

# Reducing screen time for health: Uniting against childhood obesity

Sir,

The article titled “Multipronged effects of increased screen time on the nutritional imbalance: A cross-sectional study of students of Amritsar aged 6-16 years” published in the February 2024 issue (pp. 471-476, February 2024) provided valuable insights into how increased screen time affects children’s health and awareness. I would like to add further insights into the detrimental impact of increased screen time on childhood obesity and propose steps to mitigate this issue.

In the world of today, which is becoming more digitalized, children are born into a generation of “digital natives” who can easily navigate their way around screens and devices right from their childhood.<sup>[1]</sup> The fact that screens have become an integral part of children’s daily routines is not surprising, given that technology has taken over almost every aspect of modern life.<sup>[2]</sup> However, this exposure to digital media comes with profound implications for their physical, mental, and social well-being. Screens represent a two-edged sword because on one hand, they offer limitless opportunities in terms of learning and entertainment while at the same time presenting serious challenges to the development and health of children.

The negative impacts of too much screen time for kids are wide-ranging. It fosters a sedentary lifestyle, contributing to obesity, which further increases risk of hypertension, diabetes, dyslipidemia, and cardiac diseases. Mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and short attention spans are common among kids with high screen time. Research also links screen overuse to attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and cyberbullying.<sup>[2]</sup> In addition, screens impede interactions, hindering vital aspects such as language development and familial connections. In addition, mindless eating of snacks while engaging with screens exacerbates calorie intake. Also, temptation of screens frequently tempts kids to abandon outside play and sports. Advertisements promoting unhealthy foods further contribute to poor dietary habits, increasing the risk of obesity.<sup>[3]</sup> Disrupted sleep patterns because of excessive screen exposure further contribute to weight gain.

Obesity in children affects not just physical health but also social and psychological well-being. It raises the risk of chronic illnesses and can cause problems with social connections and

self-esteem, underscoring the pressing need to address this public health concern.<sup>[4]</sup>

It is anticipated that proactive measures are needed to address the negative effects of increased screen time. Setting limits for screen time assists in establishing a balance between screen usage and other activities such as physical exercise and social interactions. Encouraging outdoor play promotes physical fitness and offers an alternative to sedentary screen time. Emphasizing healthy eating habits and involving children in meal preparation cultivates lifelong wellness practices.<sup>[2]</sup>

Designating areas without screens, especially in bedrooms, helps promote face-to-face communication and also improves sleep. Educating children about balanced use of screens empowers them to choose wisely. Setting limits, using parental controls, or modeling appropriate behaviour with screens are necessary means of managing screen time responsibly. Raising awareness among parents coupled with installing monitoring devices can minimize excessive screen time. Parents should interact more with their children by doing more activities together. They should also limit screen time, refrain from giving kids phones, and encourage children to read books to have a balanced lifestyle. Providing educational content enhances cognitive skills, reinforcing the importance of quality screen time.

By actively managing screen time and promoting holistic well-being, parents and caregivers can help children thrive in today’s digital age while safeguarding their health and development.

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### Conflicts of interest

There are no conflicts of interest.

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