

SMART HEALTH SCHOOL PROGRAM



What is a healthy amount of informal computer use?

Many of us wonder about what is a healthy amount of screen time for our children. It is an interesting debate and a common area of questioning, as technology becomes an ever-increasing integral part of young children's lives.

Children are growing up with computers as an important part of their lives, using them both at school and in the home setting. An interesting article titled *"Evidence-based guidelines for the informal use of computer"* reviews research on the effects of informal computer use on children's academic, cognitive and social skills. Informal computer use was defined as the "normal day-to-day unstructured use of computers such as playing computer games or surfing the Internet." The article went on to explain that "although use typically occurs within informal settings like the home, library or a museum, it can also occur during unstructured play time in classrooms and in after-school programmes." The researchers undertook a significant literature review with the aim to look at the "effects of informal computer use and identify potential pathways through which computers may impact children's development".

Some of the statistics are interesting. The following is summary of their findings:

- Children spend a significant amount of time with media of all kinds; for instance, US youth (8–18 year olds) report spending approximately 8 hours per day with media; because they use multiple media at the same time, they actually consume about 10 hours and 45min of media content per day.
- The 8–18 year olds reported that they used the computer for approximately 1.5 hours per day to go online and access various applications and games for non-school-related purposes; they also reported that they spent an average of 1hour and 15min per day playing games on a variety of platforms (e.g. consoles, hand-held systems and so on).

Recommendations:

- Children should be encouraged to use computers for moderate amounts of time (2–3 days a week for an hour or two per day).
- The content of this informal use should include non-violent, pro-social and educational themes and provide opportunities for social engagement with family and peers.
- Informal Computer use should not displace other social activities.



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