Top tips:
screen time and digital play

Many of us struggle with finding a solution to the challenges around screen time and how to support children and young people to access and interact with it in a way that is beneficial and balanced. As adults we have an important role to play in supporting children in a digitalised world.

The rules have not changed – The same approaches to parenting and working with children apply to children's offline and online environments. As always, children need adults to support their play – by playing with them and preparing them with competence so that they can extend their own play. They expect us to set limits and help them manage their time. Knowing our children's friends and where they are going with them applies when they are offline or online.

Online is an 'environment' – Children do the same things they have always done, only virtually. Like any environment, digital technology can have positive and negative effects and children need our support to learn about these.

Engage with children – Our participation – as parents or practitioners – with digital technology helps social interaction and learning. Playing computer games together with older children or watching younger children engaging with electronic toys and devices helps us to understand what they are doing.

Talking is good – Neuroscience research shows that very young children learn best via two-way communication. Language development is dependent on time spent talking and playing between children and caregivers. Passive screen time should be avoided for our infants and young toddlers, as they do not generally lead to language learning.

Playing is important – Children get wide-ranging exercise as well as significant mental health benefits from freely chosen play. Each day should have some digital technology free time and space. Play settings should offer a wide range of opportunities for play and our homes should have some places and times where technology is not used – such as mealtimes or bedtimes.

Providing choices – When children have a range of things to do and places to play, they are better able to self manage their use of digital technology and devices.

Think about our use of technology – We can limit our own screen use, and model good and moderate online and device use, especially when children are nearby.

Supervision helps – Look to organisations for support and up-to-date information. The NSPCC provides useful tools to help parents keep children safe online (www.nspcc.org.uk/preventing-abuse/keeping-children-safe/online-safety). Others, like Common Sense Media (www.commonsensemedia.org/app-reviews) reviews age-appropriate apps, games and programmes.

Being online is okay for older children – Online relationships are integral to the development of young people. Social media helps children to stay in touch with friends, make plans with them, and feel connected. Encouraging appropriate behaviors that apply in both the offline and online worlds is essential. Asking young people about what what they are doing online is totally acceptable and it helps us understand the content and situation.

Making mistakes – Children, just like adults, will make mistakes using digital technology, just like they do in other situations. When supported and handled with understanding, these can help children to learn and problem solve. Concerns about things such as posting certain images on social media platforms or texting inappropriately, may indicate a need to check for other risk-taking behaviors young people may be engaging in offline.

www.playwales.org.uk