

Dangers of unregulated screen time for young kids

Nine in 10 children under the age of two here are allowed daily screen time without adult supervision, and that can lead to problems like language delays and attention deficit, a study has found.

Infants are regularly exposed to content on electronic screens from as young as six months – often as a convenient pacifier, said the study titled *Growing Up In Singapore Towards Healthy Outcomes, or Gusto*.

Gusto is Singapore's largest birth cohort study and was conducted over the last 10 years. It aims to understand how conditions in pregnancy and early childhood influence the health and development of women and children.

It is published by the Centre for Holistic Initiatives for Learning and Development, or Child, set up by the Lien Foundation and National University of Singapore (NUS) medical school.

One key finding suggests high levels of screen time for children under two are linked to a sedentary lifestyle later in life, and that often leads to obesity, high blood pressure and poorer mental health.

Increased screen time for children between the age of one and two can also lead to problems in executive functions when the child gets older. Executive functions refer to a set of brain processes related to the ability to focus, remember instructions and perform multiple tasks successfully.

Children usually get screen time on electronic devices such as phones, computers and TV sets.

The higher the amount of screen time between the ages of one and 18 months, the more difficulties were observed in attention, language and social skills in later childhood, the study found.

Professor Lee Yung Seng, co-director of Child and head of paediatrics at NUS Medicine, said yesterday: "This is a worrying trend and a key public health concern that we can and ought to address, especially in this digital age where increased digital media use in infants and toddlers is ubiquitous."

The study recommends that children under 18 months not be allowed any unsupervised screen time. Children between 18 and 36 months can have limited unsupervised screen time of not more than one hour a day, it added.

This is similar to guidelines in other countries, said Dr Evelyn Law from the department of paediatrics at NUS Medicine.

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