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Policy Brief: Screen Time of New South Wales Children

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Key Messages

- Guidelines suggest children aged 5-17 should have less than two hours a day of sedentary screen time (e.g., watching television).
- Children's screen time increases from age 10/11 to age 14/15 and two-thirds of students exceeded the recommended screen limits.
- Screen time mostly consists of watching TV/Videos. Boys spend more time gaming than girls.
- Children from high SES backgrounds spend less time on screens overall, and more educational time on screens.
- Family rules around screens decrease as children age, and high SES households are more likely to have rules around screen time.

Purpose

Balancing children's screen time with other activities such as physical activity, socialising, and homework is an important issue – there are only 24 hours in a day. The Australian 24-hour movement guidelines¹ recommend that children aged 5-17 should have less than 2 hours of sedentary recreational screen time per day. This is because high levels of sedentary screen time is associated with socioemotional problems (including anxiety and depression),² poorer academic performance,³ obesity,⁴ and sleep problems.⁵

We analyse 24-hour time-use diaries of New South Wales children from the most recent national longitudinal data on children's screen time, to provide a pre-pandemic benchmark of children's screen use.

Advice for moderating children's screen time typically suggests that families set clear limits around screen use.⁶ Consequently, we also examine how family rules around screen time change over time as children age.

Data

This analysis uses time-use diary data from the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC), a nationally representative sample of children in Australia. LSAC also includes survey items about family screen time rules. This analysis focuses on the “birth” cohort – the cohort of children who were born in 2004 – and examines changes as they grew up between 2014 and 2018. Analysis is restricted to children residing in New South Wales.

¹ <https://www.health.gov.au/topics/physical-activity-and-exercise/physical-activity-and-exercise-guidelines-for-all-australians>

² Vasconcellos, R. P., Sanders, T., & Noetel, M. (2025). Electronic screen use and children's socioemotional problems: A systematic review and meta-analysis of longitudinal studies. 513-543.

³ Adelantado-Renau, M., Moliner-Urdiales, D., ... & Álvarez-Bueno, C. (2019). Association Between Screen Media Use and Academic Performance Among Children and Adolescents: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 173(11), 1058-1067.

⁴ Fang, K., Mu, M., Liu, K., & He, Y. (2019). Screen time and childhood overweight/obesity: A systematic review and meta-analysis. *Child: Care, Health and Development*, 45(5), 744-753.

⁵ Carter, B., Rees, P., Hale, L., Bhattacharjee, D., & Paradkar, M. S. (2016). Association Between Portable Screen-Based Media Device Access or Use and Sleep Outcomes: A Systematic Review and Meta-analysis. *JAMA Pediatrics*, 170(12), 1202-1208.

⁶ <https://www.nsw.gov.au/education-and-training/digital-citizenship/parents-and-carers/managing-screen-time>

Analysis

Overall Trends

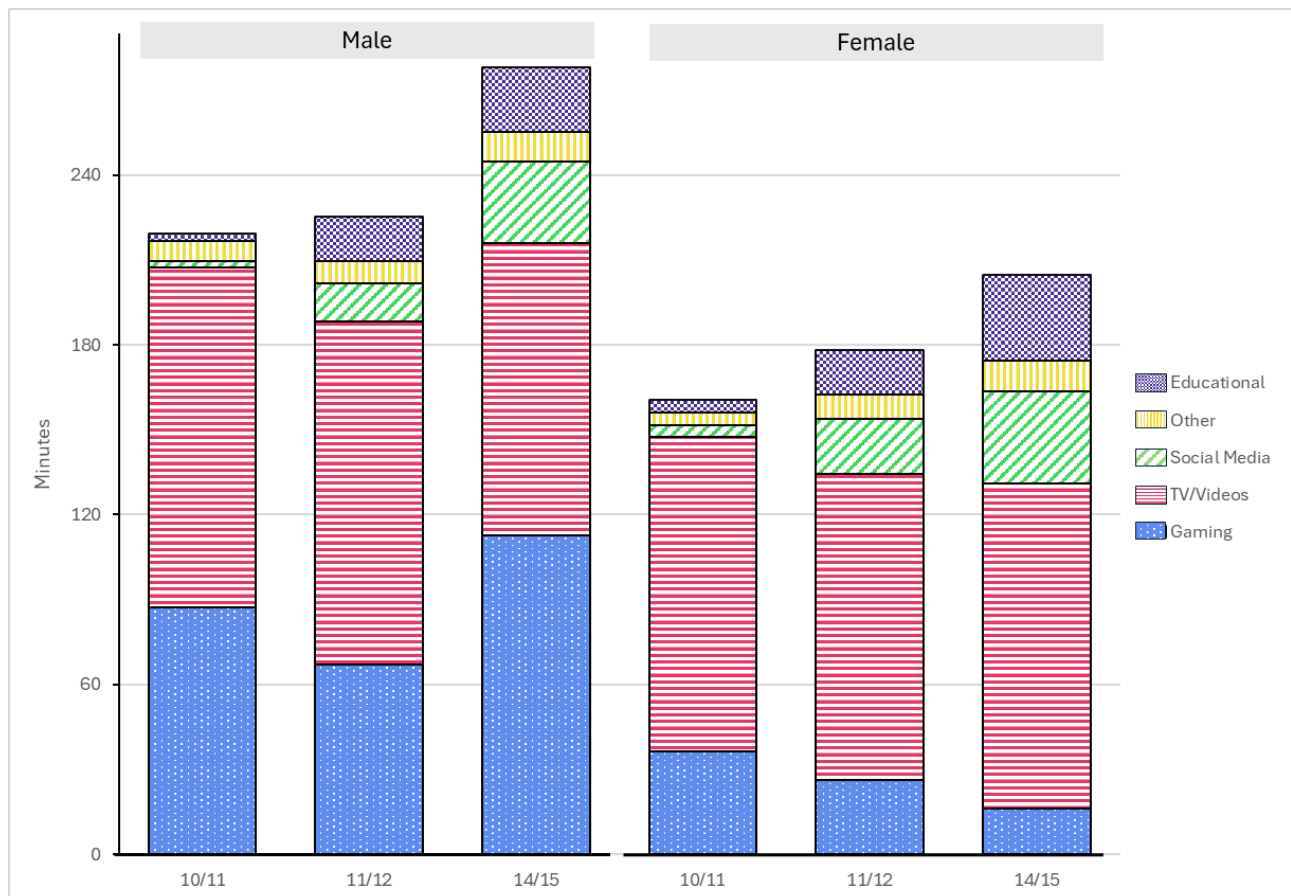
Children's screen use increased over time, with children spending on average 209 minutes (approximately 3.5 hours) on screens per day. This is more than the two hours (120 minutes) of recommended time a day on screens. Two-thirds of children spent more than the recommended two hours on screens.

Children spent the most amount of time watching television and videos. Time spent on social media use increased as children aged, in line with the expansion of social media platforms and greater access to smart phones.⁷

Sex differences

Figure 1 shows differences in screen time between males and females. Time spent gaming increased over time for males but decreased for females. Educational screen time (i.e., completing homework on screens) increased for both males and females as they aged.

Figure 1. Average screen time by age and sex (New South Wales)

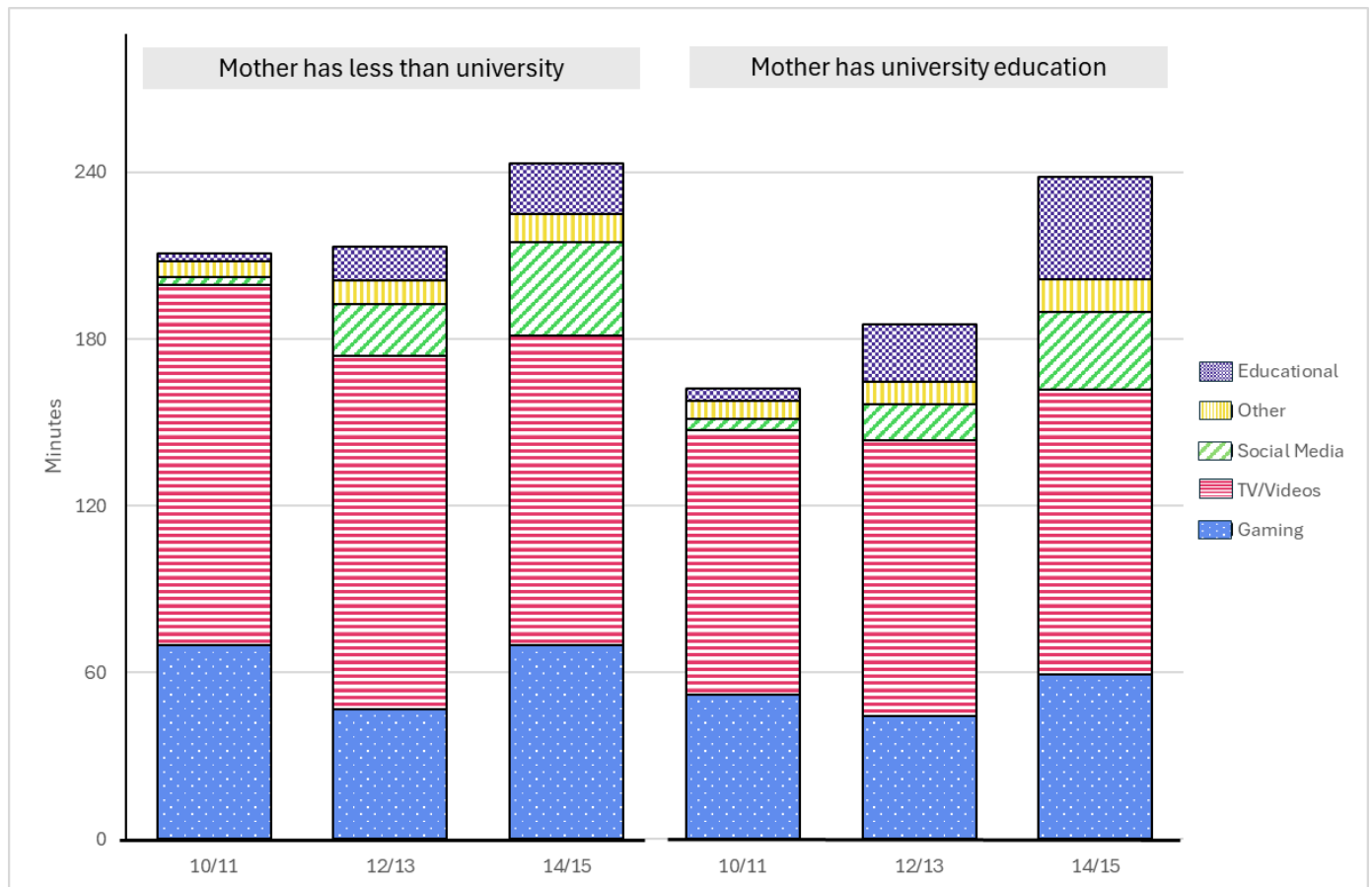


⁷ Leigh, A., & Robson, S. (2025). The Rise of Social Media and the Fall in Mental Well-Being Among Young Australians. *Australian Economic Review*.

Differences by Socioeconomic Status (Mother's Highest Education)

Children from lower socioeconomic status (SES)⁸ families had higher amounts of screen time at ages 10/11 and 12/13 compared to children from higher socioeconomic status backgrounds (see Figure 2). At ages 14/15, overall time use was similar, however children from low SES families spent more time watching TV/Videos, and more time engaging in social media compared to high SES families. Children from high SES families also completed significantly more schoolwork on screens at age 14/15.

Figure 2. Average screen time by age and mother's highest education level (New South Wales)



Family Rules Around Screens

Table 1 shows that the proportion of children with family rules around screen time (including the quantity of TV, time spent on the internet and rules for amount of screen time, as reported by parents) decreased as children aged. By ages 14/15, only 1 in 2 children had family rules around the amount of time they were allowed on screens.

⁸ Low socioeconomic status was indicated by families with mothers who have less than university education.

Children from high socioeconomic backgrounds (based on their mother's highest level of education) are consistently more likely to have family rules around screens compared to children from low socioeconomic backgrounds.

Table 1. Percentage of children with family rules around screens, by SES (New South Wales)

	Rules about quantity of TV		Rules about time on internet		Rules for amount of screen time	
	Low SES	High SES	Low SES	High SES	Low SES	High SES
Age 10/11	64%	71%	77%	80%	-	-
Age 12/13	56%	67%	71%	75%	-	-
Age 14/15	-	-	-	-	48%	56%

Note: Survey items not asked in all years of data collection.

Acknowledgement

This brief uses unit record data from Growing Up in Australia, the Longitudinal Study of Australian Children (LSAC). The study is conducted in partnership with the Department of Social Services (DSS), the Australian Institute of Family Studies (AIFS) and the Australian Bureau of Statistics (ABS). The findings and views reported in this paper are those of the author and should not be attributed to DSS, AIFS or the ABS.

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About POLIS

The Centre for Social Research and Methods has been rebranded as ***POLIS: The Centre for Social Policy Research***. As part of this change, the Centre for Aboriginal Economic Policy Research (CAEPR) has joined POLIS and is being renamed the Centre for Indigenous Policy Research.

POLIS – which draws from the Ancient Greek for the administrative centre of the City-State – is designed to provide a designated space at the ANU for discussion, debate and research on the formulation of social policy. The rebrand will allow POLIS to better capture and market the key work of the centre in providing research and expertise on social policy in response to community and federal and state/territory government needs and requirements.

POLIS delivers exceptionally robust data and evidence-driven insights into the key challenges facing contemporary Australia. This provides the foundational cornerstones of informed social policy development amongst leading stakeholders within our modern policy: government, community groups, business representatives, and educators.

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