

SCREEN TIME AND THE IMPOSSIBILITY OF MODERN PARENTING

KATE MANNELL



In her beautifully written book, Kate Mannell shows how the idea of screen time has become both the problem but also, seemingly, the ‘solution’ for parents, researchers and the media, as they grapple with the mounting pressures of parenting in a digital age.

Prof. Sonia Livingstone, LSE and author of *Parenting for a Digital Future: How hopes and fears about technology shape children’s lives*

This is a fascinating and timely book—Mannell expertly unpacks why we find it so hard to talk about tech use and raising children well, and why the discourse around ‘screen time’ can put so much pressure on parents. Essential reading for researchers, parents, and policymakers alike.

Prof. Pete Etchells, Professor of Psychology and Science Communication, Bath Spa University and author of *Unlocked: The Real Science of Screen Time (and How to Spend it Better)*

Mannell’s book offers an acute and rigorous deconstruction of the screen time discourse, showing that if we aim to shift the conversation around children’s digital media use beyond moral panics and parental blame, we need to rethink the roles and responsibilities assigned to parents within contemporary intensive parenting culture.

Prof. Giovanna Mascheroni, Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore

A compelling and timely book that unpacks the discursive matrix of screen time embedded in contemporary parenting. Mannell examines key cultural tensions of technology use and offers constructive ways forward. Recommended to anyone interested in childhoods, the uncertainty of parenting and the stronghold these discourses have in our societies.

Prof. Ola Erstad, Faculty of Education Sciences, University of Oslo



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How much screen time is harmful to a child's brain? Does 'high stimulation' screen time cause more tantrums than 'low stimulation' screen time? What screen time is best, and worst, for a child's language development? For parents of young children, this kind of talk is ubiquitous—it is in news headlines and social media content, arguments with partners, and conversations with friends.

Scholars have argued that the catch-all concept of 'screen time' limits discussions about children's digital media use: it assumes all screen use is alike and is associated with an overwhelming focus on harm. Yet talk about screen time dominates everyday culture. Why has this discourse proven so persistent and powerful?

Rather than debating the impacts of children's media use or the validity of 'screen time' as a term, this book steps further back to investigate discourse about screen time and early childhood as a cultural phenomenon in itself. It examines how dominant ideals and narratives about parenting shape the way screen time is defined and made to matter.

Drawing on diverse forms of data, including social media content, news reporting, and interviews with parents, this book maps the key narratives about screen time that saturate parents' everyday lives. It unpacks the powerful cultural norms around parenting that have enabled these narratives to become common sense, and explores how parents grapple with and navigate these narratives in ways that are often complex and contradictory. In doing so, the book offers insights into why discussions of screen time have endured and take their current form, the pressures and challenges that parents experience as a result, and how researchers can most meaningfully intervene. This book will be of interest to scholars and students from Media and Communication, Sociology, Cultural Studies, and Education, as well as anyone seeking a robust analysis of children, families, and technology.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kate Mannell is Research Fellow at Deakin University in the ARC Centre of Excellence for the Digital Child. Her research focuses on everyday digital media use, with a particular emphasis on families and youth, and how people manage challenging or unwanted elements of technology. She has recently published research in *New Media & Society*, *Journal of Children and Media*, and *Social Media + Society*, and her research has been covered by media outlets including *The Atlantic* and *The Guardian*.

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INTRODUCTION

When I first started researching young children and technology, the one thing I knew was that my work would not be about screen time. For most people, ‘screen time’ is a commonplace term for the time people spend using digital media. It has a particularly strong association with children and the idea that too much screen time is bad for their development. For media and communications academics, however, the term ‘screen time’ is much maligned. It signifies a way of thinking about children’s media use that ignores the rich diversity of family life in favour of a reductive lens that is overly focused on harms. As I’ll explain shortly, scholars from several disciplines have vigorously critiqued the concept of screen time, arguing that it has failed as a basis for serious research and as a basis for public health guidelines, such as recommended time limits for children. I was aware of these critiques when I entered this field of research and saw the concept of screen time as redundant. The phrase wasn’t in my vocabulary; in fact, I fastidiously avoided it.

At work this made sense, but in personal interactions it could stand out. One such interaction provided the catalyst for this book. I was catching up with an old friend who I only get to see every few years. She was deep in the trenches of early parenthood, with three children under the age of 4 years. I didn’t have children and was instead deep in the trenches of research about children’s technology use as I finished a large literature review project. At one point, our conversation turned to my work. She was curious to hear what I was learning. What does the research say about children and screens? As we talked about this, our conversation developed an odd tick. I would say something about kids’ technology use, and my friend would reply by talking about screen time. She would ask something about screen time, and I would reply by talking about kids’ technology use. We were talking about the same thing, but

never with the same language. This disconnect became impossible to ignore and my bemused friend laughed aloud, noting: ‘When you’re a parent, it’s *screen time*’. The ethnographer in me sat up straight. She was right. Like all families, hers had a rich and nuanced set of media practices born of their unique circumstances, personalities, and interests, but the concepts and language available to her for discussing these practices were different from mine. Mine was an academic language of technology practices and media use; hers was a language of ‘screens’ and ‘screen time’ born of the everyday discourse that surrounded her as a parent. In that moment, I realised that I didn’t really know what her frame of reference was. What does the concept of screen time mean to a parent of young children? What kind of talk about it characterises their everyday lives? What was my friend reading, seeing, hearing, and speaking about with other parents? I realised that I knew a lot about academic debate over the concept of screen time, but little about the popular discourses that had the greatest bearing on my friend’s experience as a parent.

This conversation stuck in my mind because it crystallised another question that I had been circling for some time: if the idea of screen time is unhelpful, as many academics have argued, why does it remain so prevalent in popular discourse? To explain why this question is worth writing a book about, I want to briefly review the main academic arguments against the notion of screen time.

Many of these arguments are focused on the fact that screen time is an unhelpful concept in the context of academic research. For starters, there’s little consensus among researchers about what the term means and, therefore, how it should be measured. What devices count as screen time? Does screen time include educational uses or just leisure activities? Should background use be included or just the time a child is actively paying attention? Is a child’s screen time best measured during a typical week? What about weekends? And non-typical days? Studies of screen time take different approaches to these questions, meaning there is little conceptual or methodological clarity across this research.¹ There are two other major issues with its use in research. One is that, as the term itself suggests, screen time research focuses on how long children spend using screen media. But is time the only factor that counts? As many have argued, surely what a child is watching, or playing, or doing also matters. Is two hours spent following YouTube’s content recommendation algorithm the same as two hours spent watching content that fosters a child’s hobbies or passions? And what about the wider context: who they are with, how they are feeling, the surrounding circumstances, and so on?² None of this is captured in studies that only measure time. The other issue is that, even if we agree that time is the thing that matters most, researchers lack good methods for measuring it. The vast majority of screen time studies measure duration by surveying parents about how long their children spend with screen media—a method that is notoriously inaccurate. Even in the era of television,

it was difficult for parents to accurately predict how long their children spent watching TV, a challenge that has become virtually impossible as mobile devices have enabled more sporadic moments of media engagement across the day.³ Reviewing these and other issues, a group of leading psychologists concluded: ‘[W]e reiterate what others have already recommended: that the term “screen time” is retired.’⁴

A second major area of academic critique is the way that ‘screen time’ has become a basis for public health guidelines that recommend time limits for children. The most well-known and influential of these is the American Academy of Pediatrics’ (AAP) ‘2x2 rules’, which, for many years, recommended that parents avoid screen use for children younger than two years and limit it to two hours per day for older children.⁵ Many of the arguments against these guidelines mirror, or draw from, the arguments about screen time research. For instance, one major critique is that such guidelines lack meaningful evidence to support them because of the methodological issues just mentioned, while another is that universal time limits do not account for the different ways that the time might be spent.⁶ A major review of screen time guidelines undertaken in 2016 highlighted a third issue: such guidelines overwhelmingly frame screen use as posing risks to children’s wellbeing and recommend time restrictions as the only method of addressing these risks.⁷ The report, coauthored by leading global expert Sonia Livingstone, notes that this narrow approach leaves parents with little support given ‘that children’s use of digital media need not be all negative, that the role of parents extends beyond limiting and restricting, and that the difficult task is therefore to judge, and to balance, media-related opportunities and risks.’⁸ That is to say, while purporting to help parents, the exclusive focus on risk in screen time guidelines and their one-size-fits-all solution provides little meaningful guidance to parents who are generally trying to balance both risks and opportunities, and to do so with regard for the specific interests, needs, and capacities of their family. Reviewing this and other issues, the report calls for health authorities to ‘Move beyond screen “time” as a basis for guidance’.⁹

Many of the scholars making these critiques are not just contesting the specific concept of screen time and how it has been operationalised in research and policy—they are also critiquing the wider approach it represents. This approach can broadly be characterised as part of the media effects tradition in which research tries to determine whether and how particular media technologies (e.g. television) or types of content (e.g. violence) affect the way people think or behave. While some research looks for positive effects, it is more typical for research in this tradition to begin with a social problem (obesity, mental health, psychosocial adjustment, etc.) and ask to what extent ‘media are to blame’.¹⁰ To answer this question, researchers try to isolate and measure the effects of media use and then, in the case of children, inform parents about what amount or type of media use to avoid. This approach, and the debate

over its validity, has a long history stretching back through decades of concern about how society should approach children's media use.¹¹ Critics have argued that media effects research oversimplifies people's relationships to the media they consume, positioning them as 'inescapably passive creatures' and eschewing questions about the broader spectrum of meanings that media have in people's lives.¹² While it is worth acknowledging that media effects research now includes more nuanced approaches that consider how media use and its outcomes are often reciprocally related and contingent on a wide range of factors, it is also true that highly reductive approaches persist and that these dominate research (and public debate) on screen time.¹³ These reductive approaches are especially common when new technologies emerge; indeed, as many scholars have noted, research and public debate about media effects and children often follow a predictable cycle. A new media technology emerges and questions quickly follow about whether it might be good or bad for children. Research begins with impossibly broad constructs (like 'television', or 'violence', or 'screen time') and tries to find positive or negative effects. Then, as research develops and social alarm subsides, the conversation (both scholarly and public) matures towards a more nuanced position that acknowledges how the outcomes of media engagement are varied and contingent.¹⁴

Following in this tradition, the critiques of screen time I've outlined are not just concerned with replacing the specific language of screen time—they are trying to push the conversation forward, moving it from over-generalisations to a more nuanced discussion that acknowledges the complexity of children's screen media use and its varied meanings and impacts: positive, negative, and otherwise. These arguments, however, largely contest screen time discourse on the basis of its inaccuracies and its misuse in the context of research and policy. They don't yet tell us about its cultural uses and meanings in everyday life.

Children's media use as 'screen time' in popular discourse

In popular discourse, to talk about young children's media use is often to talk about anxieties around screen time. Social media and news reporting abound with alarmist claims about the ill effects of screens on the young. As I show in Chapter 4, screen use during early childhood is claimed to cause everything from diabetes and short-sightedness to developmental delays, poor emotional regulation, and 'virtual autism' (a pseudo-scientific claim that children can present with autism-like symptoms due to screen exposure). Many of these alarmist warnings foreground a distinctly contemporary set of concerns about impacts on the developing brain. A self-described 'brain trainer' on TikTok warns parents that screen time is 'a slow killer to your child's brain', while, in another video, a nanny patiently explains that while children may appear settled in front of a screen, this is really due to a 'chemical reaction that occurs in

their brain which essentially zombies them'. News stories variously claim that 'excessive screen time is atrophying parts of children's brains'¹⁵ and that it impairs brain 'architecture'¹⁶ and 'functions'.¹⁷ While pushback exists (largely in the form of funny social media videos and thoughtful op-eds), it is drowned out by a barrage of alarmist warnings.¹⁸ In the words of one parent I interviewed, all that parents hear about screen time is 'news article after news article telling us it's bad for kids.'

Alongside these warnings is a flood of conflicting instructions issued by a diverse cast of social media influencers, health professionals, and news reporters. Parents are told they should avoid screens for children under 18 months except for video calling. Or is it all screen use under two years? As Chapter 6 will demonstrate, some of these instructions push back on alarmist and idealistic narratives in which screen time is wholly negative, telling parents instead that they should be engaging in the *right kind* of screen time. But these ostensibly more moderate discourses create as many issues as they solve. Parents are told, for example, to choose 'low stimulation' content and avoid 'high stimulation' content. But is *Bluey* high stimulation or low stimulation? What about *Ms Rachel*? Governments, too, are getting in on the act. Sweden and France both recently waged emotive campaigns against technology use in early childhood, with then-French President Emmanuel Macron declaring that it was time 'to regain control of our screens'.¹⁹ Citing 'a clear consensus' on the negative effects of 'screens' on children, the expert committee he commissioned recommended preventing screen use before the age of three years, discouraging it before the age of six, and, remarkably, restricting the use of mobile phones and televisions on maternity wards 'as much as possible'.²⁰

Academics also regularly weigh in on the debate. While many contribute, wittingly or otherwise, to the kinds of alarmist claims outlined above, others try to inject moderation into a public discussion characterised by hyperbole. This often takes the form of public-facing books, such as Pete Etchells' *Unlocked: The Real Science of Screen Time (and how to spend it better)*.²¹ Arguing that society has become overly fearful of technology, Etchells—a professor of psychology and science communication—systematically debunks many of the most common tropes about screen time harms through careful explanations of what 'the scientific evidence base actually has to say'. Others have focused more specifically on trying to shift the conversation around *children's* digital media use. Lynn Schofield Clark's *The Parent App* and Katie Davis' *Technology's Child* both draw on the authors' experiences as digital media researchers and parents to engage empathetically with common anxieties and offer strategies for thinking them through without falling into universalising narratives about the impacts of technology.²² Academics have also prosecuted these arguments through media appearances, including giving interviews and writing for news outlets. Education scholar Kate Highfield, for example, wrote a piece for the Australian edition of *The Conversation* titled 'Screen Time for Kids is an

Outdated Concept, So Let's Ditch it and Focus on Quality Instead'.²³ Arguing that the emphasis on screen time limits has detracted from conversations about the wider context of children's screen use, she declares that 'If I had magic powers, I would get rid of the concept of screen "time". We need to be talking about screen quality instead'.

While crucially important, such efforts can, at times, feel like a drop in the ocean. Etchells' *Unlocked* was published the same month as Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation*—a book that has arguably done more than any other to catalyse fears about the impact of digital media on children.²⁴ And in the three years since publishing Kate Highfield's piece, the Australian edition of *The Conversation* has published 29 articles about children and screen media, most of which use the term 'screen time' and focus on harms. Even more tellingly, in 2024, it published another piece that makes the same argument about dropping the idea of screen time, and another again in 2025.²⁵ From this perspective, the pattern feels less like a linear progression towards nuance and more like a circular debate. As this book will demonstrate, a sense of progress is especially hard to find in conversations about early childhood (ages 0–8), where suggestions that we might take a less alarmist approach to children's media use are fraught with fears about its impacts during this important period of development. Amid all this talk, what are the main narratives and ideas that parents encounter? What do they make of this discourse? And what factors are contributing to the circularity of this debate? Better understanding the nature of this discourse and why it has been so persistent are the two major aims of this book.

What we do and don't know about popular discourse around young children and screen time

We currently know relatively little about popular discourse around young children's screen use, despite the fact that much of the research in this area is, to some degree, a response to this discourse. One of the reasons we know relatively little is that, to date, major studies of young children's media use by media scholars have largely focused on understanding practices—that is, how children and families engage with technology. In recent years, there have been several notable books examining this question, including some that focus specifically on early childhood. Many of these books note the issue of alarmist, effects-based discourses around children and media and outline common tropes, but this serves primarily as the groundwork for empirical studies that then show up these tropes as impossibly thin compared to the richness of children's experiences and the complexity of parents' deliberations. Cary Bazalgette's *How Toddlers Learn the Secret Language of Movies* and Emily Booker's *Square Eyes: Children, Television, and Fun*, for example, both dedicate early chapters to explaining that children's media use has long been

subject to media effects discourses that concentrate on harms and risk.²⁶ This then serves as a background for their arguments about the value of taking alternative approaches. For Bazalgette, this means shifting from a ‘preoccupation with effects and risks’ to investigating how children learn to make sense of the visual language of movies.²⁷ Drawing on detailed observations of toddlers, she pushes back on the characterisation of children’s viewing as passive by illustrating how even very young children are engaged in ‘intense, self-driven and purposeful activity’ when watching.²⁸ Booker follows a similar line of argument but focuses instead on the need to pay attention to children’s accounts of what they enjoy about television. As she explains, ‘Because the effects discourse has long dominated the way we talk about children and television, I would argue that it has hindered us from fully exploring the diverse ways that children actually enjoy and get pleasure from watching television.’²⁹

Where Booker and Bazalgette focus on the media practices of children, other studies focus on the *mediation* practices of parents—that is, how they manage, negotiate, engage with, facilitate, and limit their children’s digital media use. Again, major studies in this area often begin with observations about public discourse, noting that discussions of parental mediation typically focus on risk, restriction, and screen time limits. Green et al.’s *Digital Media Use in Early Childhood: Birth to Six* has an early chapter critiquing screen time guidelines; Sonia Livingstone and Alicia Blum-Ross’ *Parenting for a Digital Future: How Hopes and Fears About Technology Shape Children’s Lives* addresses early on the dominance of screen time rules in the public imagination; and Catherine Page Jeffery’s *Parenting in a Digital World: Beyond Media Panics Towards a New Theory of Parental Mediation* opens with a chapter that recounts the long history of moral panics about young people and technology, and summarises contemporary discourses around issues like sexting and cyberbullying.³⁰ Each of these books then offers rich qualitative insights into parents’ experiences, demonstrating how poorly this narrow public discussion serves their interests and how inadequate it is at capturing what it means to parent in a digital age. In doing so, they make important arguments about the limitations of media-effects discourses, but because their focus is primarily on examining the *practices* of parents and children, they say only a little about these discourses as phenomena in themselves. In this book, I swap the emphasis, asking instead what we can make of this discursive backdrop against which family life and academic research is so often set.

There is another way that screen time discourses appear at the periphery of media research on children. Many studies of digital parenting, such as those mentioned above, note a kind of contradiction: even as parents engage with their children’s media use in varied and nuanced ways, they often talk in the more restricted and negative language of screen time. Drawing on decades of research with families, Sonia Livingstone observes that ‘While parents talk about screen time rules with anxiety and guilt, at the same time their actions