting young children. A non-judgemental approach was key.

“I don’t just want the solution, I want a step-by-step guide. I do not want to feel alone when I’m trying to explore guidance”. Amal (mother of a toddler)

“As much as I have my own rules and all, I feel like I could still do with guidance, then probably compare it to what I have and see what works better. Cause we learn every day.” Terry (father of a toddler)

“Maybe just some suggestions on how to play with children. I think sometimes I’d like some creative things that I can do easily that would help me connect with her better”. Lucy (mother of a toddler)

“Yes, of course I would like more guidance. I understand that a lot of parents are absolutely not aware of the damage that exposing children to the screens at a very early age can do”. Wyatt (father of a toddler)

Role of Professional Services

- In terms of preferred ways to receive screen time advice, online information was the most popular for parents across the study (total of 61%, n=106).
- Other preferences included information via social media, through leaflets and opportunities to discuss with professionals.
- Across the study, 40.22% of parents (n=70 parents) felt that professionals have a key role to play in disseminating screen time advice to caregivers with children under two.
- However, 86.2% (n=150) of participants across the study had not spoken to any professionals regarding children’s screen time. A small number of survey respondents had received advice or guidance from GPs (4%), midwives (1%), health visitors (6%), early years’ staff (3%), or ‘other’ professionals (1%). Of the focus group parents, two caregivers mentioned NHS staff (health visitor and speech assessment team).
- Building in screen time advice during key stages of pregnancy or childhood, such as antenatal or immunisation visits, were seen as key opportunities for professionals to share screen time advice according to focus group participants.

- Focus group participants viewed parent support groups for children’s screen time guidance positively. Such views came from the focus group experience, where attendees enjoyed speaking to other parents about their experiences through the research and found it very helpful and reassuring listening to other caregivers.

“Social media is a great tool to disseminate such information... Good content creators could be hired to capture people’s minds... [and] work hand in hand with local authorities or the government”. Wyatt (father of a toddler)

“I’d appreciate advice that understands the realities of parenting. Sometimes we are tired, we are busy or we are dealing with children who have additional needs like my child. So, I think guidance that is realistic, flexible and supportive will be valuable for parents like me”. Hazel (mother of an infant)

“I want guidance to be flexible: pamphlets, flyers, online, in my mail, having a free phone helpline”. Harriet (mother of an infant)

“I want to share my experience and learn from others”. Jason (father of a toddler)

Screen Time Interventions

- Managing children’s screen use and role modelling appropriate behaviours were said to be difficult for focus group parents who were frequent screen users themselves.
- 38.88% (n=7) of focus group parents were ‘very concerned’ or ‘somewhat concerned’ (44.44%, n=8) about their own screen time, with most participants describing themselves as “heavy screen users” during the interviews.
- From the survey responses, 40.38% (n=63) of all parents were ‘somewhat concerned’ about personal screen use and 18.58% (n=29) were ‘very concerned’. When analysing the responses of pregnant survey respondents specifically (n= 22), one was ‘very concerned’ about their screen use, and 6 individuals were ‘somewhat concerned’. Eight pregnant individuals from the survey also suggested that they felt compelled to use screens to some extent (i.e., ‘always’, ‘mostly’, ‘a little’).
- Two parents in the focus group who were currently pregnant also expressed that they were ‘very’ or ‘somewhat’ concerned about their screen time and both expressed that they ‘sometimes’ felt compelled to use screens. Pregnant focus group parents felt that screen use was prevalent due to their limited mobility during pregnancy, devices as a

distraction from pregnancy symptoms, and the ease of using devices for everyday purposes.

- Across the study there were 152 non-pregnant participants, 16 of which 'always' felt compelled to use screens (10.52%) and 36 parents (23.68%) reported that they 'often' felt compelled to use screens. 72 participants (47.36%) expressed that they 'sometimes' felt compelled to use screens.
- 35% of parents across the study (n=61) felt a sense of social isolation, which may have contributed towards daily and/or high levels of adults' screen use.

"Half the time you're on the phone looking at how to be a good parent while ignoring your child because you're on Instagram watching these super parents giving advice". Lucy (mother of a toddler)

"For me, I am an excessive screen user cause I'm working all the time and sometimes I have other side jobs... I'm always on my device. I'm always holding either my tablet, my iPad, my laptop or I'm with my phone". Alan (father of a toddler)

"I have a lot of needs, a lot of things I do on my screens... I use my screens all the time. I would say more than half of the day I do make use of my screen, for both work and studies". Samuel (father of a toddler)

- Focus group attendees commented that they lacked ideas or the confidence to play with their children as an alternative to screen use.
- Bad weather in the UK and having to stay indoors was said to lead to an increased level of screen time for children according to focus group parents.
- When asked about children's time in natural daylight, children were exposure to natural light for 30 minutes to 7 hours per day for the focus group participants. Whereas survey participants reported a range of 0-7 hours of natural daylight per day for babies, infants, and toddlers.
- 7 children (4 newborns, 1 infant, 2 toddlers) were reported to have minimal or no time outdoors (i.e. 0-30 minutes per day). Most of these children were said to be non-screen users with exception of two children; one toddler who spent 30 minutes a day on screens (1-2 days per week) and one infant who spent 2-3 hours using screens every day.
- Focus group attendees suggested that the lack of community resources such as well-maintained playgrounds and availability of local provision (such as community centres),

alongside the expensive cost of family days out, meant that screens were a cheaper alternative in terms of activities and entertainment.

- Lack of childcare and support led to children's screen time in some households. Just under half of the participants (47.12%, n=82) reported that their child had a funded early years education and childcare place⁹, and 13.79% (n=24) paid for private childcare.
- Additionally, 13.79% (n=24) of parents had no childcare and 4.59% (n=8) were unaware of the early years offer from the government which is available for children aged two and under.

"If I am telling her, 'Oh don't always use the screen,' she'll tell me, 'But mommy, you use yours'". Amber (mother of a toddler)

"I just want to make sure that I'm giving my child attention rather than both of us just being on a screen". Hazel (mother of an infant)

"Screen time, you know, it is cheap and cheerful time that you use to keep them entertained and indoors... I just think the lifestyle in this country does not help, that we are paying a lot for outdoor activities and the weather doesn't help". Stella (mother of a toddler)

Conclusions

1. Parents would benefit from having clearer guidance about the risks and potential harms of screen time.
2. Parents wish for sensitive, clear, and non-stigmatising guidance and advice that responds to the realities of modern family life.
3. Parents would like advice and guidance to be accessible via different means including a mixture of in-person and online options.
4. Reducing parental screen use needs to be considered since they act as role models for their children.
5. Effective professional support needs to be sympathetic to parental circumstances and individuality of children.

⁹ HM Government. (ND). *Free childcare if you're working*. <https://www.gov.uk/free-childcare-if-working>

6. As parents expressed that professionals have a key role to play in supporting parents and young children's screen time, all services must play a part in acknowledging the real concerns that parents have and provide guidance.
7. Providing screen time advice during routine visits and appointments could increase opportunities for parents to share their concerns and ask for help if needed.
8. Other forms of support such as Children Centres and Family Hubs are well placed in the community to reach parents and children and can provide alternative activities to children's screen time.
9. Greater awareness of the government's early years education and childcare offer would help support eligible parents with limited or no support.

Future Directions

- Following the announcement of the new UK Government guidelines on screen time for 0-5s, it would be useful to conduct focus group interviews again with primary caregivers of under 2s to understand the impact of the guidance and how parents are translating the recommendations into daily life. Since the focus groups were undertaken before the guidance was published, follow-up interviews with the original focus group participants would offer a direct comparison of screen time use and parental views before and after implementation.
- Understanding the views of professionals regarding children's screen time and parental screen behaviours are important, and future research could focus in this area to enable a better understanding of how to support families in a holistic manner.
- Pregnant individuals reportedly felt more compelled to use screens compared to non-pregnant parents. This finding requires further investigation to understand why and the possible implications of subsequent screen-use for babies, infants, and toddlers.
- There appeared to be a lack of clarity among the participants about the precise risks of screen time on under 2s. Using the global evidence base in this area to help provide parents, caregivers and professionals a greater awareness of potential harms will be useful.
- With screen time being almost inescapable for the modern world, societal questions continue about how healthy relationships between non-digital and digital experiences can be maintained, and in particular for those who are under 2. The experience of under 2s cannot be considered in isolation and must be understood through the understanding of the lived experiences of their parents/caregivers and siblings too.

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