

Screen time

Working out how much screen time is appropriate for your child can be difficult, especially with children who become distressed when it's time to put the device away. Screen time can be an important emotional and sensory regulation tool for some children; it allows them to be completely in control of their environment, and lets them know what the rules are and what to expect. This combination of control over things like volume, brightness, and being able to stop or exit out of what's happening and the comfort of knowing what to expect is very rare for young children outside of screen time, particularly for neurodivergent children. Being pulled out of this safe, controlled state into the unpredictable, uncontrollable chaos of the real world can be very difficult, and is often why children become distressed when their devices are taken away.

Strategies

- Some children become distressed when it's time to put the device away because it's unexpected, suddenly pulling them away from a safe, favourite activity. For these children, having a visual timer or countdown can help. Depending on their age and ability, this can be a clock, an hourglass, or any visual representation of how much time is passing. (Note that this will not work for every child, and some children may become more anxious and upset when they know exactly how much time they have before their device is taken away. For these children, five-minute or ten-minute warnings can be more effective.)
- Let your child know when they can have their device back. Young children have very little or no real sense of time, and may not understand that when their device is taken away it's not forever. Letting them know that they can have their device back after preschool, or in two hours, helps them to understand that the device being gone is temporary, even if they don't have a real sense of how long it will be gone.

- Try to find a natural stopping point in whatever your child is doing on their device, and line up the end of screen time with this point. For example, instead of having twenty minutes of screen time, tell your child they can watch two episodes of a favourite show, or four cat videos on YouTube, or play until they reach a save point in their game.
- Make the next task after screen time something the child enjoys – transitioning between tasks is hard for neurodivergent children, and transitioning from a favourite activity to a difficult one can be very distressing. This doesn't have to be a whole new activity; adding an element of the child's screen time-related interest to an existing part of your routine can also work. For example, after watching an episode of their favourite show, they can tell you all about it in the car on the way to the next activity; or turn brushing their teeth into a game associated with the game they were playing on their device.
- Children who use devices to regulate their emotions and sensory experience and to calm themselves down need access to their devices to be reliable. Using screen time as a reward or taking it away as a punishment is likely to make children more anxious about screen time access, and more distressed when it is taken away.