
How Sleep & Screen Time Affect Your Child's Behavior

We live in the digital age! TV, video games, computers, iPads, iPhones, smart phones and all the other screen devices out there are grabbing for our attention. Children now, have access to technology at a much younger age than most of us adults.

Growing up, I did not have my first cell phone until I was driving, at 18 years old. And it wasn't one of those fancy smart phones of course. It was a black and white text and phone calls only phone. We didn't have a computer in our home until I was 16 or 17 I believe. Our first computer was one of the old DOS computers. It was a huge day when we got an actual desktop with Windows. A whole new world opened up for us.

Did you know that the average American child watches 3-4 hours of TV alone a day? ([source](#)) And that isn't even including video games, phones, iPads, or computers. Another report stated that the average child is exposed for 50 hours of screen time in one week.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends little to no screen time for children under the age of 2. For ages 2 and above they recommend no more than 1-2 hours a day. ([Source](#)) So why is too much screen time so bad for our kids? Here are a list of reasons why:

- Aroused nervous system (which makes falling asleep difficult)
- Sensory overload
- Lack of restorative sleep
- Lack of movement (leading to increase obesity rates)
- Exposure to violence

- Atrophy in gray brain matter (where processing occurs in the brain)
- Addictive tendencies (due to dopamine being released in the system, a hormone which simulates reward processing in the brain and addictions)
- Impaired brain function (decrease in impulse control, abnormal brain activity which leads to poor task performance)

(Sources: [Psychology Today](#) ; [Iowa State University](#) ; [CINet](#) ; [Mayo Clinic](#))

When your child has too much screen time, their entire mood and behavior is changed. Their brain can actually be damaged from too much screen time.

So how does sleep fit in to this?

When your child has too much screen time, in particular right before bed time, their body is put in to an un-natural state of arousal. This makes it difficult for them to fall asleep. When they do eventually fall asleep, their body does not fall into a normal sleep pattern. Because their body is still un-naturally aroused, even in their sleep, they never enter the 4th stage of sleep which is the deepest and most restful sleep.

When their bodies are not fully rested, their body gets stressed. Remember when we talked about how our bodies react when they are stressed? They react with a fight of flight response! Environments or situations that wouldn't normally bother them, all of a sudden do because their body is trying to deal with the stress of not sleeping, plus dealing with being un-naturally aroused from the screen time.

It turns into a terrible cycle.

The best example I have of lack of sleep was from being a first time mom. My daughter was a terribly colicky baby, from what we found out later was most likely reflux issues. Her body was in a constant state of stress it seemed, which meant lack of sleep for both

of us. The first 6 months were honestly a blur. All I remember is not being able to sleep, but somehow managing to survive.

Lack of sleep puts all of us on edge. I can definitely tell that being on the computer or watching tv right before bed makes it difficult for me to fall asleep. When I don't get that restful sleep, I am a "bear" the next morning. Little things that my daughter does, that don't normally push my buttons all of a sudden bother me. I find myself tolerating less and also being more cross and using a raised voice.

So now imagine how your child feels, who may already be dealing with sensory processing problems. Add in the screen time, which affects the sleeping patterns, which affects an already not functioning sensory processing system and you are getting nowhere fast.

It is obviously very hard to completely avoid screen time. But here are some tips you can use in your home to help:

- Remove all screens and electronic devices from your child's bedroom (the bedroom should be a place to relax and wind down, no screens allowed)
- Do not allow screen time for at least 1-2 hours before bedtime (this gives the brain a chance to come down out of that un-natural state of arousal and allows your child to relax before bed)
- Limit screen time to the recommended 1-2 hours a day (or even less) for children 2 years old and older
- Very limited to NO screen time for children under 2 years old (I realize this is not always practical, I struggle with this in our home as well. You are not alone, so don't feel like I am bashing you for letting your toddler watch TV).
- Encourage physical activity and play time away from computer or TV screens
- Encourage reading before bed
- Have a consistent bedtime routine and time (in our home we get into PJ's, brush teeth, read a few stories, pray, and then I rock her for about 5 minutes while singing a

few songs. Then I place her in the crib and typically she is asleep within half an hour of so. Bedtime is as close to 8:00pm as we can get each night. We started this routine at birth).

*Note: Many children with sensory processing disorders can also have sleep disturbances. If you feel your child may have a sleeping disorder, please consult your physician and see about having a sleep study or other tests done to rule out any of these issues.