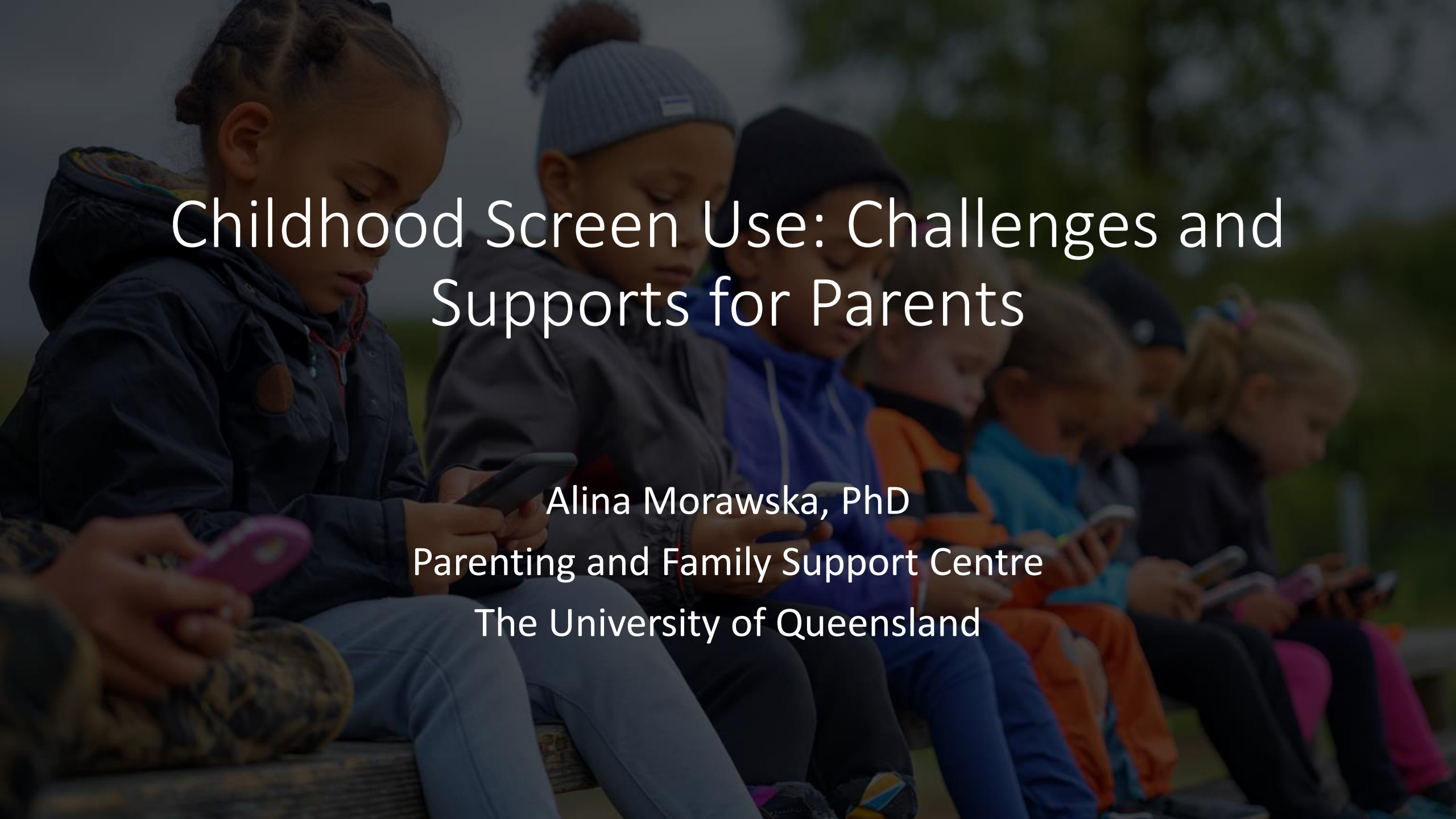

Childhood Screen Use: Challenges and Supports for Parents

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Acknowledgement of **Country**

The University of Queensland (UQ) acknowledges the Traditional Owners and their custodianship of the lands on which we meet.

We pay our respects to their Ancestors and their descendants, who continue cultural and spiritual connections to Country.

We recognise their valuable contributions to Australian and global society.

Overview

- Screen use: the problem
- Parental concerns and barriers
- What do young people say?
- Factors influencing screen use
- The home-school interface
- How to support parents
- Future directions

What is screen use?

- Viewing or interacting with screens
- Screen technology vastly outpacing research
- Focus on quantity vs purpose/content/quality

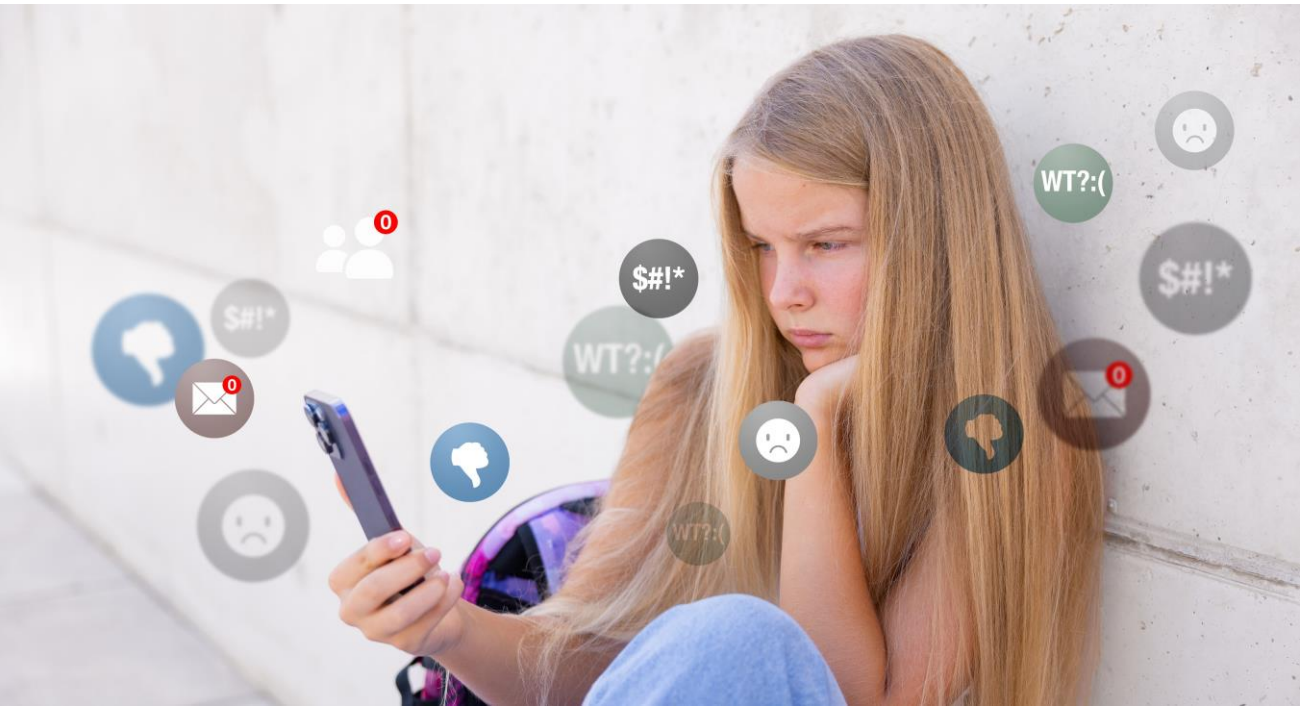
How common is screen use?

- Discretionary use highly prevalent
- Key areas of concern:
  - time
  - content
  - purpose
  - pre-existing risk factors

RCH Child Health Poll
https://www.rchpoll.org.au/

Top ten Child Health Problems

1. Excessive screen time
2. Bullying/cyberbullying
3. Internet safety
4. Unhealthy diet
5. Child abuse and neglect
6. Depression
7. Not enough exercise
8. Suicide
9. Overweight or obesity
10. Family and domestic violence



Parent concerns

RCH National Child Health Poll (2015)

- 56% of parents concerned their children have too much screen time
- Contributing to:
  - family conflict (62%)
  - oppositional behaviour (32%)
  - sleep problems (26%)
  - lack of physical activity (18-43%)
- Using screens to:
  - manage child behaviour (61%)
  - as a reward (62%)
  - while attending to other tasks (70%)

What parents have told us

screen time is stealing our ability to focus on other, more important things…our ability to focus on things that matter more for our mental health

I get torn because I don't want it to also replace playing and imagination and colouring and drawing … it's hard for me… I don't agree with it replacing those things. So that's probably where I get very conflicted…"

It comes down to what it's replacing as well…is this replacing interaction with other humans? In which case we can lose social skills and the ability to actually have a conversation with somebody and read nonverbals and have a two way conversation.

The levels of screen time allowed at friends' place… I have good intentions at home but tend to be judged if I ask for TVs to be turned off when we are out at other people's places

If we were out and he had the tablet for more than 15–20 minutes, as soon as I took it away he'd be screaming and throwing a fit — full terrible two, terrible three toddler scenario. More often than not I'd end up carrying him over my shoulder like a sack of potatoes, kicking and screaming, because I'd taken away the iPad or my phone he'd been using to play matching games.

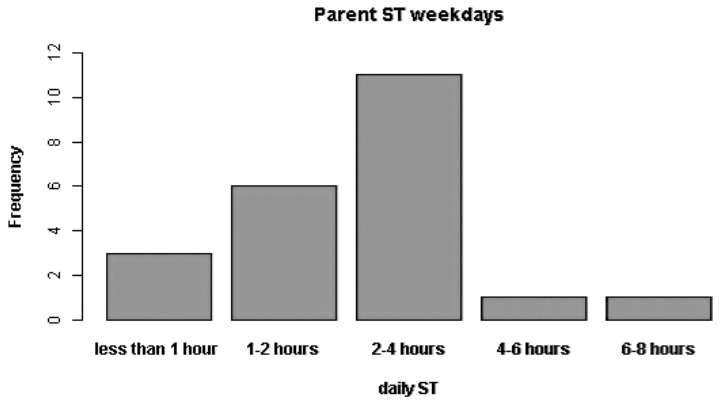
My son uses an iPad at kindergarten every day – he then struggles to understand why he can't play with one at home every day… It would help if the screen time at kindergarten was consistent with the guidelines for screen time

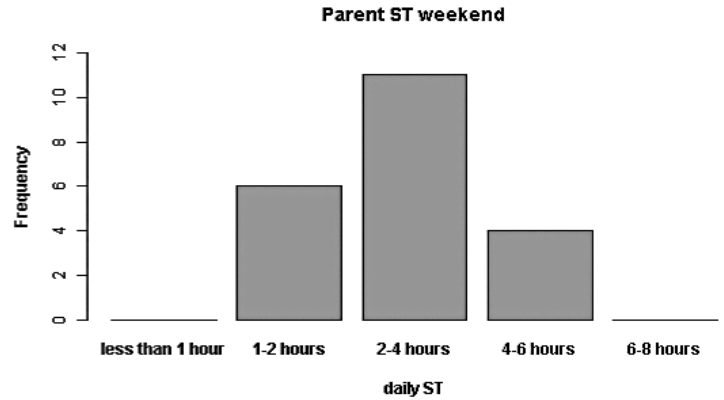
Parents' Attitudes to Young Children's Screen Time (Fyffe & Morawska, 2025)

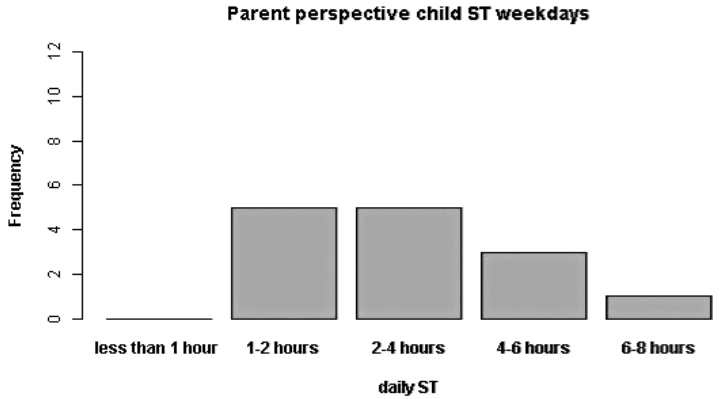
- screens help manage the demands of parenting
- parents acknowledge the benefits of screen time
- parents can identify more disadvantages than advantages of screen time
- parents feel guilty about children's and their own screen time
- parents actively manage screen time and content
- parents would need persuasive information and strategies to change their current screen habits

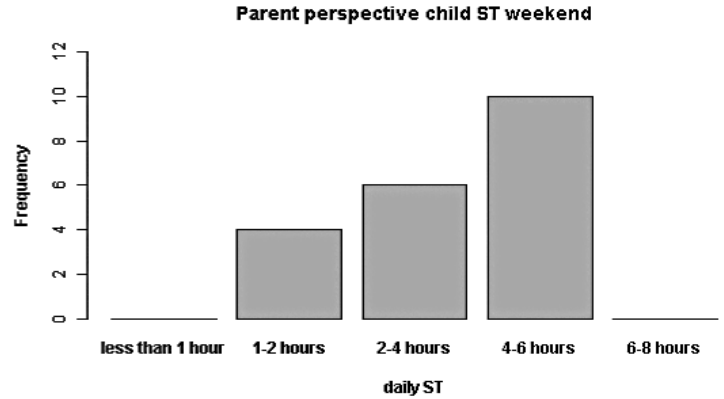
What about young people?

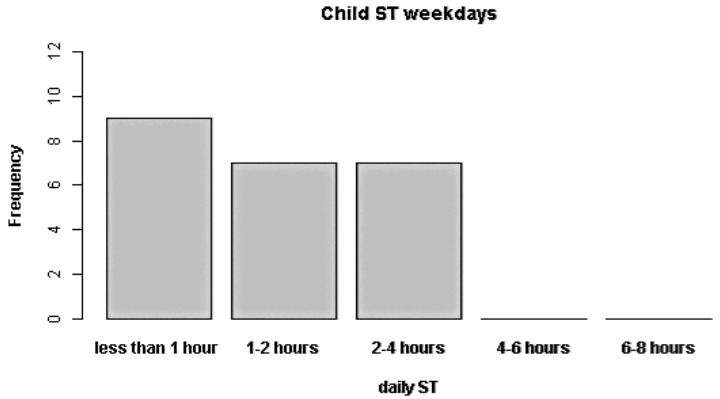
(Fuss & Morawska 2025)











Some key themes

- Benefits: stay in touch with friends and family, call for help in emergencies, support for learning, discover new interests or content related to personal hobbies
- Risks: impact on health and wellbeing, screens as “addictive”, disconnection from the real world, exposure to inappropriate or harmful content
- Parental rules and guidance:
  - generally, rules at home are fair and helpful
  - if not helpful: frustration with not being able to finish what they were doing and affecting social interactions and inclusion
- School rules: improving focus on learning and offline interactions, reducing peer pressure

... my dad is texting a lot... And my mom, ... sometimes she is on her phone and when we ask any questions she doesn't really listen and hear, but then other times she is using her phone a lot for photos, and she takes a billion photos. And it can get a bit annoying, ... I think they use [their screens] ... a bit too much.

... I think that's good, that we`re not on [our screen devices] all the time and ... we're not allowed phones in school either. ...because otherwise people aren't like listening to the teachers and ...there's a lot more drama I guess around social media and that sort of thing at school.

I think people use them too much to be honest. Like, phones they`re used unnecessarily... I feel like everywhere I look, there's always someone who's got their head buried in the phone. ... I think they are necessary, but I don't think we need to spend that much time on your phone every day. ... Like people just ... scrolling through ... Facebook and using Snapchat and TikTok and all that stuff. I don't think ...that side of things is necessary or good for anyone.... people around me get a bit carried away on their screens, I guess. ... Just sort of like forgetting why they are on the screen... they get a bit sidetracked from what they're doing. (Female, 13 years)

My younger sister, who's 5, doesn't use it as chronically, but my 10-year-old sister ..., she's glued to her iPad and phone and devices, and she hates leaving the house, cause it means she has to leave all that stuff behind. And whenever I see her, she's either... upset cause she is out of screen time and having a hissy fit about it or she's ... on her screens watching a YouTube video...

What about online safety? (Agha et al 2023)

- teens said they encountered:
  - information breaches and sexual risks with strangers
  - cyberbullying from acquaintances or friends
- what they did:
  - blocked or reported strangers
  - struggled with responding to risks from friends or acquaintances
  - did not find any of the existing ways for responding to be effective

What about social media?

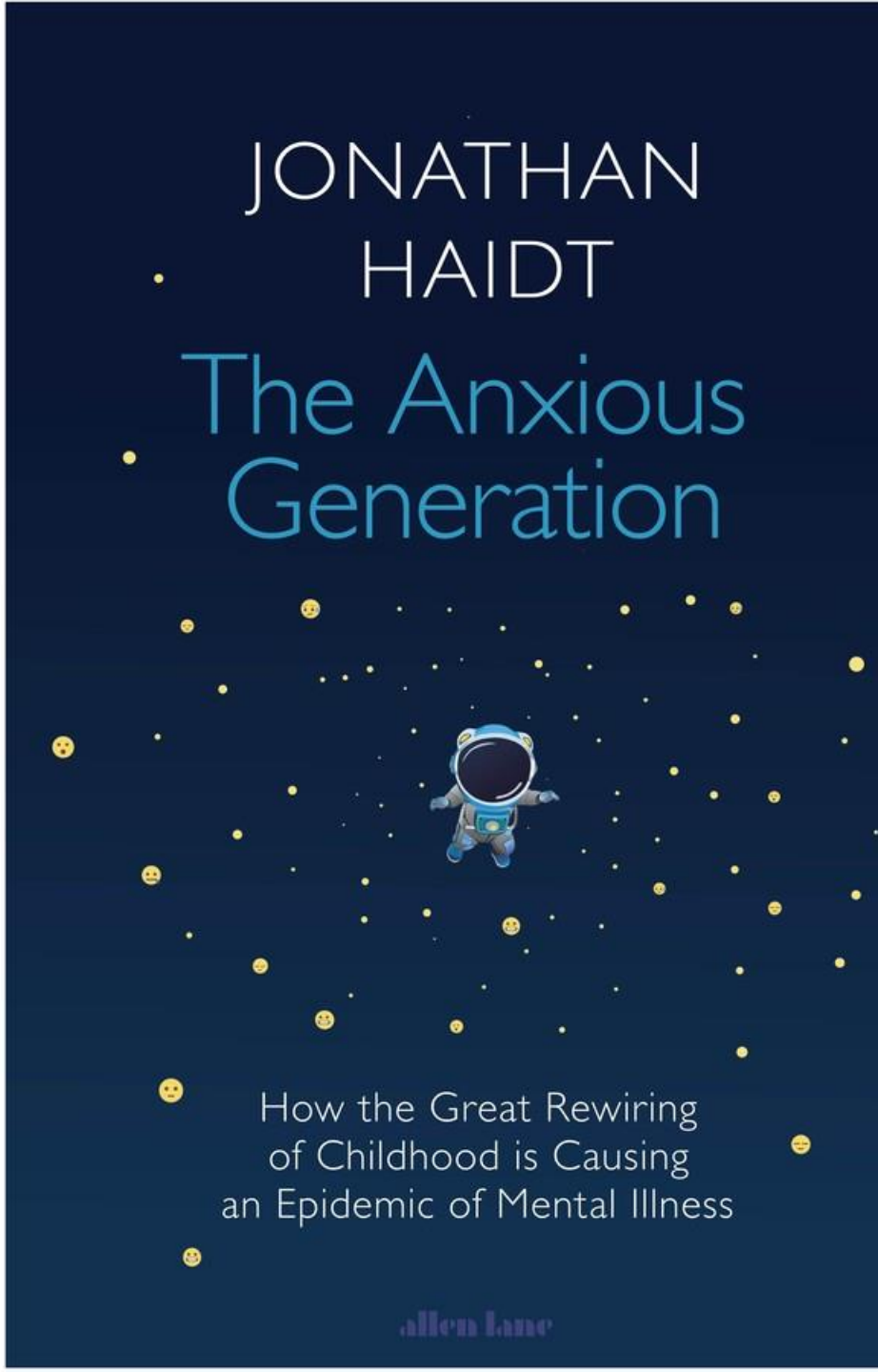
- supporting autonomy: promoting self-governance, facilitating choicefulness, developing a sense of self
- suppressing autonomy: external forces motivating use, fostering compulsive and non-intentional use, and affordances of social media threaten personal control (West et al 2023)

perceived as a threat to mental wellbeing (O'Reilly et al 2018):

- cause mood and anxiety disorders for some adolescents
- platform for cyberbullying
- social media use framed as a kind of 'addiction'

Effects of screen use

- numerous negative developmental outcomes (Hood, et al 2021; LeBlanc et al 2012; Madigan et al 2020; Ophir, et al 2021; Stiglic & Viner, 2019; Valkenburg et al., 2022)
- in children <5 years, > screen time associated with:
  - lower scores on measures of cognitive development and weaker fine motor skills
  - delayed language development and delays in communication and problem-solving
  - reduced learning of emotion-regulation strategies and mental health problems
- high use social media use linked to anxiety, depression, sleep disturbances, lower subjective wellbeing, and self-harm (Bozzola et al., 2022; Hilty et al., 2023; Irmer & Schmiedek, 2023; Keles et al., 2020; Lund et al., 2021; MacKenzie et al., 2022; Marino et al., 2018; Nesi et al., 2021; Shannon et al., 2022; Valkenburg et al., 2022; Vidal et al., 2020)
- mechanisms of effect?
- ongoing debate



Barriers (Reddan et al., 2022)

- parenting practices which encourage screen use:
    i. using screens to keep children occupied
    ii. high use of screens by parents themselves
- parents struggling to set screen use limits
- difficult child behaviour when limits are imposed
- influences outside the home

Correlates of screen use

(Veldman et al. 2023)

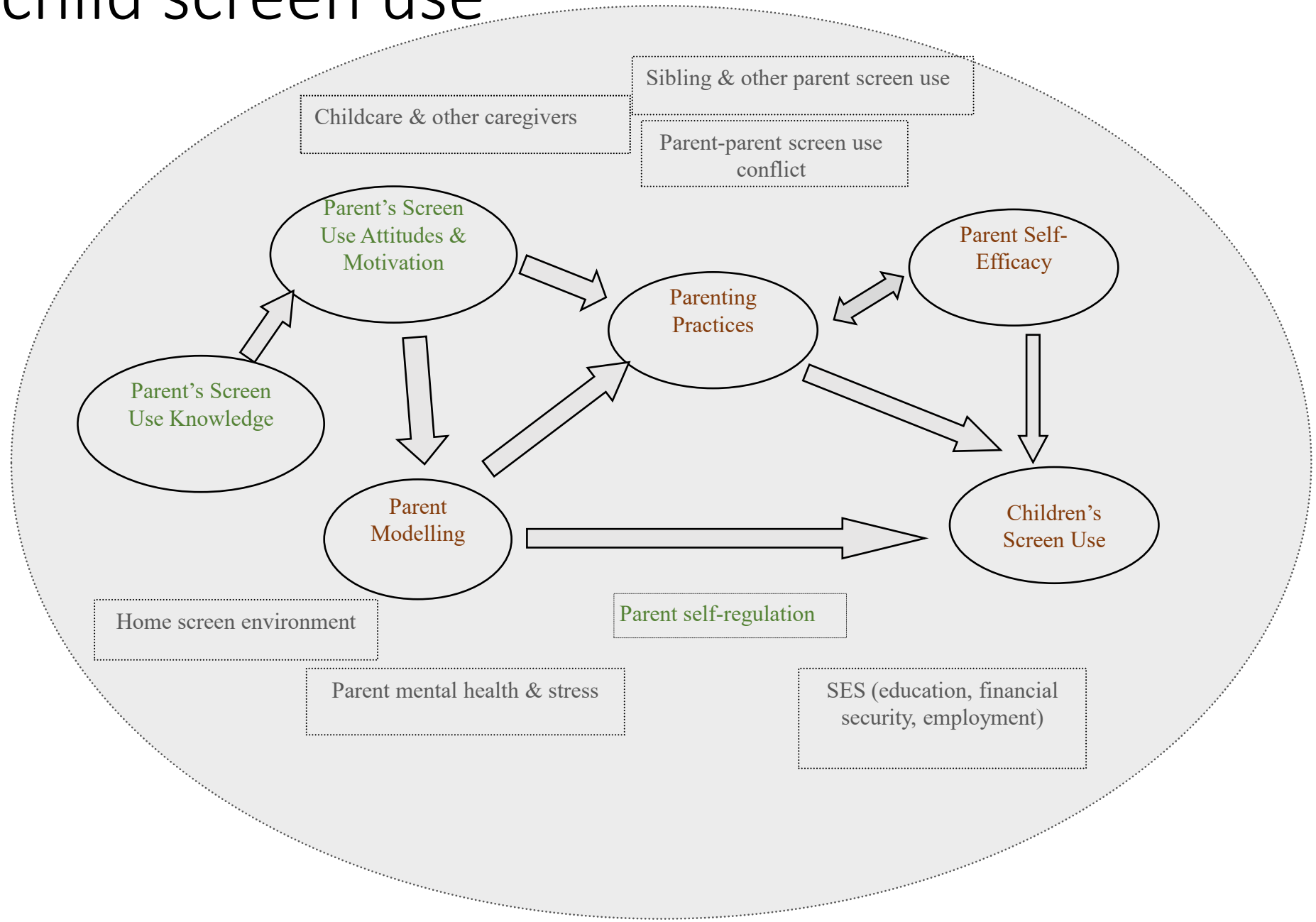
- 52 studies
- 2 of high methodological quality
- Moderate evidence for:
  - electronic device in the bedroom
  - parental screen time
  - having a TV on at home
  - descriptive norms and screen time
  - value of physical activity
  - monitoring screen time
  - childcare
  - parental self-efficacy
- No evidence: child sex, BMI, physical activity, temperament, number of siblings, being a first-born, neighbourhood-related factors, socio-economic indicators, and parental marital status, physical activity, weight status, depression, wellbeing, sex, age and positive outcome expectations
- Insufficient evidence: 70% of examined correlates

Systematic Review of Parenting Factors (Pyne et al 2025)

- Parental modelling +++
- Screen use rules - -
- Mealtime viewing ++
- Use of screen as reinforcer ++
- Use of screen as mood regulator ++
- Use of screen as babysitter +++
- Parental self-efficacy - - -
- Co-viewing ?
- Authoritative parenting style - -
- Authoritarian and permissive parenting styles ++
- Parental knowledge ?

A model of child screen use

(Morawska et al 2023)



Role of parents in adolescence

- Do parents still matter in adolescence?
- What's the role of parents in teen social media use?
- Can parenting interventions support healthy social media use in adolescence?

Factors influencing adolescent social media use

(Morawska et al 2025)

Study	Modeling	Mediation/ Communication	Monitoring	Limit Setting
Albeladi and Palmer (2020)				
Fardouly et al. (2018)				
Fardouly et al. (2024)				
Festl (2021)				
Geurts et al. (2022)				
Geurts et al. (2023)				
Giménez et al. (2017)				
Grau-Grau et al. (2023)				
Khurana et al. (2015)				
Koning et al. (2018)				
Len-Ríos et al. (2016)				
Liu et al. (2013)				
Liu et al. (2016)				
Martins et al. (2019)				
Moreno et al. (2023)				
Padilla-Walker et al. (2020)				
Pradeep and Sriram (2016)				
Qin et al. (2023)				
Reich et al. (2021)				
Rudnova et al. (2023)				
Shin and Ismail (2014)				
Symons et al. (2020)				
van den Eijnden et al. (2021)				
Wisniewski et al. (2015)				
Yépez-Tito et al. (2020)				
Yao et al. (2022)				
You et al. (2023)				

Modifiable parent factors

- modelling (Bleakley, et al 2013; Lauricella et al 2015)
- knowledge (Miguel-Berges et al., 2019)
- parent attitudes (Hamilton et al 2016; Lauricella et al 2015; Miguel-Berges et al 2019; Russell, et al 2022; Sanders, et al 2016)
- parental monitoring (Downing, et al 2015; Lampard, et al 2013; Neshteruk et al 2021; Tang et al 2018; Thompson, et al 2015)
- limit setting (Downing et al 2015; Lampard et al 2013; Neshteruk et al 2021; Tang et al 2018; Thompson et al 2015)
- co-viewing (Thompson et al., 2016)
- using screen time to control child behaviour (Tang et al 2018; Thompson et al 2016)
- use of mobile devices to calm young children (Radesky, et al 2023)
- parental self-efficacy (Chen, et al 2020; Halpin, et al 2021)
- stress, depression (Duch et al 2013; Hoyos Cillero & Jago, 2010; Lampard et al 2013; McDaniel & Radesky, 2020)
- parent conflict (Jago et al 2016; McDaniel & Coyne, 2016)

What are we doing about it?

- Reduction approaches (limits, bans, tech solutions)
- Immunisation approaches
- Social media ban

What works in reducing screen time?

- Focus on knowledge (Azevedo, et al 2019)
- Technological solutions: privacy, security, impact on parent-child relationship (Ali, et al 2021; Ghosh, et al 2018)
- Systematic reviews: modest reductions in screen use and sedentary time (Downing, 2018; Krafft et al 2021; Lewis et al 2021; Martin, et al 2021; Schmidt et al 2012; Zhang et al 2022) but mixed findings (Wahi, et al 2011; Wu, et al 2016)
- Small effects when targeting children/adolescents (Nguyen et al 2020)
- Limited focus on family interventions (Rajagopal et al 2025)
  - Low study quality
  - Varied interventions
  - Mixed effects

Parenting interventions to support healthy adolescent social media use (Morawska et al 2025)

Moreno et al. (2021) examined the effectiveness of the American Academy of Pediatrics family media use plan

Brandhorst et al. (2023) evaluated the efficacy of *Internet Addiction: Empowering Parents! Group Training* for parents of adolescents and young adults with Gaming Disorder or Social Network Use Disorder in Germany

Key challenges in intervention literature

Focus:

- mostly on television
- on decreasing screen time
- interventions for children and adolescents
- not principally on parents

Healthy Habits Triple P

- Fully online, self-directed program
- Complete over 2 weeks
- Foundation module plus domain-specific module(s)
- Interactive, flexible:
  - video/audio clips
  - interactive activities
  - screen use monitoring
  - goal setting
  - downloadable Healthy Habits plan

Module 1: GETTING STARTED WITH HEALTHY HABITS

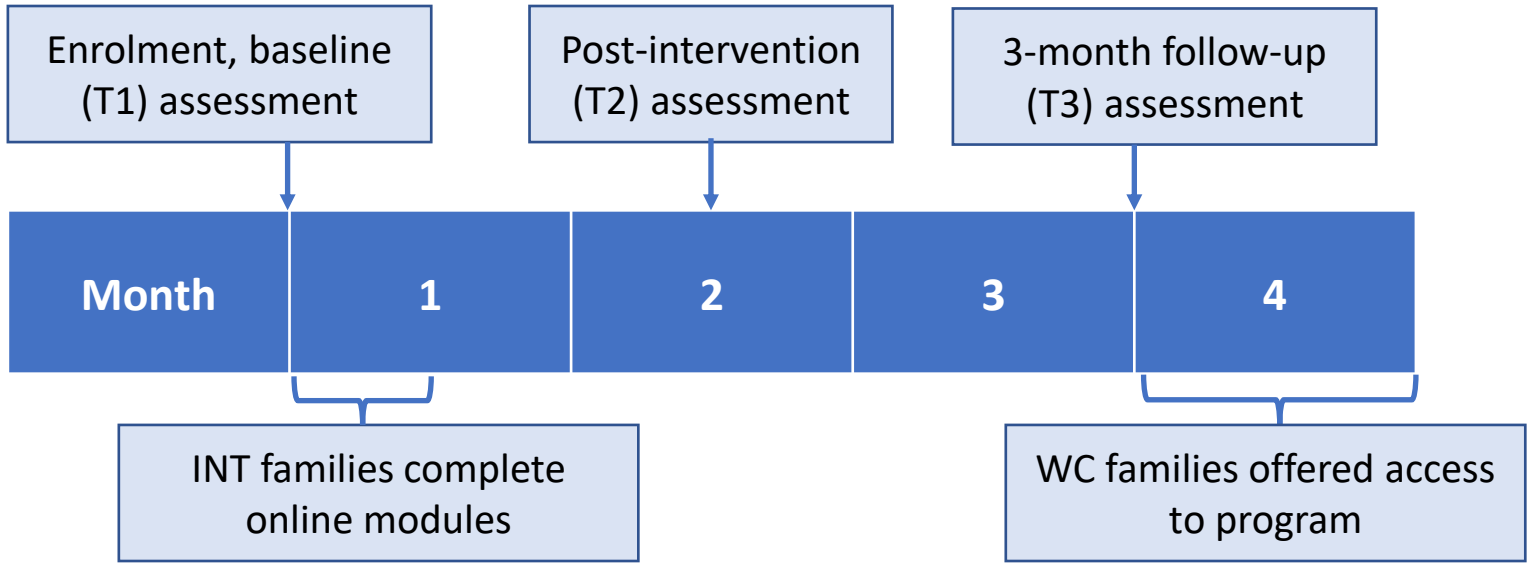
- Introduction
- Encouraging Healthy Habits
- Setting Up Routines
- Dealing With Resistance
- Challenges To Maintaining Healthy Habits
- Building Independence
- Coping
- Finding Evidence

Module 2: HEALTHY SCREEN TIME HABITS

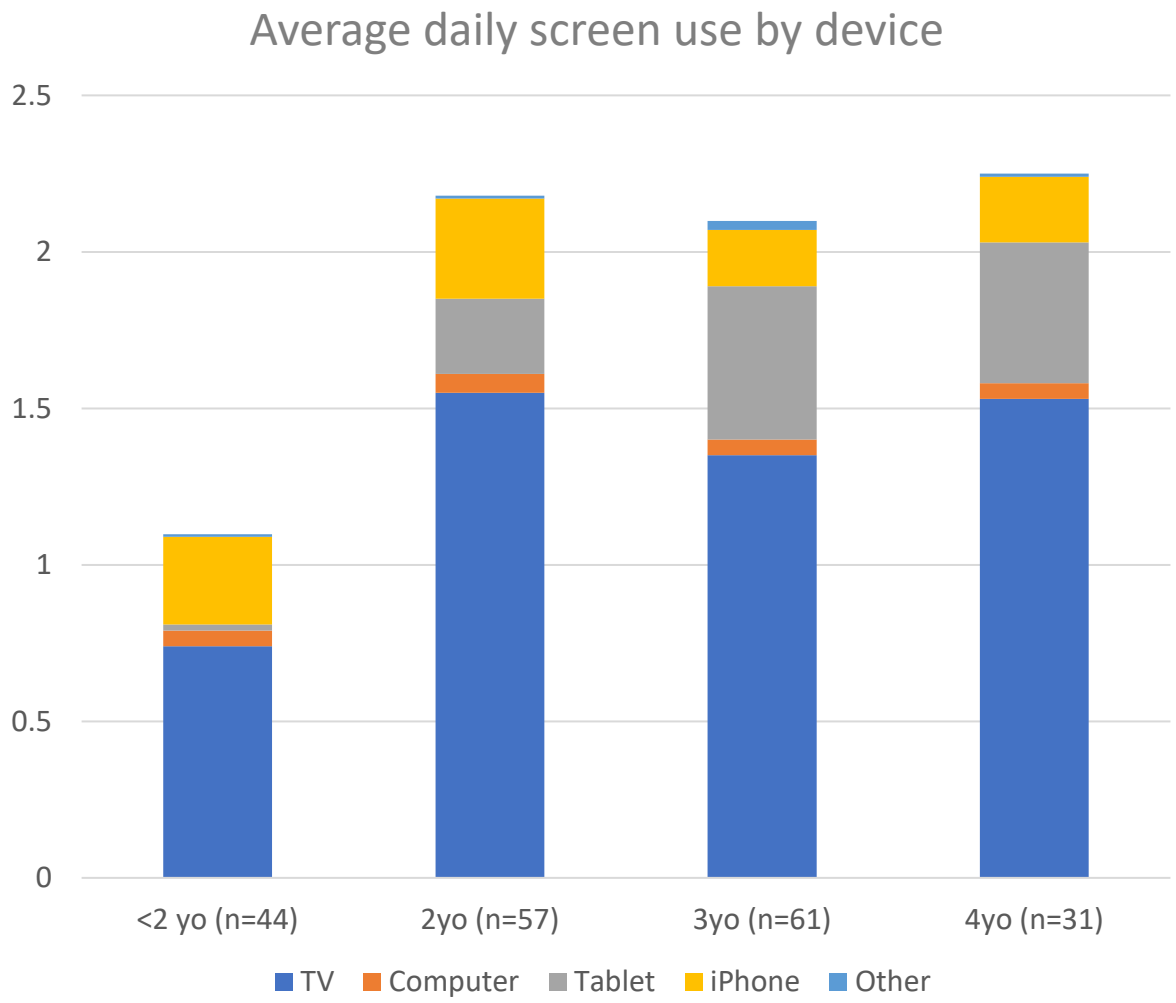
- Overview
- Getting Started With Healthy Screen Time
- Manage Screen Use
- Making Healthy Changes

Healthy Habits Triple P Pilot (Mitchell et al 2025)

- Pilot study: Assess feasibility & acceptability, test efficacy
- Target sample: 70 families of children aged 9 months – 4 years
- Randomisation: Intervention (INT) vs. waitlist control (WC)



Screen use - children



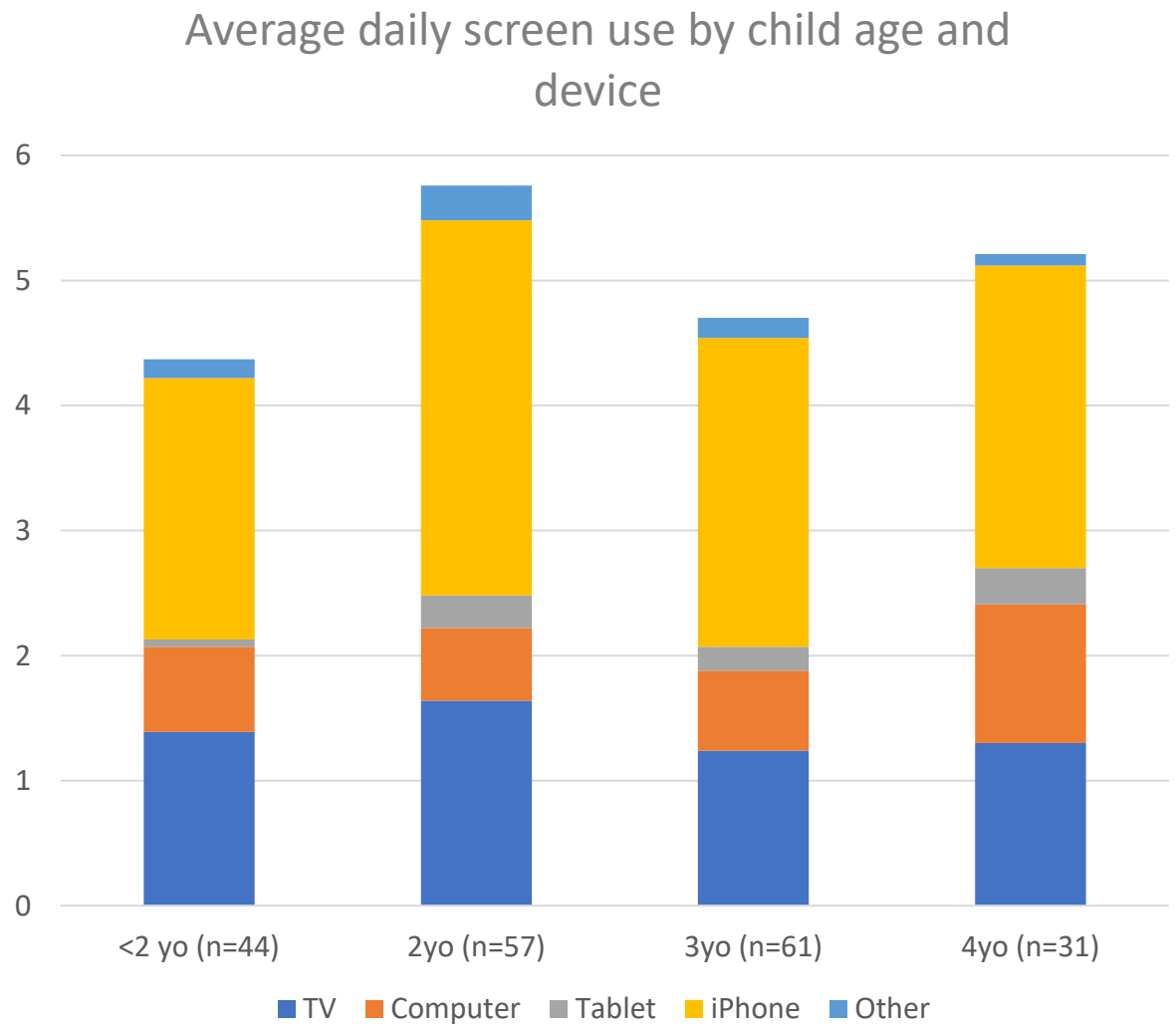
- 98% of children using screens
- 50% of parents set daily limits

BUT

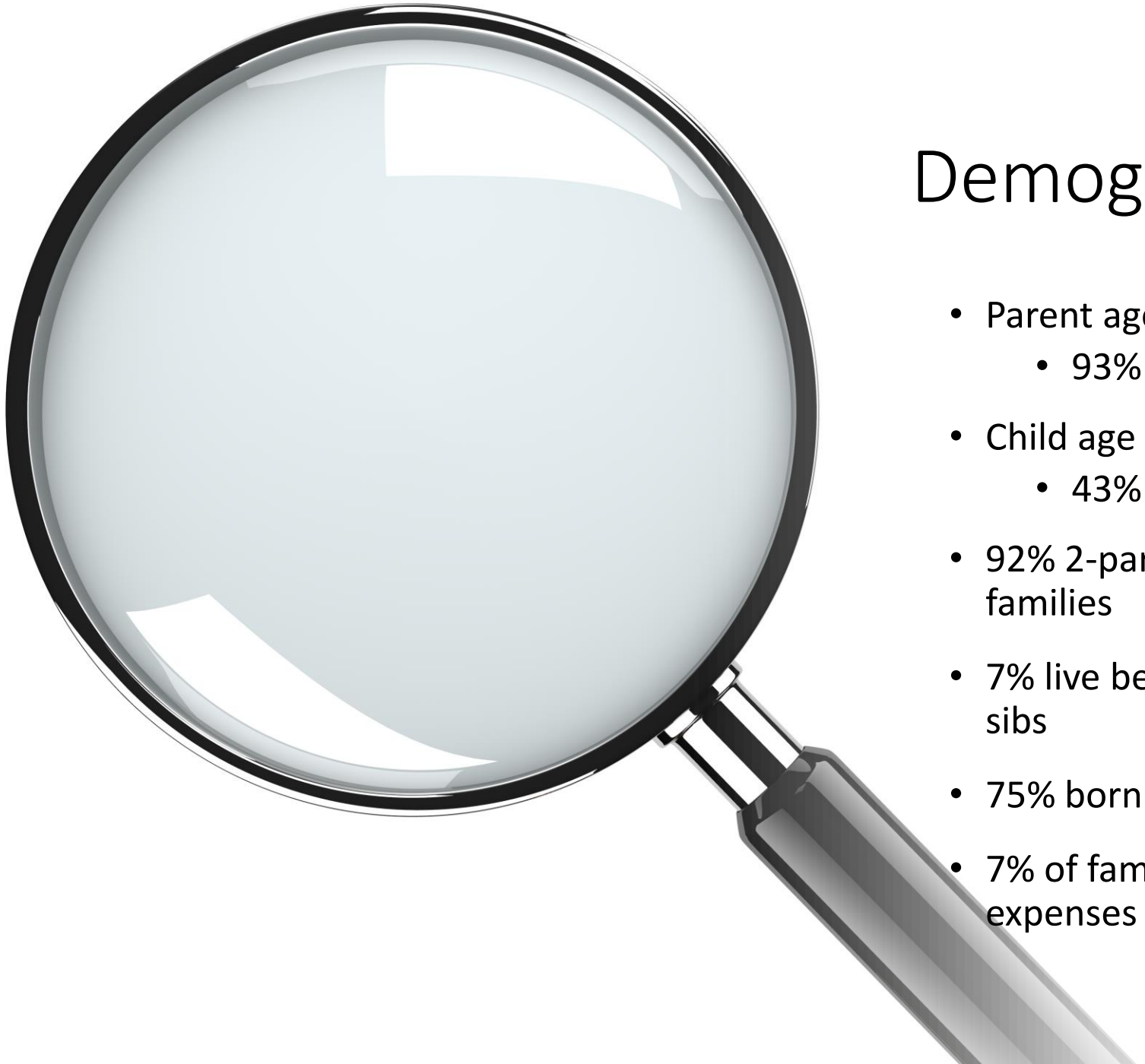
- 4 in 5 exceed recommended limit
- Replacing physical activity (74%)
- Use while eating (71%)

- 78% of parents unhappy with / concerned about child screen use:
  - Amount: 51%
  - Context: 24%
  - Content: 21%
  - Other: 25%
  - Thematic analysis: difficult behaviour when withheld/turned off, demanding screens, others' screen use

Screen use - parents



- 100% of parents using screens
- Correlated with child use (r=.63)
- 82% of parents unhappy with / concerned about own screen use
  - "Addiction" to screens
  - Desire to reduce use
  - Esp. problematic – phones, social media
  - *"Amount of time spent on screens or mind-numbing scrolling"*
  - *"I can't believe how much time I spend on my phone despite feeling like I have very little leisure time"*
  - *"I feel addicted to my phone and would like to decrease and model better use"*



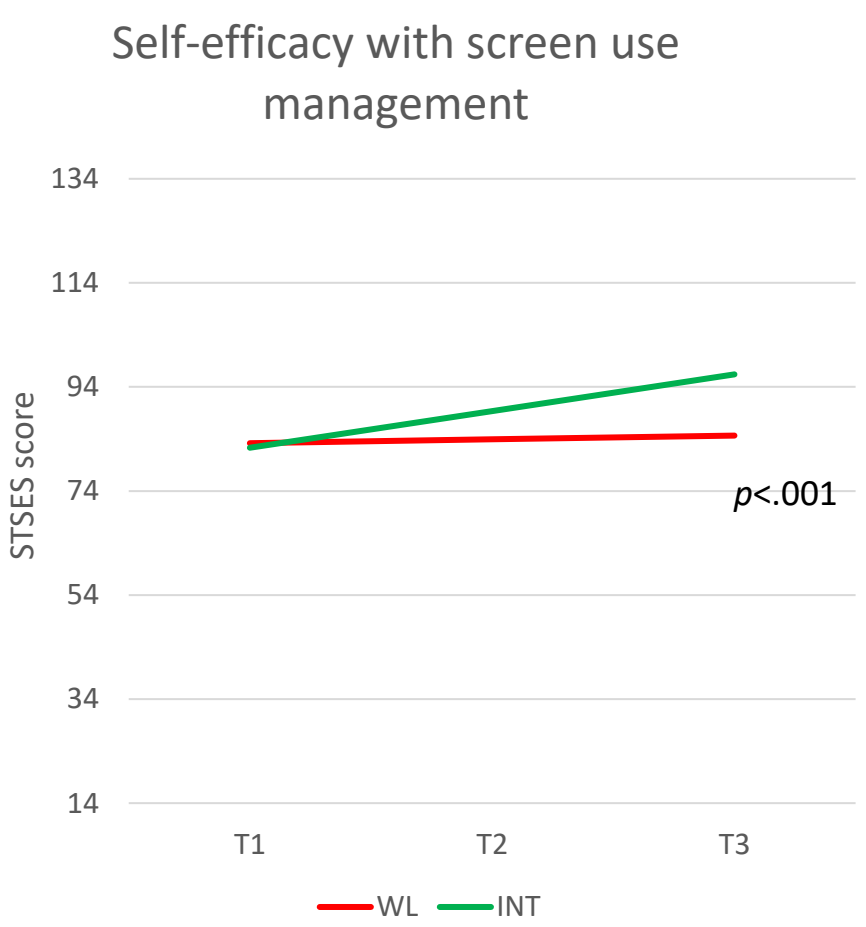
Demographics (*N*=98)

- Parent age = 36 years (range 19-55)
  - 93% mothers, 7% fathers
- Child age = 2.8 years (range 9-58 months)
  - 43% girls, 58% boys
- 92% 2-parent families, 8% sole-parent families
- 7% live between 2 or 3 households, 59% with sibs
- 75% born in Australia
- 7% of families unable to meet essential expenses

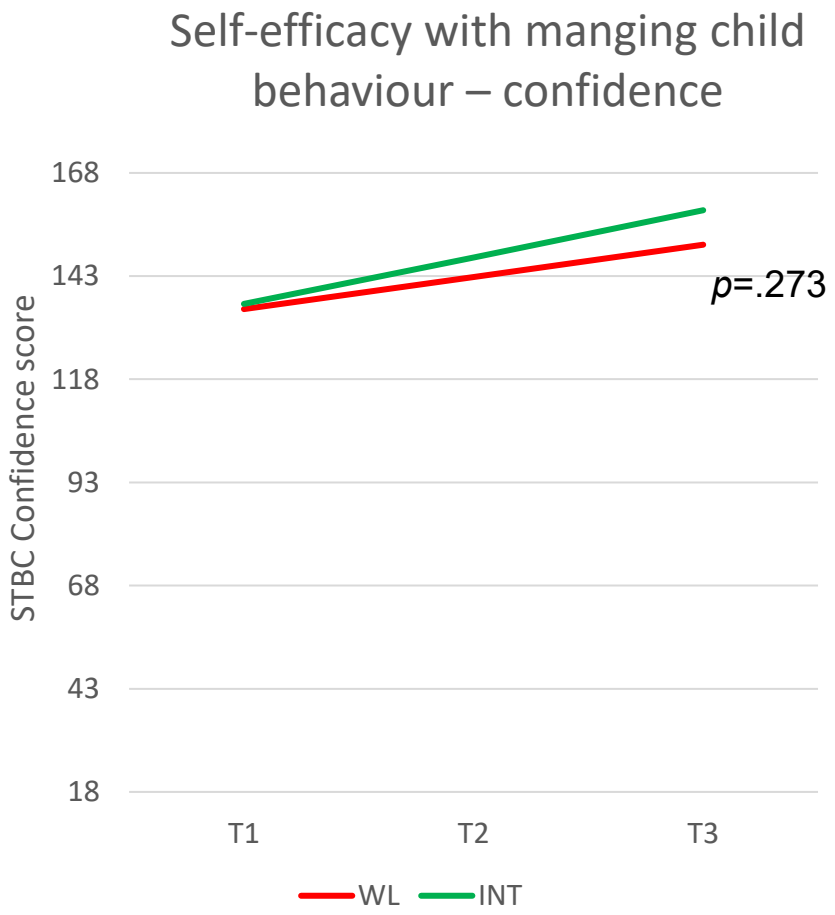
Parent satisfaction (n=30)

- All found modules helpful (>80% quite/very)
- 59% made changes based on module content
  - Use of routine
  - Limit setting
  - Modelling
  - Partner involvement
  - Strategy use
- 70% happy with child's current screen use
  - Hard to implement strategies when tired / not present, need more time to implement strategies, partner not supportive of limit-setting
- 88% would recommend to families with young children

Primary outcomes - self-efficacy

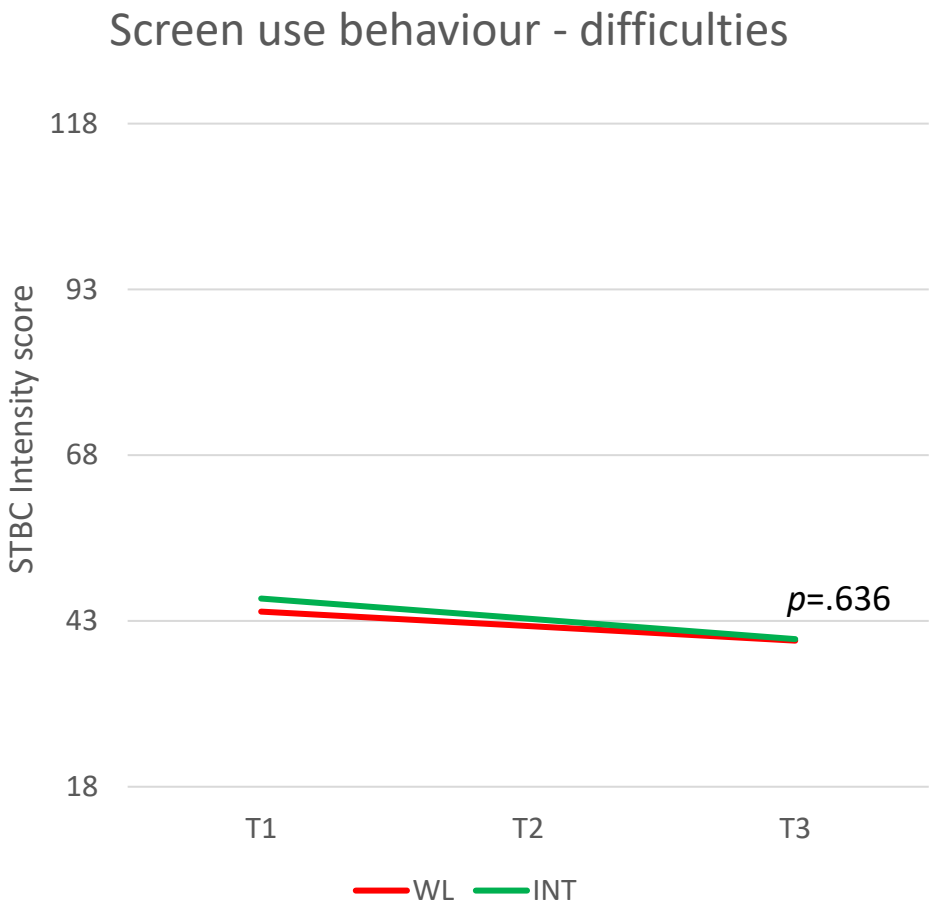


(T1-T2 d=.29, T1-T3 d=.52)

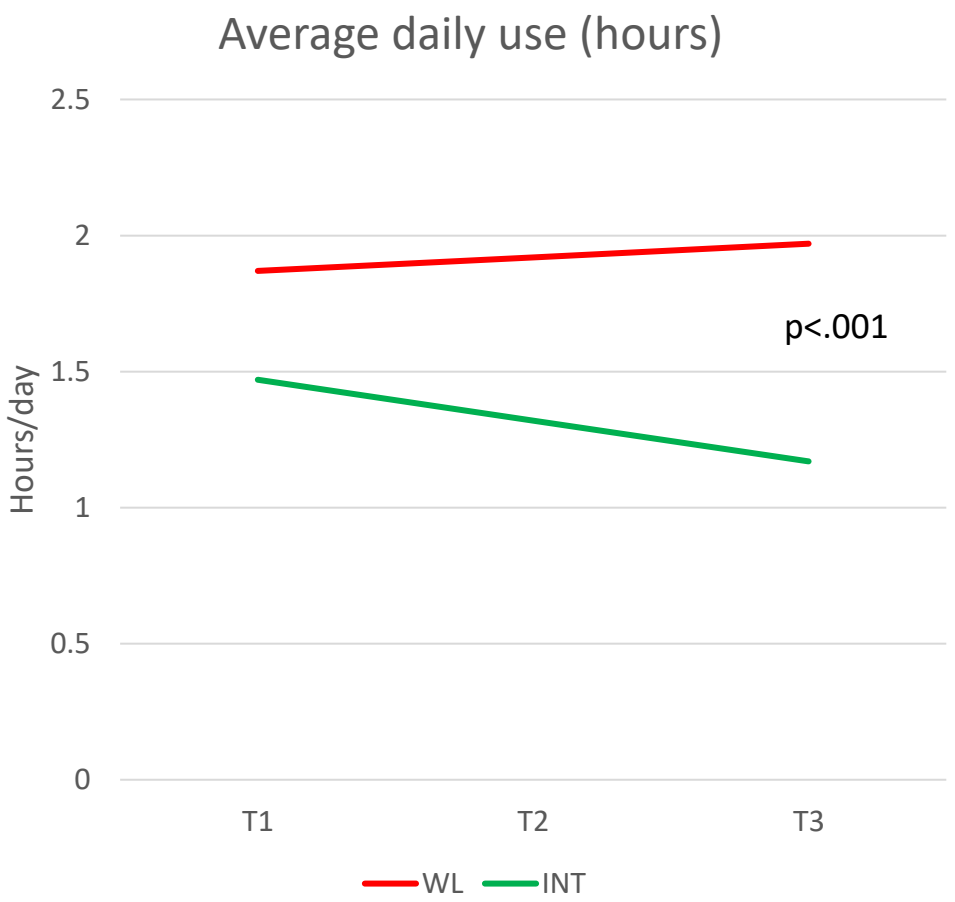


(T1-T2 d=-.03, T1-T3 d=.33)

Child behaviour & screen use

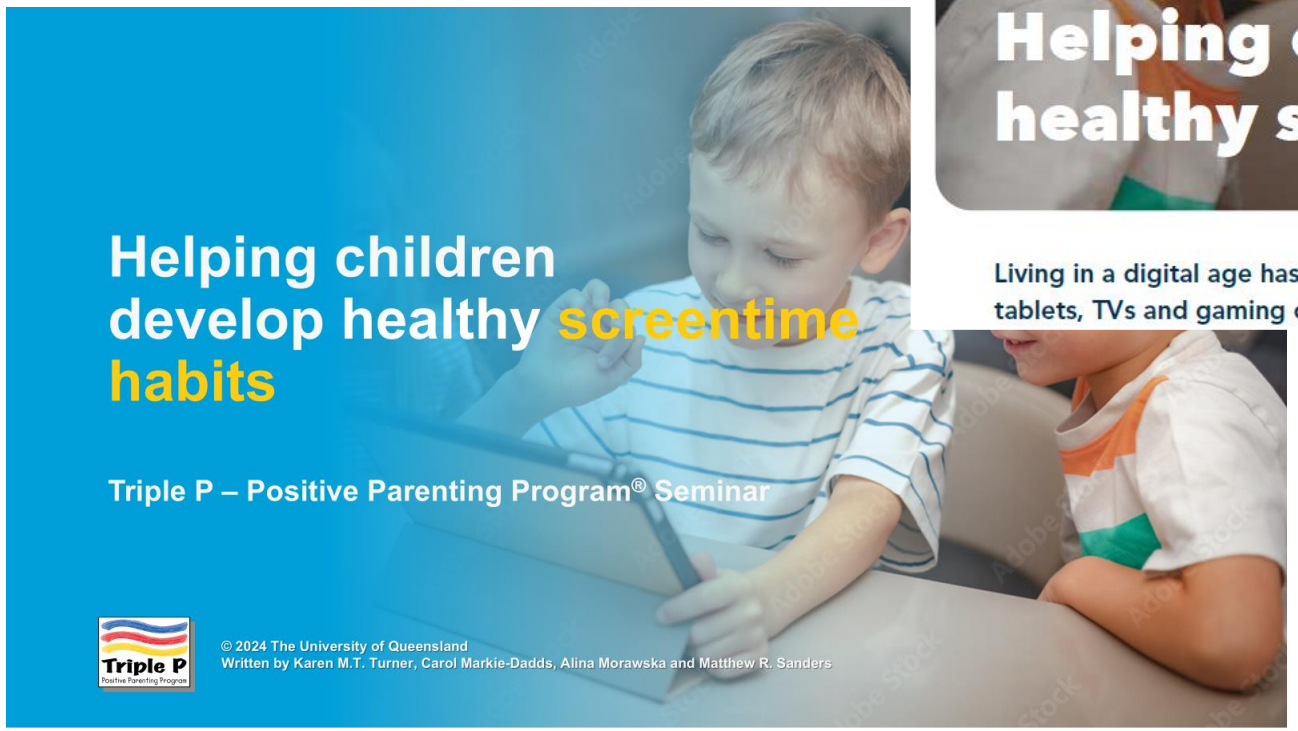


(T1-T2 d=.10, T1-T3 d=.03)



(T1-T2 d=.61, T1-T3 d=.31)

Triple P Seminar & Online Module: Helping children develop healthy screentime habits



Living in a digital age has benefits and risks for children and parents. Digital devices, like computers, phones, tablets, TVs and gaming consoles, can be fun and help with social connection. They can also be useful for

The home-school interface

- parent education:
  - how to engage with their children's digital learning most effectively
  - cultivating their sense of self-efficacy to support their children's digital learning
- create shared goals and understanding
- shared language and set of strategies
- build collective capacity
- ongoing communication about the role of digital technologies in school and at home
- co-develop guidelines about what and how children should use technologies

Challenges

- Definition of screen use
- Evidence base for guidelines
- Lack of scientific consensus about effects
- Role of parents
- Blame and shame
- Parent ambivalence
- Upskilling
- Screens, schools and communities

Recommendations and future directions

- taxonomy and assessment of how screens are being used, in what context and under what circumstances
- comprehensive assessments of beliefs, perspectives, knowledge, attitudes and behaviours
- better understanding of proximal, modifiable factors
- better understanding of within-family interactions
- integrated, comprehensive approaches
- develop and test brief evidence-based parenting interventions at key developmental periods

Thank you

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