

THE
reset guide

Screen Time

@gayatri_kalra_sehgal
www.gayatrikalrasehgal.com

SCREEN TIME

Screens are everywhere now, and so is the guilt that comes with them. You hand over the tablet so you can cook dinner or finish an email, and somewhere in the back of your mind, a voice starts up with everything you've read about screens and young brains.

Then the timer goes off, and the same calm child who was quietly watching cartoons two minutes ago is suddenly on the floor, inconsolable, like you've taken away something irreplaceable. You're left wondering if you did it wrong, again.

You didn't. Screen time is one of the most common flashpoints in early childhood, and most of what makes it hard isn't actually about the screen.

Picture This:

It's 5:30 p.m. dinner's half-made, and Meera hands Vihaan her phone with a cartoon already loaded, just so she can finish chopping without a four-year-old narrating every step. Twenty minutes later, when she reaches to take it back, he screams like she's taken away his oxygen. She feels the guilt land in two places at once, guilty for handing him the phone in the first place, and guilty for how relieved those twenty quiet minutes felt.

Has this happened to you?

This guide walks through what's really going on, and what helps.

Fact Check: What's Really Going On

- **An Hour a Day:**
The American Academy of Paediatrics recommends no more than an hour a day of high-quality educational programming for children between two and five, and notes that the quality of what is watched matters more than the exact number of minutes on the clock.
- **Co-viewing:**
Viewing together and talking about what's on screen measurably improves language learning compared to solo viewing. The same show can be genuinely educational or largely passive, depending on whether an adult is engaged too.
- **Pace of the Content Being Watched:**
Fast-paced content with rapid scene changes and loud sound effects is linked to shorter attention spans immediately afterwards, even after a single sitting. Slower-paced, calmer content doesn't produce the same effect.
- **High Stimulus Vs Low or No Stimulus:**
The meltdowns when screen time ends are rarely about the show itself. It's the abrupt drop from a highly stimulating activity to a much quieter one, and that's a hard shift for any preschooler's brain to make quickly.
- **The Trade:**
Research consistently points to what screen time replaces, not the screen time itself, as the bigger factor. Traded-away sleep, outdoor play, or face-to-face conversation matters more than the raw minutes of viewing.

5 Signs It's Becoming a Bigger Issue

- **Meltdowns specifically at hand-back:**
Bigger and sharper than the usual protest that comes with ending other activities.
- **Asking for a screen before anything else:**
It becomes the first request of the morning, before breakfast, before play.
- **Trouble settling into slower play right after:**
- **Books, blocks, or drawing feel flat and boring in the ten minutes right after a show ends.**

- Reaching for a screen the moment boredom hits:
With no other go-to activity even offered or considered.
- Restless sleep on evening-screen days:
Later bedtime settling or more night waking on days with screen use close to bedtime.

Real-Life Playbook

1. The Restaurant Handout:

You hand over a phone to survive a meal out, and now you're not sure how to feel about it.

What to do:

It's a tool, not a verdict on your parenting. Set a time limit before you hand it over, pick something calm rather than frantic, and let it go once the meal is done.

2. The End-of-Screen-Time Meltdown:

The moment the show ends, your child falls apart every time.

What to do:

Give a warning before the cutoff, not just at the cutoff. “Two more minutes, then we're done” gives the brain a runway instead of a wall.

3. The “I'm Bored, Give Me the Screen” Loop

Every quiet moment turns into a request for a screen, with nothing else offered as an alternative.

What to do:

Keep two or three simple, low-effort activities within easy reach — a puzzle, chalk, blocks — so the screen isn't the only answer to boredom in the room.

Suggestions From Us

1. Set the timer in front of your child, before you hand over the screen, not after.

How this helps:

It shifts the limit from something you impose later to something already agreed on, which tends to lower resistance.

2. Give a 5-minute warning before the screen time ends.

How this helps:

It lets your child's brain start downshifting before the screen actually turns off, instead of being cut off mid-stimulation.

3. Choose slower-paced shows over fast-cut ones when you can.

How this helps:

Calmer pacing is easier to exit emotionally, so the transition afterwards tends to be smoother too.

4. Watch together sometimes, even just for a few minutes.

How this helps:

Narrating or asking questions about what's on screen turns passive viewing into an actual language and connection opportunity.

5. Have the next activity ready before you take the screen away.

How this helps:

An empty gap after the screen is what fuels the protest. A concrete next thing fills it before boredom can set in.

6. Keep the rule the same across every caregiver.

How this helps: Consistency between home, grandparents, and sitters means your child isn't relearning the boundary in every new setting.

7. Let the child love you:

The machine sets a familiar-sounding alarm to signal when screen time is ending. This way, you stay in your child's good favour.

8. Transition Time:

While I led an educational institution for older children, I observed that transition time played an important role with this age group too. The only

difference was that older children could understand 'time' and had 'time-tables' as the structure and a precursor to the next 'activity'.

However, preschoolers live entirely in the present moment. A "five-minute warning" means nothing to a toddler wrapped up on the screen, and the final shutdown feels entirely unexpected. So how do we prepare a toddler to stop screen time at home or even at school?

Here are a few things that have worked well for my teachers:

1. Engaging Transitions:

Boring transitions don't work. Make the transition fun by joining your child in the activity. Your child will enjoy playing with you rather than listening to your instructions.

Ask the child to:

- a) Hop like a Kangaroo to the car
- b) Blindfold the child to feel the wall to exit the room.

2. Event-Based Warnings: Tie the transition to an action instead of minutes.

"You can play the (online) game one more time:

- a) and then we put on shoes, then we will go for a swim.
- b) We have to read the story to Mr Teddy; he is sleepy.

3. Sensory Cues:

- a) Ring a gentle chime or take a spoon and gently tap it on a plate to indicate that the screen time is almost over.
- b) Turn the lights off and on as a predictable cue for the child to know that it is 'time-up'.

Why This Works:

- 1. Stimulation:

Preschoolers don't yet have the neurological machinery to downshift quickly from high stimulation to low stimulation. Transitions and slower content work well for preschoolers.

2. Clear Plan:

A concrete next activity gives the brain somewhere to go. Without one, the sudden absence of stimulation itself becomes the trigger, not the loss of the screen.

3. Co-viewing:

Watching programmes together activates language and social-processing pathways that solo viewing doesn't reach, which is why the same show can look identical but function very differently.

4. Consistent Instructions:

Consistency across caregivers builds a single, stable expectation. Mixed instructions and rules force a child to test the boundary in every new setting, which shows up as more frequent meltdowns, not fewer.

Quick Solutions

1. Meltdown at hand-back? Give a warning next time, and have the next activity already out.
2. Screen time turning into hours? Set the timer before you press play, not after you notice it's been too long.
3. Struggling to settle after a show? Try a slower-paced option and see if the after-effect changes.
4. Every boring moment becomes a screen request? Keep two or three easy alternatives within reach at all times.
5. Not sure if it's too much? Look at what it's replacing: sleep, outdoor time, conversation- more than the minutes on the clock.

About the Author

Gayatri Kalra Sehgal, a former preschool principal and early childhood educator with over two decades of practical classroom experience, has helped navigate the rocky roads of parenting. Having authored eleven books, she has observed that the most challenging situations yield the greatest insights, especially when approached with patience and the right tools.

For more resources, swing by www.gayatrikalrasehgal.com



Save, Follow, Reach Out

If this guide helped you, keep it handy for the next time things get tricky.

➡ Follow on Instagram and subscribe to my website if you want to know more about:

Separation Anxiety, Temper Tantrums, Picky Eaters, Potty Training, Biting, Sibling Rivalry, etc.

➡ To discuss what's going on with your child:

Email: gayatrikalrasehgal@gmail.com
to book a **one-on-one** appointment.

