APPRENDRE À DORMIR

# Sleep and screens: what questions to ask to avoid the negative effects of screen time

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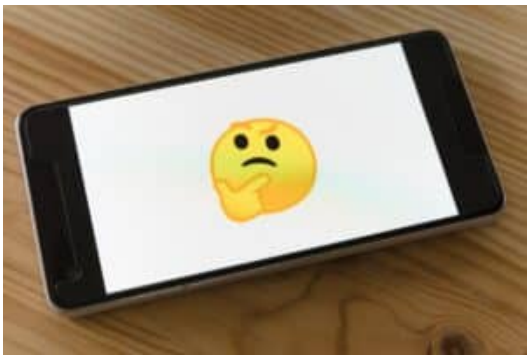
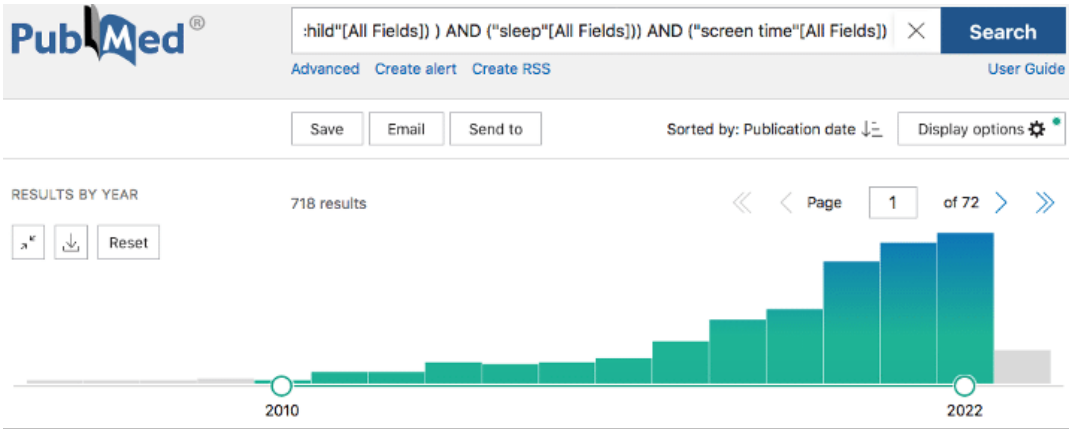


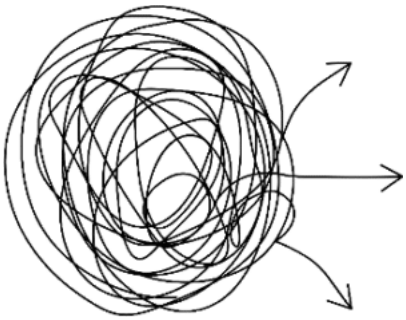
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Research on the relationship between screen time and individuals' health, particularly in terms of sleep quality, is relatively new. The variable and keyword in question were first introduced on search engines during the **early 2000s**. The investigation into the effects of screen time on children's sleep is even more recent, with data collection spanning just a few years, including the challenging period of the COVID-19 pandemic.



Here's a graph illustrating the number of publications of scientific articles that focus on sleep from "Pubmed." You can see that articles on the impact of screens on children's sleep only appeared in the 2010s, jumped around 2017-2018 and then doubled during the COVID years.



Thus we're only **just beginning to untangle the threads** in order to gain clarity and better understand the impacts of our digital lives at all stages of life.

While much remains to be done, and the accumulation of new discoveries will help recommendations evolve over the coming years, **some threads of understanding are already emerging that can help us make decisions about our family's health.**

**Here are some questions that scientists are asking, and that you can also ask yourself to figure out whether screen time is affecting your child's sleep.**

## Does screen time eat into sleep time?

According to studies, there are compelling reasons to believe that **screen time encroaches on sleep time**. For example, associations have been observed between screen time and sleep duration, implying that greater screen time during the day is linked to shorter sleep duration. Does screen time cause a reduction in sleep or its quality? We do not know yet, but everything indicates that there is a **threshold, a limit to be respected per day** to avoid negative consequences on sleep quality, but also on its duration, which remains invisible to parents.

## Does screen time eat into or compromises the time allocated to other activities essential to sleep hygiene?

Indirectly, screen time can also be detrimental to sleep, as **it encroaches on other activities essential for good sleep hygiene**, such as spending time outdoors or engaging in physical activity and exercise, for instance. Additionally, dietary habits such as snacking in front of screens can have a negative impact on sleep as well.

## Does screen time, screen type and/or content affect the biological clock?

Screens are a **source of light and therefore have the potential to influence our biological clock**. It is known that for our brain to enter the “night mode,” it requires a return to calmness, which can be achieved by dimming the lights. At all ages, having a source of light, such as a cell phone or tablet, close to our eyes sends a signal of wakefulness to our brain.

Recent studies have also examined the effects of spending time in front of **different types of screens**, such as comparing television to tablets. This is an ongoing story…

Moreover, screen time is now being studied considering the **types of content**. For example, does watching a cartoon, playing a video game, or reading a digital book have the same impact on sleep? Is content integrated into dreams and nightmares, for better or worse?

There are valid reasons to believe that **spending too much screen time close to bedtime** may not be the ideal activity, as it risks delaying the onboarding on the first sleep and delaying falling asleep. There’s also a risk of shortening sleep duration and generating more frequent periods of wakefulness, etc.

## Are we passing on our screen habits to our children?

Studies demonstrating that **“like parent, like child” in terms of screen time** are accumulating. It is observed that the more time a parent spends in front of screens, the more their child is exposed at a young age and for extended periods during the day. As parents, becoming aware of and changing our own behavior in the face of this problem can become a lever for positive change for the whole family, given that children imitate parents!

## Is screen time a sign that the parent needs a “break”?

Screens often serve as a “break” for parents, because they know full well that their children will be calm and occupied in front of this exciting guardian!  However, it’s worth remembering that, depending on their age, children can also take a break with a book, a puzzle, draw, play dough, and so on.  For a parent who feels overwhelmed, **it may be time to seek help from the “village” surrounding their child, at least occasionally when they realize that screen time is skyrocketing and exceeding the recommendations a bit too often.**

Even if the research isn’t quite there yet, we all know that it takes more than a village to raise a child, and that a screen cannot fulfill that role.  Accept help from the “village” to give yourself time to get back in touch with your vital needs and recharge your batteries while your child spends their energy.

We bet that the combination of “village + rested parent + spent child” represents a “win-win” formula for the whole family’s sleep, compared with the formula of  “screen + child + exhausted parent” formula.

That being said, “once in a while” we can also give ourselves some leeway without thinking that we will “break” our child…

Dear parents, **your sleep is important.** You can consult the “Your vital need” section for ideas on how to regain control of your nights and your fatigue, and consult our “Resources” page to find support near you, for example.

## And, and, and?

There are still many questions surrounding the use of screens. For example, the impacts based on age, the short-term and long-term effects on physical and mental health, and so on.

We invite you to take a look at the current recommendations regarding screen time, and then remember that every child is different. Also **it’s up to you to observe how your child reacts to screens and to adapt your family culture accordingly, with confidence and consistency, especially between parents in the same household**… Well well, it sounds similar to what is recommended for choosing sleep methods!

**Our relationship with screens is a family choice that must be made with confidence, in the light (!) of current knowledge and taking into account our child's needs and our own.**

## Inspiration and scientific sources:


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- Canadian Paediatric Society (revised, March 2023). **Screen time and preschool children: Promoting health and development in a digital world.** Position Statement.
    - Information for parents from Canada's paediatricians : **Screen time and young children.**