

Encourage exercise but steer clear of screens: Keeping kids busy in quarantine

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As social distancing policies come into play and schools progressively cancel sports, excursions and extra-curricular activities, UniSA experts are cautioning parents that filling this void with additional screen time

could be detrimental to their children's health.

Leading children's behavioral health expert, UniSA's Associate Professor Carol Maher says while screens are a tempting distraction for children as their [parents](#) try to focus on work or other activities, the costs outweigh the benefits.

"There's no doubt that screens are an easy [time](#)-filler for kids, especially when mum or dad are working from home, but it's critical for parents to understand that excessive recreational screen time is associated with many negative health, mental and behavioral outcomes," Assoc Prof Maher says.

"The trouble with screen time is that it's elastic, meaning that the time spent watching TV, gaming or playing on an iPad can vary dramatically, often stretching beyond initial intentions.

"For [school-aged children](#), no more than two hours of screen time a day recommended. Beyond this, screen time will negatively impact a child's mood, behavior and attention span, and, in the longer term, can impact their physical health through higher risks of obesity and poorer cardiometabolic health.

"Many parents can commiserate with asking their child to turn off their PlayStation or computer after a long videogame and being faced with tears, tantrums and bad behavior—sometimes called 'tech-wreck.'" As more parents start to work from home, will they need to be more aware of how much time their child is spending on screens."

Assoc Prof Maher also says finding new opportunities for children to be active will also be critical in these changing times.

"Maintaining a balanced lifestyle is important for kids' health and

wellbeing. This includes regular physical activity, which has proven mental [health](#) benefits in times of stress or uncertainty.

"Importantly, a balanced lifestyle will also keep kids in good [physical health](#), ensuring their immune systems are strong, and making them more resilient if they were to get an infection.

"Given the likely medium-to-long term social distancing recommendations, physical activities could include all sorts of backyard play—cricket, trampolines, building obstacle courses—as well as simply getting out as a family to walk, cycle or run together, or alternatively looking into sports that involve some distance, such a tennis."

If we do find ourselves in the unprecedented situation where schools have closed and parents are working from home, Assoc Prof Maher says that screen time still has a place, especially if it is used for educational purposes.

"Teachers are already preparing materials for kids to do at home, and many parents will be relieved to know that when computers are used for education purposes, the two-hour daily limit does not apply," Assoc Prof Maher says.

"Not all screen time is created equally, so when parents are looking for additional online activities for their kids, some options are more suitable than others. For example, educational video games that help kids practice maths, typing skills and so on, are great, as are STEM-focused YouTube channels that conduct all sorts of experiments and investigations.

"Social media also has a place, especially with teens as it allows them to stay connected with their friends when meeting up in person isn't possible.

"If we are relegated to a limited home environment, parents can take comfort in the fact that working from home relieves them from commuting, freeing up time and delivering a higher degree of flexibility to rearrange working hours to suit their family's needs.

"Setting up a new family routine will help clarify children's expectations of when and how recreational [screen time](#) is available. This is certainly a new reality, but parents can make it work by working with their kids, along with some determination and creative planning."

Provided by University of South Australia

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