



Change your story

Early Years Screen Time and Usage

UK Government Consultation Response

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6. What evidence should the panel consider about the positive and negative impacts of all types of digital screen use by 0–5-year-olds?

Given the National Year of Reading's focus on early years, there is a timely opportunity to reinforce shared reading, talk and play within the home learning environment. The home learning environment refers to the broader pattern of responsive, language-rich interactions between parents and young children that underpin early development, encompassing activities such as shared reading, conversation, play, and guided exploration. While supporting these interactions, it is important to ensure that guidance on digital use is grounded in robust understanding. Digital screen use is not a single, uniform activity. Its impacts vary significantly depending on the type of use (passive versus interactive), the level of adult support, the content accessed and the developmental stage of the child.

High-quality, developmentally appropriate digital activities can support early communication and literacy when used alongside shared reading, talk and play. For example, children who engaged with stories in both print and digital formats were more likely to have above-average vocabulary than those using print alone (Knowland & Formby, 2016). Interactive digital reading can also support vocabulary development and shared attention, particularly when adults are actively involved (Troseth et al., 2020). These findings highlight the potential for digital tools to complement early learning when they are used to support interaction, rather than replace it.

By contrast, passive, unsupervised and high levels of screen use are associated with poorer language development, inattention, sleep disruption and weaker cognitive outcomes (Brushe et al., 2024; Tamana et al., 2019). UK longitudinal birth cohort data show that two-year-olds with the highest levels of screen use had poorer language outcomes than peers with lower levels of screen use (Fish & Bernardi et al., 2026), and higher early screen exposure has been linked to poorer later developmental outcomes (Madigan et al., 2019). Importantly, this reflects not only screen exposure itself, but what such use may displace. Back-and-forth talk, shared reading and play are among the strongest predictors of early language, cognitive and social development, and displacement of these interactions represents a key mechanism through which screen use may influence outcomes.

However, the benefits of digital media are not evenly distributed. Children from lower-income backgrounds are less likely to benefit from digital reading without adult support (Liang et al., 2025), and heavier screen use is often patterned by socioeconomic inequality (Brushe et al., 2024). Differences in language outcomes are also more strongly associated with household income and the quality of the home learning environment than with screen use alone (Fish & Bernardi et al., 2026;

Madigan et al., 2019). This highlights the central role of the home learning environment and reinforces the importance of supporting families, particularly those facing disadvantage, to sustain the interactions that underpin early development.

Parents' decisions about screen use are shaped by wider structural pressures, including time constraints, financial pressures and limited access to local services and support (Moisi et al., 2025). In this context, screens may sometimes serve as an accessible resource, but they cannot substitute for sustained interaction, access to books or broader early years support. Ensuring families have the guidance, confidence and resources to create rich home learning environments remains fundamental to supporting positive developmental outcomes.

Overall, digital screen use in early childhood is neither inherently harmful nor inherently beneficial. Its impact depends on how it is used, what it replaces, the level of adult engagement and the broader context in which families are raising young children. This reinforces the importance of approaches that support families to use digital media in ways that strengthen, rather than weaken, the home learning environment and complement the interactions known to support early learning and development.

7. What evidence should the panel consider about the impact of different amounts of screen time, imposing empirical time limits, for 0–5-year-olds?

The impact of screen time on children aged 0–5 is not determined solely by the amount of time spent on screens, but by how that time is used and the context in which families make decisions about digital use (Mannell et al., 2024). Outcomes vary depending on the type of screen use, the quality of content, the level of adult involvement and the child's developmental stage. Indeed, variation across studies often reflects differences in content, context and patterns of use, rather than simple differences in exposure alone.

This complexity is reflected in the lack of clear consensus on universal screen time limits for young children. Evidence does not robustly support precise, universal time thresholds. Passive television viewing is more consistently associated with poorer cognitive and developmental outcomes (Mallawaarachchi et al., 2024), while interactive educational apps, video calling and digital books used with adult support can contribute positively to language and communication development (Herodotou et al., 2018; Roseberry et al., 2014; Fitzpatrick et al., 2023). Systematic reviews similarly distinguish between passive, unsupported use and interactive, supported engagement, with the latter more likely to support learning and development (Misirli, 2025).

Longitudinal evidence provides important insight into how developmental outcomes relate to levels of exposure. UK data show that associations between screen time and language outcomes are non-linear, with minimal differences at lower levels of use and poorer outcomes more evident at higher levels of exposure (Fish & Bernardi et al., 2026; Madigan et al., 2019). These findings highlight that potential risks are closely linked to displacement of interaction, play and exploration, which are critical for early language, cognitive and social development.

Time alone is therefore an incomplete measure of developmental impact. Engaging with high-quality educational content alongside an adult is likely to have different implications than passive or unsupported viewing for the same duration. Digital media use in early childhood also includes a wide range of activities, such as listening to music, audiobooks and educational content, which may support engagement and language development when used appropriately (Paulus et al., 2024).

Family context plays an important role in shaping patterns of screen use. Families facing time pressures, financial constraints or limited access to local services may rely more heavily on digital tools, including for educational and caregiving purposes (Moisi et al., 2025; Flewitt et al., 2024). Blanket empirical limits may not fully reflect these realities or capture the factors most strongly associated with developmental outcomes.

Overall, while higher levels of screen exposure are more consistently associated with poorer developmental outcomes, the evidence highlights the importance of how screens are used, what they replace and the broader context of early childhood development. Approaches that focus on supporting high-quality, developmentally appropriate use, alongside strengthening the home learning environment, are more likely to support positive outcomes than those based solely on rigid time thresholds.

8. What evidence should the panel consider about the different types of digital screen use by 0–5-year-olds (e.g. TV, digital books and games, social media, messaging tools and online activities) and their impacts on children?

Digital screen use in early childhood encompasses a wide range of activities, including passive viewing, interactive play, shared reading, video calling and listening to stories. Treating all screen exposure as a single category obscures important differences in how children engage with digital media. Focusing on “screen use”, rather than screen time alone, provides a more meaningful understanding of children’s experiences and developmental implications (Kaye et al., 2020; Parliamentary Office of Science and Technology [POST], 2020).

Developmental impacts vary significantly depending on the type of activity. Passive, recreational screen use, such as television viewing, is more consistently associated with poorer language, cognitive and attention outcomes (Walsh et al., 2018; World Health Organisation, 2019). By contrast, active and interactive uses, including shared digital reading and educational apps, can support vocabulary development, engagement and early literacy when used with adult involvement (e.g. Kucirkova et al., 2024). In these contexts, digital tools can support shared attention and interaction, reinforcing rather than replacing the communication and engagement that underpin early development.

Video calling provides a clear example of how digital tools can support early development when used interactively. Responsive video interaction can help young children develop language and social communication skills, particularly when it involves familiar adults and meaningful interaction (Roseberry et al., 2014). At the same time, there remains limited evidence on the developmental implications of some newer forms of digital engagement, including social media, messaging and gaming, despite increasing exposure among young children (Ofcom, 2025). This highlights the importance of distinguishing between different forms of screen use when considering developmental impacts.

Digital activities are also increasingly integrated into the home learning environment. Our 2025 parent survey found that around three in ten (29.6%) parents engaged in digital learning activities with their child daily, and more than one in four (26.7%) said their child listened to stories on smart speakers or audio devices each day (Moisi et al., forthcoming). For some families, particularly those facing financial or practical barriers, digital tools provide an accessible way to support storytelling, language development and shared engagement with stories.

The National Literacy Trust recognises literacy as a multimodal practice that spans print, audio and digital formats. Digital tools can support engagement, motivation and access to stories, particularly when used alongside shared reading and interaction. The National Year of Reading reflects this approach, reinforcing the importance of shared reading across formats while emphasising that digital media should complement, rather than replace, the interactions known to support early learning and development.

Overall, developmental impacts depend not simply on whether screens are used, but on how they are used, the type of content accessed and the level of adult involvement. Distinguishing between different forms of digital engagement is therefore essential for understanding both their potential benefits and risks. The panel should therefore consider evidence that differentiates between types of digital activity and that distinguishes between screen use that is shared with an

engaged adult and use that occurs in isolation, rather than relying on aggregate measures of screen time alone.

Evidence shows that the developmental impact of digital screen use in 0–5-year-olds depends on how screens are used, the type of activity, and adult involvement, rather than screen time alone. Passive activities, while interactive and educational uses can support language, literacy, and social skills, especially when an adult participates. Digital tools can also enhance home learning and storytelling, particularly for families facing barriers. The panel should therefore consider evidence that distinguishes between types of screen use and shared versus solitary engagement to capture the full impact on children.

9. What evidence should the panel consider about the impact of the way that screens are used by 0–5-year-olds impact on child development, e.g. lone use of devices or joint use with the active involvement of an adult, sibling or other child?

The way screens are used really matters when it comes to their developmental impact. Research consistently distinguishes between lone, passive use and joint media engagement, where an adult, sibling or peer actively participates. In early childhood, learning is strongly shaped by responsive interaction, and lone screen use may reduce opportunities for language, social, emotional and cognitive development if it replaces engagement with others.

By contrast, joint media engagement can support children's learning and development. When adults actively engage with children during screen use, they can scaffold understanding, extend language and help children connect digital content to real-world experiences. Co-use of digital media, including shared digital reading, interactive apps and co-viewed educational content, supports early language, literacy and communication when adults are involved (e.g. El Gemayel et al., 2025), and in some cases through interaction with siblings or peers.

Adult mediation plays a critical role in helping children interpret and learn from digital content. Through discussion, questioning and shared attention, adults can enhance comprehension, support critical thinking and model appropriate technology use. This highlights the importance of understanding screen use in terms of its social context, not just exposure.

Digital activities are already embedded in many home learning environments. Parents report using digital books, audio stories and educational content to support early language and literacy, often through shared engagement (Moisi et al., 2025). However, adult involvement varies depending on purpose and context. Screens may be used to support routines, calm children or occupy them during travel or

appointments, alongside more interactive and shared uses (e.g. Flewitt et al., 2024). This reinforces that developmental impact depends not only on whether screens are used, but how and why they are used.

The timing and context of screen use may also influence outcomes. Screen use during mealtimes or before sleep has been associated with poorer cognitive and language outcomes (e.g. Cimino & Cerniglia, 2025), underscoring the importance of considering when and how screens are used alongside whether adults are involved.

Overall, joint, interactive and scaffolded screen use is more likely to support positive developmental outcomes than passive, solitary use. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between lone and joint media engagement, and recognising the role of adult mediation, purpose and context in shaping developmental impact.

10. What evidence should the panel consider about how different types of content (e.g. video calling, digital books, communication apps such as learning to sign, learning numbers and letters etc, video games, children's videos, commercial adverts etc) impact 0–5-year-olds at different ages/stages of development?

The developmental impact of digital content varies significantly depending on the type of content, the child's developmental stage and the level of adult involvement. Early childhood development is shaped primarily through interaction, play and exploration, and digital content has different implications depending on children's cognitive readiness and the extent to which it supports or displaces these experiences.

In infancy and early toddlerhood, children show more limited capacity to learn from digital media. At this stage, direct interaction, sensory exploration and responsive communication play a particularly important role in supporting development (Guellai et al., 2022). Digital content may be less effective when used in isolation, but adult involvement can help mitigate these limitations by supporting attention, reinforcing meaning and connecting digital content to real-world experiences.

As children approach toddlerhood and preschool age, their ability to learn from digital media increases. Educational content, particularly when interactive and used alongside adult engagement, can support language, early literacy and numeracy development (Christakis, 2024; Herodotou et al., 2018). Adult scaffolding helps children interpret and apply what they see, reinforcing learning and supporting comprehension.

Different types of content also have distinct developmental implications. Digital books, literacy apps and educational tools can support vocabulary development,

story engagement and print awareness when used jointly with adults. Similarly, interactive and communication-based uses, such as video calling with family members, can support language development and social communication by enabling responsive interaction (Roseberry et al., 2014). Video calls can also help strengthen emotional bonds, particularly with family members who are separated by distance, by maintaining consistent social connection and familiarity.

Digital tools may also provide particular benefits for children with special educational needs (SEND) and children learning English as an additional language (EAL). Interactive and multimodal content can provide accessible, inclusive and repeatable opportunities to support language development, engagement and confidence (Flewitt et al., 2024). These tools can complement broader early learning experiences when used as part of a supportive home learning environment.

By contrast, passive consumption of entertainment content, particularly when used without adult engagement, offers fewer developmental benefits and may displace the interaction, play and communication that support early learning. This highlights the importance of distinguishing between content that supports interaction and learning, and content that primarily involves passive consumption.

It is also important to note that what it means to be literate is changing. Early exposure to digital media and a variety of content also contributes to children developing media literacy. Supporting children to engage critically and meaningfully with digital content, alongside adult guidance, can help build the skills needed to navigate digital environments safely and effectively as they grow (Flewitt et al., 2024; Parentzone, 2024).

Overall, developmental impact depends not simply on exposure to digital content, but on the type of content, the child's developmental stage and the extent to which it supports or displaces interaction and learning. Content that promotes interaction, communication and engagement, particularly when supported by adults, is more likely to support positive developmental outcomes than passive or unsupported use.

11. What evidence should the panel consider about the relationship between parents' or carers' and wider family screen use and their children's (0–5-year-olds) screen use?

Parents and carers play a central role in shaping young children's digital habits. Children learn through observation and imitation, and parental behaviours strongly influence children's patterns of screen use. Just as positive parental reading behaviours are associated with higher levels of reading for pleasure among children,

parental modelling of digital behaviours can shape how children engage with technology.

How technology is used within the family environment is particularly important. Joint engagement, such as co-viewing educational content, shared digital reading or interactive play, can support early language, literacy and communication development (El Gemayel et al., 2025). Through shared use, parents can scaffold understanding, reinforce learning and help children engage meaningfully with digital content.

By contrast, high levels of solitary screen use, including situations where adults are focused on their own devices, may reduce opportunities for interaction, conversation and shared attention (Brushe et al., 2024; Radesky et al., 2022). These everyday interactions play a critical role in supporting early language and social development. This highlights the importance of considering family digital environments as a whole, rather than focusing solely on children's individual screen use.

Family screen use patterns are shaped by wider structural and social factors, including work demands, time pressures and access to resources. Parents may use digital devices to support caregiving, manage competing responsibilities or access educational content. It is important to create a positive culture around discussing technology use in the home, rather than fuelling judgement or stigmatisation. Practical support, high-quality guidance, and accessible resources are essential in equipping parents with the tools they need to model healthy digital habits. When parents are empowered in this way, technology can be used to complement children's learning, rather than limit it.

Overall, parental modelling, joint engagement and the wider family digital environment play a central role in shaping how children experience and learn from digital media. Approaches that support parents to model balanced and interactive use are more likely to support positive developmental outcomes than those focused solely on restricting children's access. The panel should therefore consider evidence on parental modelling, joint media engagement and family digital environments, rather than focusing solely on children's individual screen exposure.

12. What evidence should the panel consider about whether and how parental attitudes towards technology and wider parenting approaches can influence the impacts, both positive and negative, of digital screen use by 0–5-year-olds?

Parental attitudes, confidence and broader parenting approaches play a central role in shaping how digital screen use affects young children. Parents' beliefs about

technology, their understanding of its potential benefits and risks, and their confidence in supporting their child's learning influence how digital media is used within the home (e.g. McLaughlin et al., 2026).

Parental behaviours also shape children's digital habits. Studies show that parent media use is a strong predictor of children's media use, highlighting the importance of parental modelling and attitudes in shaping children's engagement with technology (Paulus et al., 2023).

Parenting approaches influence whether screen use supports or displaces early learning. When parents actively engage with children around digital content, screen use can support language development, literacy and learning. By contrast, passive or unsupported use is more likely to displace interaction, shared reading and play. This reinforces the importance of considering screen use within the wider context of the home learning environment.

Wider parenting environments also shape outcomes. Responsive caregiving, structured routines and language-rich interaction support early development and help ensure digital media complements broader learning experiences. Conversely, limited parental engagement, high stress or lack of access to support may increase the likelihood that screen use displaces interaction and learning opportunities.

Parental attitudes and behaviours are shaped by wider structural factors, including access to guidance, services and support. Opportunities for parents to receive clear, consistent and accessible guidance on supporting their child's development, including digital media use, vary across communities (Betts et al., 2024; Parentzone, 2024). Supporting parents with practical, evidence-informed guidance is therefore central to helping families use technology in ways that support early development.

Overall, parents' attitudes, confidence, and knowledge about technology play a crucial role in shaping how it affects young children. Their beliefs influence not only how screens are used at home but also the potential developmental impacts on their child. Where technology is present, its effects are most positive when it is embedded within a warm, interactive home environment that includes responsive parenting, shared reading, conversation, and play.

Everyday parenting practices, such as maintaining predictable routines, fostering open communication, and remaining actively engaged, can help mitigate potential negative impacts of screen time and support a balanced approach to technology use. Parents also model what a healthy relationship with technology looks like, shaping children's long-term habits and attitudes. To ensure all families can benefit, parents need consistent, high-quality support that equips them with the knowledge and

confidence to make informed choices. With the right guidance and support, parents can help their children navigate the digital world safely and thrive both online and offline.

13. What evidence should the panel consider about interventions, programmes, or support that can help parents to support and manage their child's (0–5-year-olds) screen use?

Current evidence highlights a significant gap in evaluated interventions to support families with digital media use in early childhood. A rapid review identified very few interventions targeting digital media literacy among families with children aged 0–5 and concluded that it was not possible to assess effectiveness due to the limited availability of evaluated programmes (Betts et al., 2024). Existing interventions tend to focus on reducing screen time, supporting parental mediation or improving digital media literacy, but robust evidence on scalable, effective approaches remains limited. This highlights the need for interventions that support families in using digital media in ways that strengthen early development, rather than focusing solely on reducing exposure.

Our research also highlights the structural barriers families face in supporting early learning. Parents consistently identify lack of time, financial pressures and limited access to local services as barriers to engaging in shared learning activities, including shared reading and interactive play (Moisi et al., 2025). These findings reinforce the importance of interventions that are realistic, accessible and embedded within families' everyday lives.

Strengthening the home learning environment remains one of the most effective ways to support early development and shape positive digital habits. Interventions that support shared reading, talk and play help ensure digital media complements, rather than displaces, the interactions that underpin language, cognitive and social development. Supporting parents to use digital media intentionally, alongside shared interaction, is therefore central to promoting positive developmental outcomes.

Place-based approaches are particularly effective in supporting families. Families experience very different social, economic and structural contexts, and interventions tailored to local communities are more likely to engage families and support sustained behaviour change. Partnership working across early years services, health, education and the voluntary and community sector helps ensure families receive consistent, accessible and trusted support.

The National Literacy Trust's Early Words Matter programme provides a strong example of this approach in practice. Delivered through partnerships with family

hubs, health services, early years settings, voluntary organisations and community partners, the programme supports parents to build language-rich home learning environments from birth. It focuses on practical, achievable strategies that strengthen shared interaction, including shared reading, talk and play. This model demonstrates how supporting parents' confidence, knowledge and everyday routines can help ensure digital media complements, rather than displaces, early learning.

This approach aligns closely with the government's Best Start in Life strategy, which recognises the importance of supporting parents and strengthening early childhood environments. The National Literacy Trust is currently working with Worwin in Manchester and Sandwell to support early years system change through coordinated, place-based approaches that integrate support across services. These programmes demonstrate how national strategies can be implemented locally to provide coherent, accessible support for families.

The National Year of Reading further reinforces the importance of supporting shared reading and early language development as part of a broader approach to improving children's outcomes. Digital media can play a positive role when used to guidance, support shared reading and interaction, but this depends on parents having the confidence and support needed to use it effectively.

Effective support relies on integration across education and health services, ensuring families receive coherent advice from health visitors, early years practitioners and parenting programmes. Guidance should be widely accessible and engaging, delivered through universal channels such as multilingual resources, digital tools, face-to-face support, and print materials while also enabling more personalised and relational support where families would benefit from additional support.

Overall, the most effective interventions are those that strengthen the home learning environment, support parental confidence and provide clear, practical and accessible guidance. Place-based, partnership-driven approaches that integrate support across early years services are particularly well positioned to help families manage digital media use in ways that support early development and long-term outcomes.

14. What evidence should the panel consider about parents' and children's (0–5-year-olds) views on screen time and managing children's use of screens?

Parents of young children hold nuanced and balanced views about digital media, recognising both its potential benefits and risks. Research with UK parents of

children aged 0–3 found that many believed digital devices supported creativity, early learning and engagement, for example through drawing apps, music and nursery rhymes, often integrated alongside non-digital activities such as singing, dancing and shared play (Flewitt et al., 2024). These findings highlight how digital tools are frequently used to complement, rather than replace, early learning experiences.

Our research similarly shows that parents recognise both the opportunities and challenges associated with digital media. While many parents view print books as particularly important for supporting language development, a large majority also recognise that digital devices can support learning when used appropriately. Parents report that digital media can support creativity, storytelling and access to educational content, while also expressing concerns about overuse, content quality and reduced opportunities for interaction (Moisi et al., 2025). This highlights parents' desire for clear, practical guidance to help them make informed decisions about how and when digital media can support their child's development.

National evidence reflects this balanced perspective. Most parents recognise benefits associated with digital media, including opportunities to support reading, creativity and learning, while also expressing concerns about inappropriate content and children's ability to navigate digital environments safely (Ofcom, 2025). This reflects parents' active engagement in managing digital media use within the realities of modern family life.

Digital media is already integrated into many families' everyday routines. Our research shows that a substantial proportion of parents engage in shared digital activities with their children, including listening to stories, singing songs or using educational content together. These shared experiences can support early language and literacy development when parents are confident and supported to use digital tools interactively.

Parents consistently express a need for clear, practical and realistic guidance. Concrete examples of how digital media can support shared learning, alongside guidance on managing timing, content and routines, are more helpful than blanket messages focused solely on reducing exposure. Supporting parents with accessible, evidence-informed guidance helps ensure digital media complements, rather than displaces, shared reading, talk and play.

Overall, parents play an active and thoughtful role in managing their children's digital media use. Supporting parents with the knowledge, confidence and resources to use digital media intentionally is central to ensuring it contributes positively to early development and helps children build the skills they need to thrive.