

Sedentary behaviour and Screen-time: Birth to five years old

Late last year saw the release of the National Healthy Eating and Physical Activity Guidelines for Early Childhood Settings ("Get Up & Grow"). These are the first guidelines to make recommendations about sedentary (i.e. inactive) behaviour, including screen time. By setting restrictions on this behaviour early, long lasting healthy physical behaviour patterns can be promoted.

'Sedentary behaviour' is a term used to describe time spent doing physically inactive tasks that do not require a lot of energy. Despite the common perception that sitting down and being inactive 'does no harm', there is increasing evidence that certain activities, and in particular lengths of inactive time, are in fact harmful.

In Australia, large periods of sedentary behaviour are mostly due to the amount of time young children spend watching television. Other common sedentary activities include watching DVDs and playing computer or video games. Children who spend long periods of time inactive, even during allocated play times, are more likely to have poorer physical, social and intellectual development.

Children need to be provided with and encouraged to participate in a number of opportunities for physical activity during the day. It is equally important to consider the total amount of time that children are inactive, regardless of how active they may be at other times.

It can be easy for a child to become 'habitually' sedentary in certain periods of the day through screen-time for example at the start of the day and at the end of the day

through the use of television. This is of concern if this habitual behaviour continues on as a child gets older.

Sedentary tasks can be grouped as either '**productive**' or '**non productive**'. Although productive sedentary behaviour and quiet 'down time' is necessary for young children, both groups of sedentary behaviour should be closely managed to meet current Australian recommendations.

0-2 Years recommendation

Children younger than two years of age should not spend any time watching television or using other electronic media (DVDs, computer and other electronic games).

Some examples of productive sedentary behaviour include:

- Reading, listening to stories and looking at books
- Quiet play, such as art and craft activities, drawing and puzzles
- Sleeping

Some examples of non-productive sedentary behaviour include:

- Watching television and DVDs for leisure
- Playing screen games such as handheld, video or computer games
- Being restrained for long periods of time, such as in a car seat, high chair, porta-cot or stroller

Why no screen-time for children under two?

Babies should not be restrained or kept inactive (during awake time) for long periods, especially in front of the television. Before babies can walk, they need time to practise movements such as reaching, kicking and feeling. As babies become more mobile and start crawling and walking, they continue to need plenty of time to practise new skills, move freely and creatively, and play with others.



Screen-time is not recommended for babies and children less than two years of age, particularly in the early childhood setting, because it may:

- reduce the amount of time they have for active play, social contact with others and chances for language development
- affect the development of the full range of eye movement
- reduce the length of time they can stay focused

Screen-based activities for children less than two years of age have not been shown to lead to any health, intellectual or language improvements.

2–5 Years recommendation

For children two to five years of age, sitting and watching television and the use of other electronic media (DVDs, computer and other electronic games) should be limited to less than one hour per day.

Why limit screen-time for two- to five-year-olds?

Most children will be exposed to screen-time at home, and for many children this will be excessive. In the early childhood setting, any screen-based activities need thorough consideration. It may be decided that screen-

time is not included in early childhood programming, or only limited to special occasions.

In toddlers and pre-schoolers, long periods of screen-time have been associated with:

- less active, outdoor and creative play time
- an increased risk of being overweight
- sub-optimal muscle and bone growth
- unhealthy eating habits
- poorer social skills
- fewer opportunities to develop decision-making, self-awareness and self-regulation skills
- slower development of language skills and short-term memory
- television-viewing habits that may continue through childhood

Sometimes children are left inactive for long periods in places such as high chairs, strollers or car seats. Young children are naturally curious and eager to explore, therefore active play opportunities need to be available whenever possible.

0-5 Years recommendation

Infants, toddlers and pre-schoolers should not be sedentary, restrained or kept inactive for more than one hour at a time – with the exception of sleeping.

How can you help?

Young children who have adults to interact with during play often tend to be more active. Staff can help children be more active during play by encouraging them to:

- walk or pedal instead of always being in a stroller or car seat
- help with packing up toys, clothes or shopping
- play with simple items, such as buckets, dress-up clothes or old boxes and containers
- play outdoors during daylight hours.



Summary of recommendations Birth to Five Years Old

Recommendations summary for birth to five years	Birth-1 year	1-2 years	2-3 years	3-5 years
Physical activity recommendation	Physical activity should be encouraged from birth.	Should be physically active every day for at least three hours, spread throughout the day.	Should be physically active every day for at least three hours, spread throughout the day.	Should be physically active every day for at least three hours, spread throughout the day.
Sedentary recommendation — screen-time	Should not spend any time watching television or using other electronic media (DVDs, computer and other electronic games).	Should not spend any time watching television or using other electronic media (DVDs, computer and other electronic games).	Sitting and watching television and the use of other electronic media (DVDs, computer and other electronic games) should be limited to less than one hour per day.	Sitting and watching television and the use of other electronic media (DVDs, computer and other electronic games) should be limited to less than one hour per day.
Sedentary recommendation — prolonged inactivity	Should not be sedentary, restrained or kept inactive for more than one hour at a time, with the exception of sleeping.	Should not be sedentary, restrained or kept inactive for more than one hour at a time, with the exception of sleeping.	Should not be sedentary, restrained or kept inactive for more than one hour at a time, with the exception of sleeping.	Should not be sedentary, restrained or kept inactive for more than one hour at a time, with the exception of sleeping.

Checklist:

Staff, carers and setting

- Play areas are free of screens, or any screens are out of sight to avoid children watching from other areas
- Staff and carers supervise and manage screen-time and inactivity
- Staff and carers act as role models when it comes to not having screen-time.

Early Childhood Programming

- Sedentary behaviour recommendations are incorporated into the programming
- Program has minimal prolonged periods of inactivity and sitting time
- Program has a balance between inactive and active time

Want to know more?

A recent online survey with the sector around the new *Get Up & Grow* resources identified a need for additional resources and professional development to support the implementation of the Guidelines as part of the new National Quality Standards. The Queensland Government are working towards this. The resources can be viewed, downloaded or hard copies ordered via www.health.gov.au

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