



Folkhälsomyndigheten
PUBLIC HEALTH AGENCY OF SWEDEN

Recommendations for children's and adolescents' digital media use



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Recommendations for children's and adolescents' digital media use

The recommendations consist of three parts:

- general recommendations for all children and adolescents (in this publication, 'children and adolescents' refers to children up to 18 years of age) on how to avoid poor sleep due to digital media.
- age-appropriate recommendations for children's and adolescents' digital media use (ages 0–2, ages 2–5, ages 6–12 and ages 13–18)
- recommendations to parents on their own use of digital media.

The recommendations concerning children up to 12 years of age are primarily directed at parents and other adults who encounter children on a daily basis. Those concerning older children (aged 13–18) are directed at the children themselves, but there is also information on how guardians or parents (hereafter referred to as 'parents') can help their teenagers follow the recommendations.

The recommendations are based on the report [Digitala medier och barns och ungas hälsa. En kunskapssammanställning](#) (Digital media and children's and adolescents' health. A knowledge compilation)

This report is based on knowledge from scientific literature, surveys and dialogues with children and adolescents, parents and youth organisations. The recommendations are also based on knowledge concerning what children and adolescents need to develop and be happy and healthy, and about development and maturity at different ages.

More detailed guidance for parents, children and adolescents, and for people who work closely with children, will be published in December 2024.

Screen use

These recommendations are about screen use during leisure time, such as the use of social media, video clips, streamed films, television and video games.

Listening to music, radio or podcasts, or reading e-books, is not included in the recommendations, nor is school-related screen use, aids for children and adolescents with functional difficulties, or digital tools for various community services.

General recommendations for digital media and sleep

Recommendations

- Do not use screens before bedtime.
- Leave mobile phones, tablets and similar outside the bedroom during the night.

Do not use screens before bedtime

Sleep is important for children's and adolescents' development, learning, and physical and mental health. Many adolescents regularly use their mobile phones during the night, for example to check social media. But research has shown that screen use during the night or too close to bedtime can disrupt sleep because all the impressions can make it take longer to fall asleep and also make you sleep worse. It can also disrupt sleep because you 'get stuck' and have a hard time putting aside the screen and therefore fall asleep later.

Daily advice:

- Try to incorporate relaxation into your pre-bedtime evening routines. What is relaxing is different for everyone, but might consist of, for example, reading a book or listening to relaxing music. For small children, it could be reading a story and singing a song.
- **Turn off screens 30–60 minutes before bedtime**, and put mobile phones and other screens away for the night.

Leave mobile phones, tablets and similar outside the bedroom during the night

Sufficient continuous sleep is important for physical and mental health. However, research shows that many children and adolescents who use social media are accustomed to using these in the evenings and during the night, and are expected to be contactable around the clock. Such disturbances can lead to poorer sleep and cause you to be less rested the next day.

Daily advice:

- Leave mobile phones, tablets and similar outside the bedroom during the night, and use a different alarm clock than the one on your mobile.
- It can be a good idea for parents to discuss screen use with the parents of your child's classmates and other friends. It can help if several children and adolescents have similar rules and routines at home.

Age-appropriate recommendations for digital media

The use of digital media generally increases with age. There are also differences between age groups in how the media is used and what content is viewed, as well as how much support may be needed to achieve balanced use. These age-appropriate recommendations take into account the challenges and needs that may exist for children and adolescents at different ages.

For parents of children aged 0–2

Recommendation

Children under age 2 should preferably not use screens at all.

Small children develop when people around them talk, play, read, sing, etc. with them. It is also important for children's motor skills development that they can move, explore and play a lot.

Research also shows that sleep is an important prerequisite for small children's health and development, and that screen use can lead to poorer sleep.

Children under the age of 2 cannot absorb the content of digital media because their eyes and cognitive abilities are not yet sufficiently developed. From what is currently known, screen use also does not appear to have any positive effects on the health of such small children.

Daily advice:

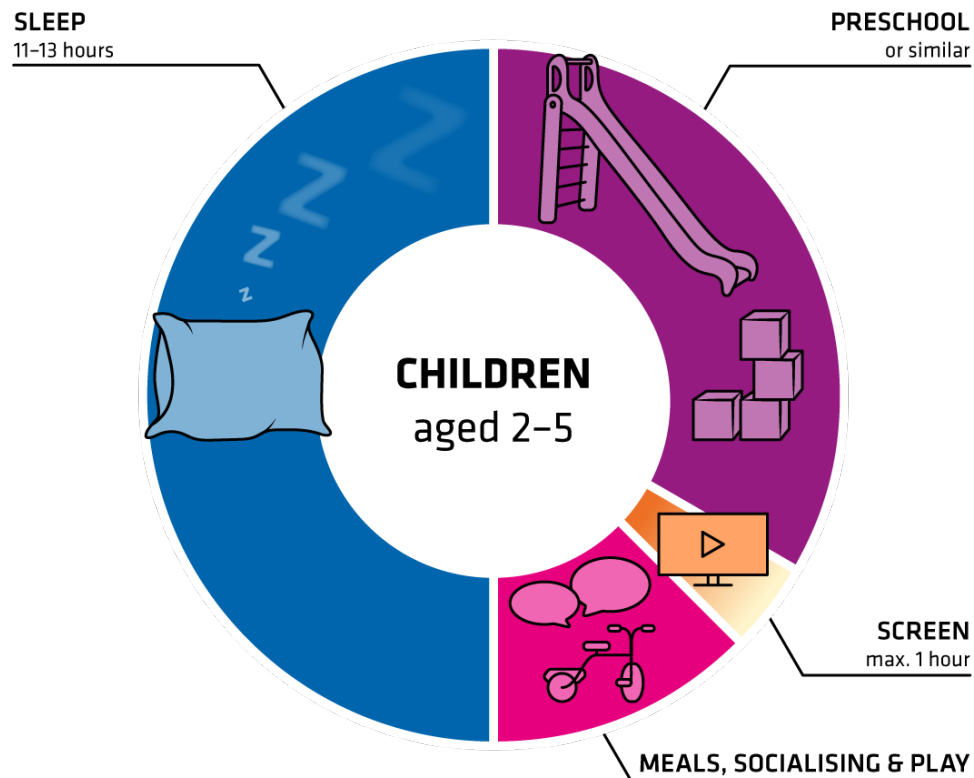
- Try to avoid screen use among children under 2 years of age, even if this may be difficult. Try to avoid the child having independent screen time. But it can be okay to have a video chat with a relative, or to look at photos with an adult.
- If, for instance, an older sibling is using digital media, sit with the children and discuss and explain the content in a way that both the older and the younger child understand.

For parents of children aged 2–5

Recommendations

- As a parent, you can control the content your child accesses. Choose age-appropriate apps and programmes that do not contain ads, algorithm controls or unknown or inappropriate content.
- Create good habits and routines to give your child a balance between, for example, sleep, physical activity, social interaction, play and learning. Control your child’s screen time so that it does not extend out into these activities.
- Try to make screen use a shared activity. Watch with your child and talk about what you see.

Figure 1. 24-hour chart for children aged 2–5



The image shows how time for different activities can be allocated for children 2–5 years of age. This can help to achieve balance in daily life so that screen use doesn’t take too much time away from other things. A good rule of thumb is **no more than one hour of screen time per day**. Screen time here refers, for example, to children’s programmes and age-appropriate apps, and not to things like aids for children with functional difficulties.

Control what content your child accesses

Many digital media outlets are designed in such a way that children could be exposed to frightening or inappropriate content. They may also contain algorithms and interaction design that could lead to problematic or addiction-like use by stimulating children to use them more and more. Advertisements and prompts to purchase are also common.

Some regulation is already in place. Television broadcast from Sweden, for example, may not contain marketing directed at children under the age of 12, because children have a hard time resisting advertisements for sweets, unhealthy food, etc. Some children's programmes, films and games have an age rating indicating that the content is not appropriate for children under a certain age.

Daily advice:

- Choose programmes and apps that you are familiar with and that are appropriate for the child's age.
- Choose programmes and apps that do not contain advertisements or other marketing.
- Avoid platforms and apps that are controlled by algorithms, i.e., those that are free of charge and tailor the content to the user. This includes many video-sharing services and social media, but not apps offering only instant messaging.
- Keep watch for content containing, for example, violence, limiting gender roles and unhealthy body ideals.

Create good habits and routines

Children aged 2–5 need to play, develop their language skills, practise interacting with others, and discover and explore the world around them using all of their senses. At this age, it is important to lay the foundation for good habits with a balance between, for example, sleep, physical activity, social interaction, play and learning.

Screen use can take time that the children could otherwise spend moving around, being creative, and interacting with family or other children. Research also shows that a lot of screen time can lead to poorer sleep and more aggressive behaviour among children.

Daily advice:

- Set clear limits on screen use. A good rule of thumb is no more than one hour of screen time per day. It is easier to decide things like this now than when the children are older.
- Agree as a family on rules for screen time that everyone understands. Put aside all screens when you are eating, socialising or doing things together as a family.

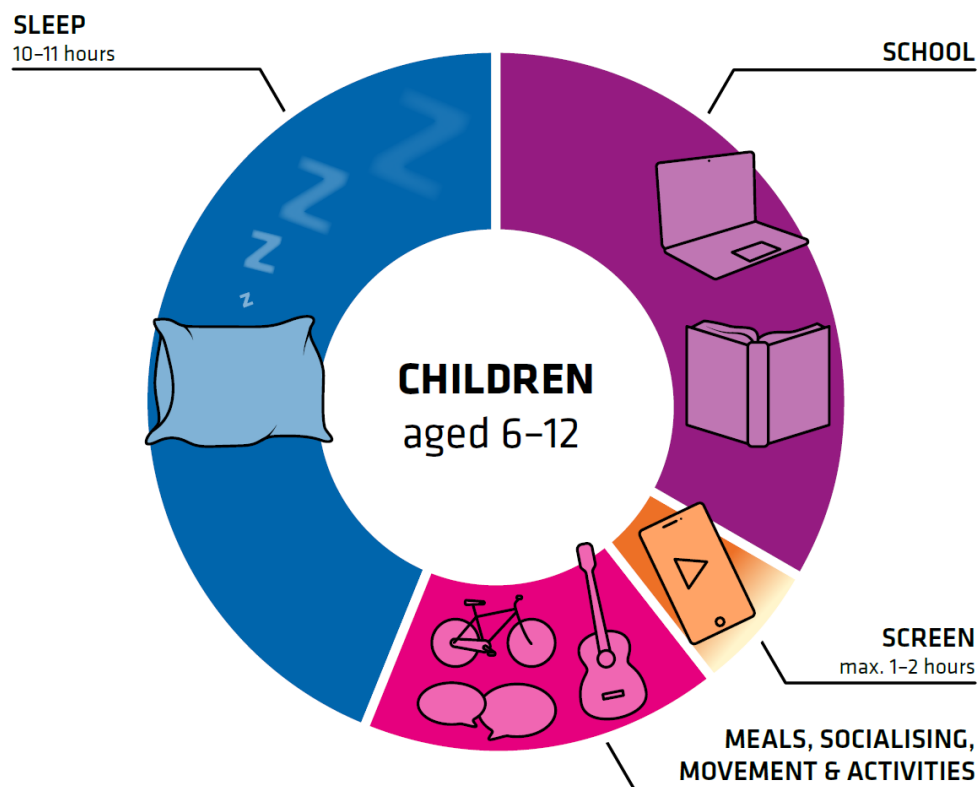
- Do not use screens to provide comfort or as a distraction when the child has to do something that they don't like. Children need to practise governing their emotions.
- Try to make screen use an activity that you and your child do together and talk about what you see and do. If you have conversations early on about what you do online, it will also be easier to talk about such things when the child is older.

For parents of children aged 6–12

Recommendations

- Control what content your child accesses. Choose age-appropriate apps, programmes or games that do not contain ads, algorithm controls or unknown or inappropriate content.
- Follow the age limits that exist for, e.g., video-sharing services, social media and games.
- Talk to your child about what they do online and how they can be influenced by digital media. Be curious and engaged.
- Create good habits for your child. Talk about what they need to feel good, and help them find a balance between schoolwork, sleep, physical activity, leisure activities, social relationships, and screen use.

Figure 2. 24-hour chart for children aged 6–12



The image shows how time for different activities can be allocated for children 6–12 years of age. This can help to achieve balance in daily life so that screen use doesn't take too much time away from other things. A good rule of thumb is **no more than two hours of screen time per day**. Screen time here refers, for example, to films, games, age-appropriate apps and other leisure use, and not to things like schoolwork and aids for children with functional difficulties.

Actively control what content your child accesses

Many digital media outlets are designed in such a way that children could be exposed to frightening or inappropriate content. They may also contain algorithms and interaction design that could lead to problematic or addiction-like use by stimulating children to use them more and more. Advertisements and prompts to purchase are also common, even though this is not permitted.

Some regulation is already in place. Television broadcast from Sweden, for example, may not contain marketing directed at children under the age of 12, because children have a hard time resisting advertisements for sweets, unhealthy food, etc. Some children's programmes, films and games have an age rating indicating that the content is not appropriate for children under a certain age.

Some platforms and apps are also designed to promote unattainable ideals and consumerism among children and adolescents.

Daily advice:

- Stay up to date on what programmes and apps your child is using, and choose those that you think are good.
- Avoid programmes and apps that contain advertising and other types of marketing.
- Avoid platforms and apps that are controlled by algorithms, i.e., those that are free of charge and tailor the content to the user. This includes many video-sharing apps and social media, but not apps offering only instant messaging.
- Keep watch for content containing, for example, violence, restrictive gender roles and unhealthy body ideals.
- Talk with older children about the fact that some content may be uncomfortable or frightening, and ask them to tell an adult if they are exposed to such content.

Follow the age limits

Age limits for, e.g., games or social media mean that they are not appropriate for children under a certain age. Children who are given early access to such games or social media may be exposed to content that they are too young to handle.

Research shows, for example, that children from age 10 and up who use social media a lot are more dissatisfied with their bodies and more often have symptoms of eating disorders than other children. Sometimes there may be peer pressure to use social media even among younger children.

Daily advice:

- Talk to your child about why age limits are important and how different types of content can affect them.
- Discuss age limits with parents of your child's classmates and other friends, and try to agree to follow the set limits.

Talk about what the children are doing on digital media

At this age, more children are starting to use screens on their own. Research shows that the risk of developing problematic or addiction-like screen use is lower if the parents are interested and engaged in what their children are doing online. We also know that children who are happy at school and have good relationships with their parents are at less risk of becoming addicted to video games.

It is important to be engaged in your child's everyday life, including the internet. Being physically active, sleeping well, and having good relationships with friends can make children and adolescents less vulnerable to adverse effects of screen use.

It is important that children have someone to talk to if they get worried or have problems. Research shows that children who are bullied or depressed are at greater risk of developing problematic or addiction-like digital media use. Children who are mentally unwell also use screens to a greater extent than other children, which can lead to a negative spiral.

Daily advice:

- Be engaged and curious about what your child is doing and experiencing online. Ask your child to show you fun things that they have seen or done.

Create good habits

Research shows that a lot of screen time can lead to poorer and shorter sleep and depression among children. It can also lead to insufficient physical activity. A lot of screen time is also associated with obesity and back pain. Movement and physical activity are important to feel good, both physically and mentally, now and in the future. The brain also needs a chance to rest from stimulation and impressions.

Using screens together with others, for example playing games with family or friends instead of alone, seems to be better for health.

Daily advice:

- Explain to your child what they need to feel good, and help them find a balance between schoolwork, sleep, physical activity, leisure activities, social relationships, and screen use.
- Set clear limits on screen use. A good rule of thumb is no more than one or two hours a day. Talk to your child about why this is important.
- Agree as a family on basic rules that everyone understands. An example is to put aside all screens when you are eating or when you are doing things together as a family.

For parents of children aged 13–18

Recommendation

- Actively help your teen to follow the recommendations on digital media and sleep, as well as the age-appropriate recommendations.

For many adolescents, digital media is a natural part of life. Adolescents can to some extent regulate their own use, but parents need to support their teens in following the recommendations, both those on sleep and those aimed directly at adolescents.

Daily advice:

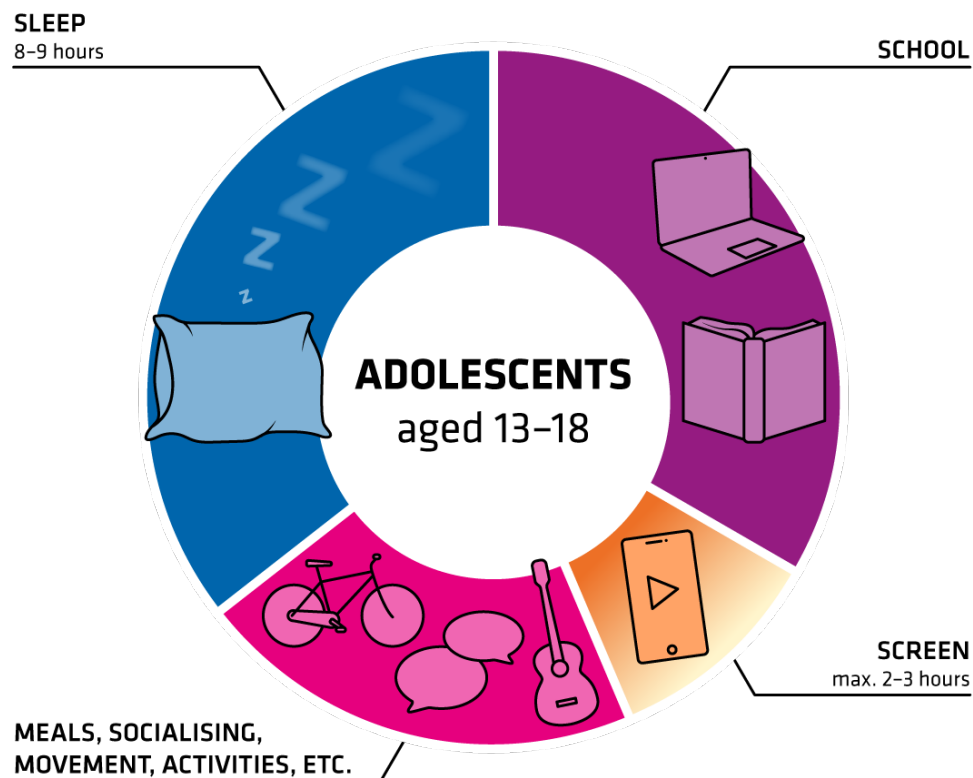
- Be engaged and curious about your child’s digital life. Keep an open dialogue about what they are doing and experiencing online, and generally about how they are feeling. Try to not judge.
- Talk about what it means to be a courteous user and how you can contribute to a positive online community, for example by thinking about your tone and language.
- Talk about what they need to feel good, and help them create good habits and a balance between schoolwork, sleep, physical activity, leisure activities, social relationships, and screen use. Adolescents may need help controlling and limiting screen time.
- Agree on rules and guidelines for screen use. Support your child in sticking to what you have agreed on.
- Determine whether your child has unhealthy screen use, look for signs of ill health, and provide support if needed.
- Talk about how to react if they or someone else is subjected to something. Bris and Ecpat, for example, have information and support lines for children and adolescents and for adults. Ecpat also has a function for reporting sexual abuse against children and adolescents. Rädda barnen (Save the Children) has #Nätsmart – guidance on how adults can talk to children and adolescents about sexual abuse online.

For adolescents aged 13–18

Recommendations

- Think about your screen use. How does it make you feel? Does your mobile phone or gaming take time from other things you would enjoy? If you are not happy, try to change your habits. Ask for help if needed.
- You can contribute to a courteous online climate by maintaining a good tone towards others.
- Seek support from an adult if you are targeted in any way, for example if you are bullied or contacted by someone in a way that doesn't feel good, or if you see something frightening or uncomfortable. This can reduce the risk of you experiencing ill effects from it.
- Try to keep a balance in your everyday life so that there is enough time for schoolwork, sleep, physical activity, leisure activities, and socialising with friends and family.

Figure 3. 24-hour chart for adolescents aged 13–18



The image shows how time for different activities can be allocated for adolescents 13–18 years of age. This can help to achieve balance in daily life so that screen use doesn't take too much time away from other things. A good rule of thumb is **no more than two to three hours of screen time per day**. Screen time here refers, for example, to games, social media, video-sharing services and other leisure use,

and not to things like schoolwork and aids for adolescents with functional difficulties.

Think about your screen use

Many digital media outlets are designed so that the users spend more and more time on them, and this can lead to problematic or addiction-like use. Research shows that a high level of screen time can lead to shorter and poorer sleep and to depression. Some even think that it feels difficult to constantly be on social media or to always see what others are doing.

The users are also exposed to unattainable ideals, including about how you should look, what you should do in your spare time, and what things you should have. Many are negatively affected by seeing a one-sided and often touched-up image of everyone else. Research shows that children and adolescents who use social media a lot are more dissatisfied with their bodies and more often have symptoms of eating disorders than other children and adolescents. Some also become more worried and experience more anxiety.

Some video games include loot boxes, skin gambling, etc., which can lead to one more easily ending up in gambling for money. You must be 18 years old to gamble, and advertisements for gambling may not be directed at adolescents under the age of 18.

Daily advice:

- Follow the age limits for apps, games and websites.
- Remember that platforms and apps controlled by algorithms can influence what you do, what you see, and how you feel. Keep watch for content containing, for example, violence, restrictive gender roles and unhealthy body ideals.
- Think critically about sources. Try to figure out why certain things appear in your feeds, how you are affected by that, and who is behind it.
- If social media and gaming make you feel worse in any way, try to devote more time to other activities instead, perhaps together with friends. You can also support each other if they also want to change their screen habits.
- Talk to an adult if you don't feel well or are finding it difficult to control your screen time, notice signs of problematic or addiction-like use, or feel concerned or anxious about what is happening online. You could, for example, turn to your student health services or a youth centre.

Ask for help if you are targeted online

Research shows that children and adolescents can be subjected to, for example, online bullying, grooming, and undesired sexual advances when they are gaming online or are on social media. Those who are more active online also run a higher risk of being harmed.

Harassment, hate and threats on the internet are commonplace for many, and comments about a person's body and appearance are the most common forms of online bullying. One can also be targeted due to racism, sexism, ableism, and homo-, bi- and transphobia, or subjected to control or violence via digital channels. There are also great differences between genders, with girls being subjected more often to, for example, sexual harassment and bullying online. Online bullying can lead to psychological problems, self-harming behaviour and dissatisfaction with one's body.

Several organisations have websites with tips on how to reduce your vulnerability online. Support and assistance are also available for those who have been subjected to bullying, abuse or exploitation. Bris and Ecpat, for example, have information about what is legal and illegal, and support lines for children and adolescents. Ecpat also has a function for reporting sexual abuse against children and adolescents.

Daily advice:

- Seek support if you are targeted. You can either talk to someone you know or turn to an organisation that works with these sorts of situations.

Try to achieve a balance in your everyday life

A lot of screen time can lead to poorer sleep or too little physical activity. Movement and physical activity are important to feel good, both physically and mentally, now and in the future. The brain also needs to rest from all the impressions on the internet. It is important to do different things, to learn something new and to socialise with others off-line. Don't let digital media take too much time from other things. A good rule of thumb is no more than two to three hours of screen time per day.

Daily advice:

- Try to create good habits and achieve a good balance between schoolwork, sleep, physical activity, leisure activities, social relationships, and screen use.

Recommendations on parents' own digital media use

Recommendations

- Think about how you use digital media when you are with your child.
- Remember that your screen habits can also affect your child's screen habits.

Research shows that parents can have poorer interaction with their children due to screen use. A parent using their mobile is, for example, less attentive to their child's needs. For children to be healthy and happy, they need to feel that their parents see, hear, and understand them.

Parents and other adults are important role models for children. If they have good screen habits, there is a better chance that the children also will.

Daily advice:

- Reflect on whether you need to limit your screen use when you are with your child.
- If you have younger children, tell them what you are doing when you are using your mobile or other screens, for example, checking bus times, buying tickets or communicating with the preschool and school. You can thereby show that it's not only about entertainment or a pastime, but that digital media also have practical applications. We can control what we want to use digital media for and take advantage of all of its benefits.

Explanations and definitions

Inappropriate or harmful content

Examples of inappropriate or harmful content include false or alternative information that can mislead and create a parallel image of the world or, through others' attitudes and behaviours, unreasonable beauty or body ideals, or violent or undesired sexual content.

Online pornography can contribute to spreading a distorted image of gender roles and of sexuality, and is associated with risk factors for sexual health. Pornography can also trivialise men's violence against women.

Signs of addiction-like use

Signs that you/your child have addiction-like gaming behaviours

- reduced control over gaming
- increased prioritisation of gaming over other interests and daily activities
- gaming continues and escalates despite negative consequences.

To get help with addiction-like gaming, or problematic use of social media or the internet in general, contact your student health services, youth centre or healthcare provider.

How much is too much: When does use become problematic?

It is difficult to determine exactly where the line is between well-balanced use and more problematic use that has negative consequences. In some studies, for example, adverse effects have been seen after more than a half-hour's use, while in others no effects are seen until after three and a half hours of daily use.

Statistics also show that those who use mobile phones or computers several hours a day have more psychological problems. These children and adolescents experience to a higher degree than others that their media use pushes aside other things and makes them sleep more poorly.

However, being physically active can reduce one's vulnerability to depressive symptoms from a high level of screen use, and it is important that children and adolescents can achieve a healthy and balanced use of digital media in their leisure time.

How can I recognise platforms and apps that are controlled by algorithms?

Platforms and apps that are controlled by algorithms are often free of charge and show content in feeds that are tailored to you. In other words, many video-sharing apps and social media, but not apps that only have instant messaging.

Physical activity is good

It is important to move throughout the day and avoid long periods of sitting still. All movement counts. Read more:

[Recommendations concerning physical activity and sedentary behaviour — Public Health Agency of Sweden \(folkhalsomyndigheten.se\)](#)

The Public Health Agency of Sweden is an expert authority with responsibility for public health issues at a national level. The Agency develops and supports activities to promote health, prevent illness and improve preparedness for health threats. Our vision statement: a public health that strengthens the positive development of society.



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