

# Screen Time, Gaming and Digital Balance

**A detailed parent guide to understanding why screens can be so compelling, reducing conflict around stopping, recognising when use is becoming harmful, and creating balance without shame or blanket assumptions.**

Screens are not one single activity. A child may be creating, talking with friends, researching an interest, watching short-form video, gaming competitively, gaming cooperatively or using technology to regulate after a demanding day. For many children with ADHD, digital activities offer fast feedback, novelty, clear goals, immediate rewards and fewer organisational barriers than many offline tasks. They can also provide genuine competence, friendship and belonging.

Problems arise when digital use repeatedly displaces sleep, eating, movement, school access, relationships or other important parts of life; when stopping becomes persistently explosive; when online spaces expose the child to harm; or when gaming becomes the only reliable place they experience success. The aim is not to make technology the enemy. It is to understand its function and build a family system that protects wellbeing while respecting why the child values it.

## Why ADHD brains may find digital activities especially compelling

| Feature                  | Why it can work well                                                        | Where difficulty can arise                                                |
|--------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Immediate feedback       | The child knows quickly whether an action worked.                           | Offline tasks with delayed rewards may feel unusually flat by comparison. |
| Clear goals and progress | Levels, scores and missions make the next step visible.                     | Stopping before a natural endpoint can feel abrupt and unfinished.        |
| Novelty and stimulation  | Fast-changing input can hold attention effectively.                         | Highly stimulating content may make quieter transitions feel harder.      |
| Social connection        | Gaming and online spaces can provide belonging and shared interests.        | Conflict, exclusion, pressure or unsafe contact can also occur online.    |
| Escape and regulation    | A predictable digital world may offer relief after school or social strain. | If it becomes the only coping strategy, other needs may go unnoticed.     |

## Look at function before setting the rule

Before changing screen limits, ask what the activity is doing for the child. Is it social connection? Recovery after masking? Competence? Predictability? Sensory regulation? Relief from boredom? A strong interest? Avoidance of a task that feels impossible? The answer changes the support. Removing the screen without replacing its function can leave the original need untouched and increase conflict.

## Stopping can be harder than starting

A sudden 'turn it off now' can require the child to disengage attention, tolerate an unfinished goal, shift reward level, remember what comes next and regulate disappointment simultaneously. Use advance warnings that are meaningful to the activity: finish this round, reach a save point, complete the current build, then stop. Agree the stopping rule before play begins whenever possible.

# Boundaries without making technology the enemy

Clear boundaries can be helpful, but boundaries work best when they are predictable, proportionate and connected to family needs. Rules created only during an argument are difficult to trust. A collaborative plan does not mean the child decides everything; it means adults explain the purpose of limits and include the child in making them workable.

|                                   |                                                                                                                                                                                                               |
|-----------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| <b>Define the non-negotiables</b> | Protect essentials first: sleep, school attendance, medication where prescribed, meals, safety and necessary family responsibilities. Avoid adding arbitrary rules simply because screens feel uncomfortable. |
| <b>Create predictable windows</b> | A known gaming or screen period can reduce constant asking. Link it to the day's structure rather than making access depend on perfect behaviour.                                                             |
| <b>Plan the ending</b>            | Use a visible timer if helpful, but also use game-aware stopping points. Give enough warning for the child to finish safely and emotionally prepare to switch.                                                |
| <b>Plan what comes next</b>       | Stopping is easier when the next activity is clear and realistic. Moving directly from a highly rewarding game to an unclear chore may be particularly difficult.                                             |

## Do not use screens as the explanation for everything

Irritability, poor sleep, school refusal, low mood, isolation or difficulty with routines deserve a wider look. Screens may contribute, but they may also be where an anxious, bullied, exhausted or socially isolated child goes for relief. Ask what changed first. Look at sleep, friendships, school demands, sensory overload, family stress, physical health and mental health rather than assuming the device created the whole problem.

## Gaming and self-esteem

A child who struggles academically, socially or organisationally may experience gaming as one of the few places where progress is visible and effort reliably produces success. If adults remove that world while offering only activities in which the child feels less competent, the loss can be significant. Build additional experiences of mastery rather than treating digital competence as meaningless.

## Screens and sleep

Late-night use can reduce sleep opportunity and highly engaging content can make stopping difficult. Families may benefit from a consistent device-down point before sleep and keeping overnight access appropriate to the child's age and needs. But persistent sleep difficulties should not automatically be attributed to screens; ADHD itself and other sleep, anxiety, sensory or medication-related factors may also be relevant.

## Food, movement and body needs

Deep engagement can make it easy to miss hunger, thirst, toileting or the passage of time. Instead of waiting until the child is dysregulated, build body breaks into longer sessions: drink, snack or meal, toilet, stretch or movement, then decide whether play continues. This is support for interoception and time awareness, not punishment.

# Online safety, gaming culture and warning signs

Digital balance is also about what happens online, not only how many minutes a child spends there. Parents need enough curiosity about the child's digital world to understand the platforms, people, pressures and spending systems they encounter.

## Online relationships

Know who the child plays or communicates with and what information they understand should remain private. Discuss blocking, reporting, screenshots, pressure to move conversations to other platforms, requests for images or personal details, and what to do if an online interaction feels frightening or secretive. Keep the message clear: coming to an adult for help should not automatically mean losing all access, because fear of punishment can discourage disclosure.

## In-game spending and persuasive design

Some games use limited-time offers, randomised rewards, cosmetic purchases, battle passes and repeated prompts to spend. Children with impulsivity or strong reward sensitivity may need explicit safeguards. Use account controls, purchase permissions and clear spending agreements. Avoid linking a child's worth or self-control to a system deliberately designed to encourage repeated engagement.

## When should parents be more concerned?

| Notice the pattern  | Questions to ask                                                                                                                         |
|---------------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Loss of balance     | Is digital use repeatedly replacing sleep, school, meals, hygiene, movement, relationships or previously valued activities?              |
| Loss of control     | Does the child repeatedly use far longer than intended despite agreed plans and meaningful consequences?                                 |
| Escalating distress | Are there severe, persistent reactions around access or stopping that are affecting safety or family functioning?                        |
| Narrowing life      | Has gaming or online activity become virtually the only source of pleasure, competence, friendship or emotional relief?                  |
| Risk online         | Are there concerns about bullying, exploitation, sexual content, threats, coercion, gambling-like mechanics, spending or unsafe contact? |

## Problematic gaming is more than 'plays a lot'

The World Health Organization includes gaming disorder in ICD-11, describing a persistent pattern involving impaired control over gaming, increasing priority given to gaming over other activities, and continuation or escalation despite negative consequences, with significant impairment. High enthusiasm or many hours alone do not establish a disorder. Concerns should be assessed in context by an appropriately qualified professional.

## If stopping triggers a meltdown

Keep safety first and reduce verbal escalation. Do not try to teach a long lesson while the child is highly activated. Once calm, examine whether the stopping point was predictable, whether the session ended mid-task, what need the game was meeting, and whether the current plan is realistic. Repeated severe distress deserves a wider assessment rather than simply harsher restrictions.

# Balanced Screen Plan - Family Worksheet

Use this collaboratively where possible. The purpose is not to count every minute; it is to protect the parts of life that matter and make digital boundaries predictable.

|                                                                           |       |
|---------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|
| What does my child enjoy or gain from screens/gaming?                     | _____ |
| Which digital activities are social, creative, educational or regulating? | _____ |
| What parts of daily life must be protected?                               | _____ |
| When are our most workable screen/gaming windows?                         | _____ |
| What warning helps before stopping?                                       | _____ |
| What is a fair natural finishing point?                                   | _____ |
| What should happen immediately after screen time?                         | _____ |
| What body breaks are needed during longer sessions?                       | _____ |
| What online-safety rules does my child understand?                        | _____ |
| What spending controls or permissions are needed?                         | _____ |
| What signs would tell us the balance is no longer working?                | _____ |
| What will adults do if the plan needs changing?                           | _____ |

## Language that reduces shame and conflict

Try: 'I can see why stopping here is hard.' 'Show me what you need to finish before you can save.' 'Gaming matters to you, and sleep matters too; we need a plan that protects both.' 'I'm not saying games are bad. I'm looking at whether the balance is working.' 'If something happens online, you can tell me and we will work out what to do.'

## When to seek additional support

Seek professional advice when digital use is associated with significant deterioration in sleep, education, relationships, self-care, mood or safety; where there is persistent loss of control; or where online harm is suspected. In the UK, a GP can help with health or mental-health concerns, while school safeguarding/SEND staff may be relevant to bullying or education issues. Immediate safeguarding concerns require prompt action through the appropriate services.

## A message for parents

You do not have to choose between unlimited access and treating every screen as harmful. Children need adults to provide boundaries, but they also benefit when adults understand the worlds that matter to them. Curiosity gives you better information. Predictability reduces conflict. Connection makes it more likely your child will tell you when something online has gone wrong. Balance is not a perfect number of minutes; it is whether technology can sit alongside sleep, health, learning, relationships, safety and a life that still contains other sources of meaning.

## Further reading and guidance

Useful sources include NHS information about ADHD and sleep, NICE guideline NG87, ADHD Foundation resources, UK Safer Internet Centre guidance and NSPCC online-safety information. For concerns about gaming disorder, use qualified clinical guidance rather than self-diagnosing from screen hours alone. This resource is educational and does not replace individual medical, psychological, educational, safeguarding or online-safety advice.

### Space to Breathe Therapy

ADHD Parent Support Series - Part 19