FACT SHEET

What is screen time.

> Screen time refers to the amount of time spent watching TV including videos and DVD’s; playing computer games on video consoles or on computers and using computers for other purposes.

> In some instances screen time also refers to using telephones for texting and social networking.

> Electronic Media (EM) is a term also used to encapsulate all forms of screen based activities.

Why Reducing Screen time as a theme?

Positive associations between TV viewing and levels of overweight and obesity have been shown in the literature. TV viewing may contribute to overweight and obesity through electronic media displacing other activities such as free play and structured physical activity, increased snacking or increased demand for energy dense foods which are heavily advertised.

In a study of preschoolers (ages 1-4), a child's risk of being overweight increased by six percent for every hour of television watched per day. If that child had a TV in his or her bedroom, the odds of being overweight jumped an additional thirty-one percent for every hour watched. Preschool children with TVs in their bedroom watched an additional 4.8 hours of TV or videos every week.

Compared to children who have less than 2 hours of screen time a day, children who have more are more likely to:

> be overweight
> be less physically active
> drink more sugary drinks
> snack on foods high in sugar, salt and fat
> have fewer social interactions.

Excessive TV has been linked to other negative outcomes such as poor cognitive performance, antisocial behaviour and reduced sleep time.

Research now indicates that for every hour of television children watch each day, their risk of developing attention-related problems later increases by ten percent. For example, if a child watches three hours of television each day, the child would be thirty percent more likely to develop attention deficit disorder.
For the purposes of OPAL the main concern is the link between obesity and electronic media use (mainly TV viewing) and the desire to increase the overall levels of physical activity within our communities.

**Australian Guidelines for screen time:**

- Australia’s Physical Activity Recommendations recommend that 5-18 y.o accumulate no more than 2 hours of screen time a day for entertainment (excluding educational purposes)\(^1\).
- Guidelines for children under five have also been released and recommend children younger than 2 years do not spend anytime viewing TV or other electronic media and for children 2-5 years less than 1 hour per day.\(^2\)

**Existing Screen time behaviour**

According to the 2007 National Australian Children’s Nutrition and Physical Activity Survey – South Australian Findings\(^3\).

- South Australia has a significantly higher amount of screen time (peaking at 4.5 hours/day for 13-14 year olds) than the National average (peaking at 4 hours/day for 13-14 year olds).
- Significant differences in screen time exist across SES bands. Children of the lowest SES quartile accumulate 30-50 mins more screen time than children of higher SES. In addition High SES children have 30 min/day more school-related time and 20 min/day more sport than low SES children\(^4\).
- Screen time is highest in holidays and on weekends. Adolescents spent an extra 100 mins/day in front of small screens on weekends and public holidays,
- Boys accumulate about 40 mins/day more screen time than girls
- Screen time rises rapidly until the ages of 13-14 then declines slowly.
- 75% of screen time is TV at age 9 dropping to 60% by age 16.

Other research shows that:

- Obese children watch more TV and accumulate more screen time than non-obese children\(^5\)
- Watching TV for 2 hrs per day during childhood and adolescence has been shown to attribute to 17% of adult overweight\(^6\).
- The peak time for TV watching for 10-13 year olds is 7pm at night followed by the time from 4pm to 7pm and with another peak at 7am\(^7\).

**Determinants of screen time**

- Families are important influencers on how children use their time:
  - Having a mother who watches more than 2 hrs of TV per day and co-viewing with parents were the strongest predictor of adolescents watching TV\(^8\)
Parents feel they were time-poor, working long hours and spending more time with younger siblings, leaving minimal time to be active with their older children. This resulted in using small screen recreation as a proxy-babysitter.\(^{19}\)

**Critical role of siblings and caregivers as role models in relation to physical activity**

**Monitoring rules and restrictions\(^{20}\):**
- Mothers are the gatekeepers
- Most regulate EM use through rules and restrictions eg. no TV before school

**Physical home environment\(^ {21}\):**
- Parents recognise TV in bedrooms as a concern but more in terms of being ready for school on time and adhering to bed times
- TV in child’s bedroom was positively associated with weight status in some studies\(^ {22}\)

**Substantial number of children begin watching TV during pre-school years and these patterns persist into childhood and adolescence\(^ {23}\):**

**Changes in TV viewing have been found to be influenced more by:**
- Child’s desire to turn off the TV and play with parents
- Home rules about how long they can watch TV\(^ {24}\)

**Social/cultural issues**

**Some families see co-viewing as “family time”\(^ {25}\):**

**Parents perceived participation in physical activity and social activities as countering sedentary time.**

**TV plays an important role in assisting busy mothers cope with young children\(^ {26}\):**

**Many parents value TV as a good educational tool**

**Any concern over TV watching is usually about content (violence, language) not relationship to obesity\(^ {10}\):**

**Barriers to changing behaviour**

**Parents or children (11-12yo) are not concerned about excessive time spent with EM\(^ {10, 27}\):**

**Parents identified their own propensity toward TV viewing and their own sedentary behaviour as a negative example for their children\(^ {10, 19}\) but were reluctant to change their own behaviour to reduce screen time\(^ {28}\):**

**Parents underestimate their children’s use of electronic media\(^ {28, 29}\):**

**Parents need to use TV as a safe and affordable distraction and rely on this for them to complete chores\(^ {19, 28}\):**
Parents’ belief that on weekends children should be able to spend leisure time as they wish

Parents of younger children (6-7 years) feel more empowered to restrict TV viewing than parents of older children

Parents and children were more open to limits on weekdays and school nights than weekends and holidays when viewing time peaked

Perceived lack of in home affordable alternatives

Limits on TV perceived as a good thing but many feel it did not apply to them

A lack of rules around time spent watching EM was thought to be a barrier to reducing EM use, split households with different rules, the busy lives of parents or a breakdown in parental authority may explain why rules may not be present and/or enforced

Benefits of reducing screen time

Parents identified closer family communication and improved school performance as potential positive impacts of reducing TV viewing

Potential approaches promoted in the literature

Stages of Change model useful in conceptualising interventions to reduce screen time. Most parents at pre-contemplation (not considering a change and unaware of issue).

To move them to contemplation stage messages should appeal to benefits that parents already value and address barriers by making behaviour change easier eg. small incremental changes

Raising parental awareness of the association between TV and childhood obesity

Increasing awareness about risks associated with excessive screen time (including negative psychological, behavioural and physiological side effects)

Increase awareness about current guidelines

Informing parents of simple changes like removing TV’s from bedrooms and turning TV off during dinner

Interventions that target family TV viewing practices, parents in particular are more likely to be effective than interventions which directly target adolescent viewing times

Mothers are capable of and willing to set and enforce EM rules within their households

Introducing curfews eg. no TV after 8pm, before 8am or between 3.30-6pm has the potential to reduce screen time by 23%, 5.2% and 20% respectively

Potential messages to parents:

Pay attention to how much children spend using all screen based media

Do not put TV’s in children’s bedrooms
> Eliminate background TV
> Limit TV on School Days
> Identify Non-screen, in home activities that are pleasurable to children
> No TV in eating areas


7. CSIRO web-site http://www.csiro.au/resources/10-steps-for-healthy-families-ScreenTime.html


