

Digital Dopamine: Half of Canadian parents concerned their child spends too much time on their devices

Parents say more screen time for their kids associated with diminished academic performance

September 3, 2019 – Whether children are reluctantly peeling themselves away from a summer of screen time, gaming and online socializing, or doubling down on the hours spent with their tablets in the name of homework, the back-to-school season brings an examination of how much is too much – and the extent to which parents are concerned by the amount of time their young children spend with these devices.

A new public opinion survey from the non-profit Angus Reid Institute, conducted in partnership with TVO, finds many parents worried about the addictive potential of digital devices as well as their contribution to physical inactivity, among other negative developmental outcomes.

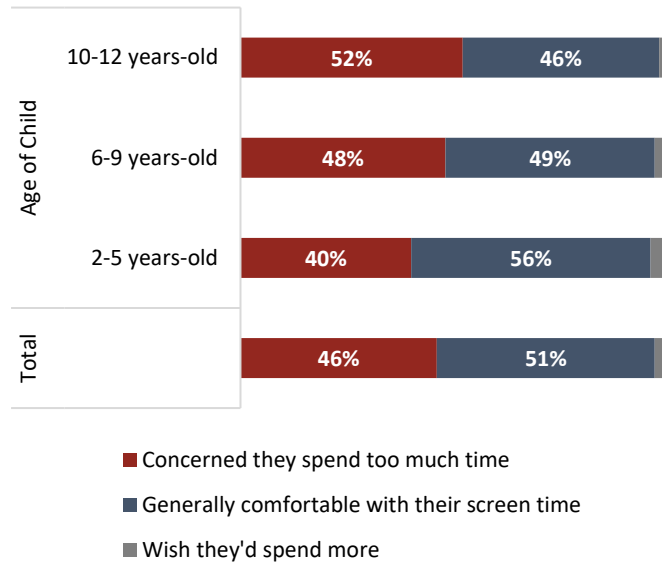
While most parents (89%) acknowledge that such devices can be a valuable educational tool for young children, nearly half (46%) remain concerned that their child is spending too much time in front of a screen.

The vast majority (87%) of Canadian parents with children between the ages of two and 12 say their child spends at least one hour per day using their device(s), with most devoting significantly more time than that.

Across a number of areas ranging from physical fitness and mental health to sociability and academic performance, parents' evaluations of their child's well-being appear negatively correlated with their total screen time. This is particularly true of reading ability, as seven-in-ten (68%) parents of children who spend less than one hour per day in front of a screen say their child does well in this area, compared to fewer than half (44%) of parents whose children spend four hours or more.

More Key Findings:

How do you feel about the amount of time your child is spending with these devices? (All Respondents, n=2200)



METHODOLOGY:

The Angus Reid Institute conducted an online survey from March 15 – 27, 2019, among a representative randomized sample of 2,200 Canadian adults who are members of [Angus Reid Forum](#) and parents/guardians of at least one child between the ages of 2 and 12 years-old. Those parents with two or more children in this age range were asked to focus on just one child, for the purposes of this survey. For comparison purposes only, a probability sample of this size would carry a margin of error of +/- 2.1 percentage points, 19 times out of 20. Discrepancies in or between totals are due to rounding. The survey was self-commissioned and paid for by ARI. Detailed tables are found at the end of this release.

CONTACT:

Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
Dave Korzinski, Research Associate: 250.899.0821 dave.korzinski@angusreid.org

- One-in-five (22%) Canadian parents say their child spends more than four hours per day using their device(s), rising to at least four-in-ten among parents of children with a physical (43%), learning (39%) or developmental disability (44%)
- Children’s screen activities appear to vary significantly based on gender and age. Boys are nearly twice as likely as girls (35% vs. 20%) to frequently use their devices for non-educational gaming, driven in large part by pre-teen boys (49%). On the other hand, pre-teen girls stand out as the group of children most likely to rely on their devices for social interaction and communication
- While nearly two-in-three (64%) parents of children with a physical disability believe screen time is a “good” or “excellent” way for kids to learn, just three-in-ten (31%) parents of children without disabilities say the same
- Parents utilize a number of approaches to manage their children’s screen time and usage, including monitoring what their child is watching (63% say they regularly do this) and talking to their child about being careful online (60%, including 75% among parents of pre-teens)

About ARI

*The **Angus Reid Institute (ARI)** was founded in October 2014 by pollster and sociologist, Dr. Angus Reid. ARI is a national, not-for-profit, non-partisan public opinion research foundation established to advance education by commissioning, conducting and disseminating to the public accessible and impartial statistical data, research and policy analysis on economics, political science, philanthropy, public administration, domestic and international affairs and other socio-economic issues of importance to Canada and its world.*

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Part 1: Assessing Screen Time in the Digital Generation

This past April, the World Health Organization (WHO) released [new guidelines](#) on young children’s use of technological devices. The report recommends that sedentary screen time for children under 5 years-old be limited to one hour a day in order to best promote their physical and cognitive development. This

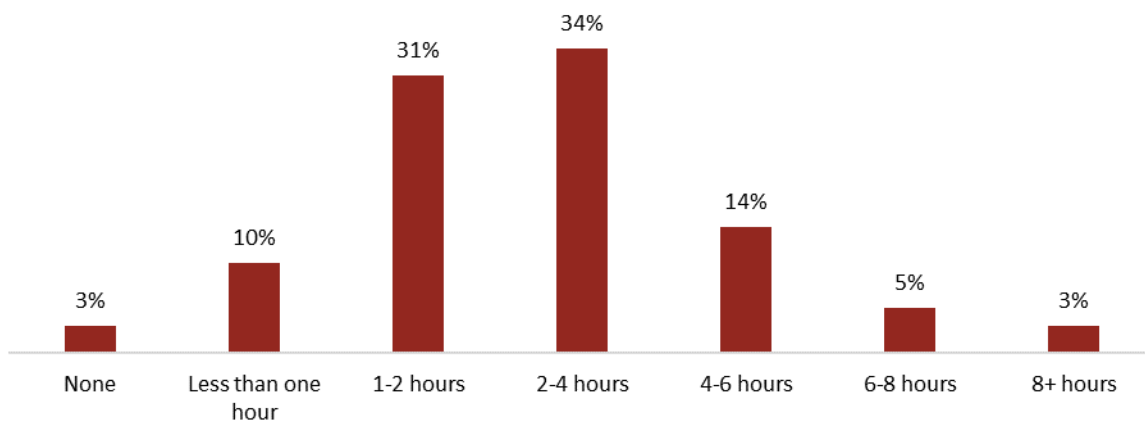
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recommendation is based on findings that “physical inactivity has been identified as a leading risk factor for global mortality” and a contributor to the rise in childhood obesity.

The results of this Angus Reid Institute study would suggest that the vast majority of Canadian parents do not believe their kids currently meet these recommendations, especially as they get older. Three-in-10 (31%) parents with children ages two to 12 report that their child, on a typical weekday, spends between one and two hours using their devices, with another one-in-three (34%) saying this daily average falls within the range of two to four hours. For a sizable minority of parents (22%), their child’s total screen time exceeds four hours per day.

On a typical weekday, what would your estimate your child's total "screen time" to be?

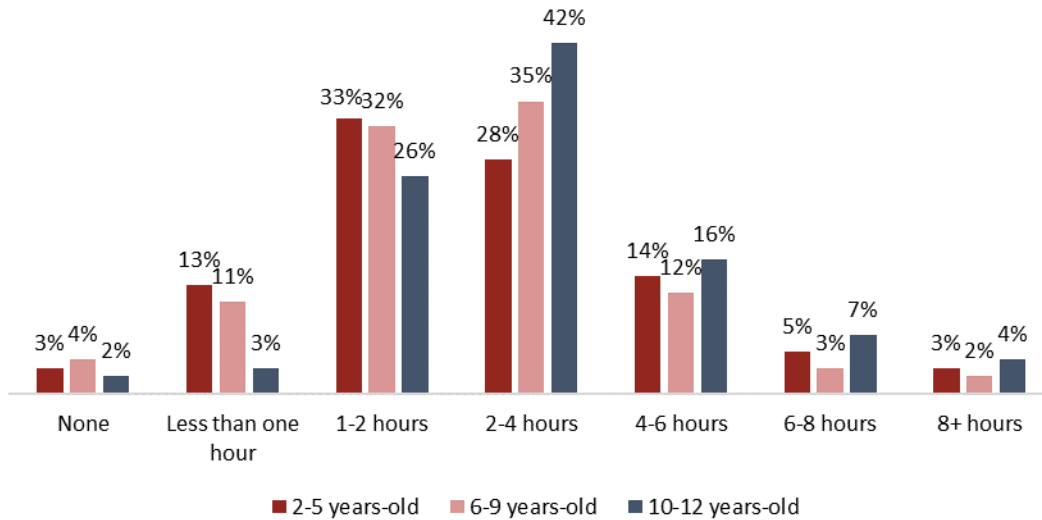


While parents of pre-teens (10-12 year-olds) are more likely than parents of younger children to say their child spends more than two hours per day in front a screen, the vast majority of children from all three age groups appear to spend *at least* an hour using their devices, with substantial numbers devoting more time than that.

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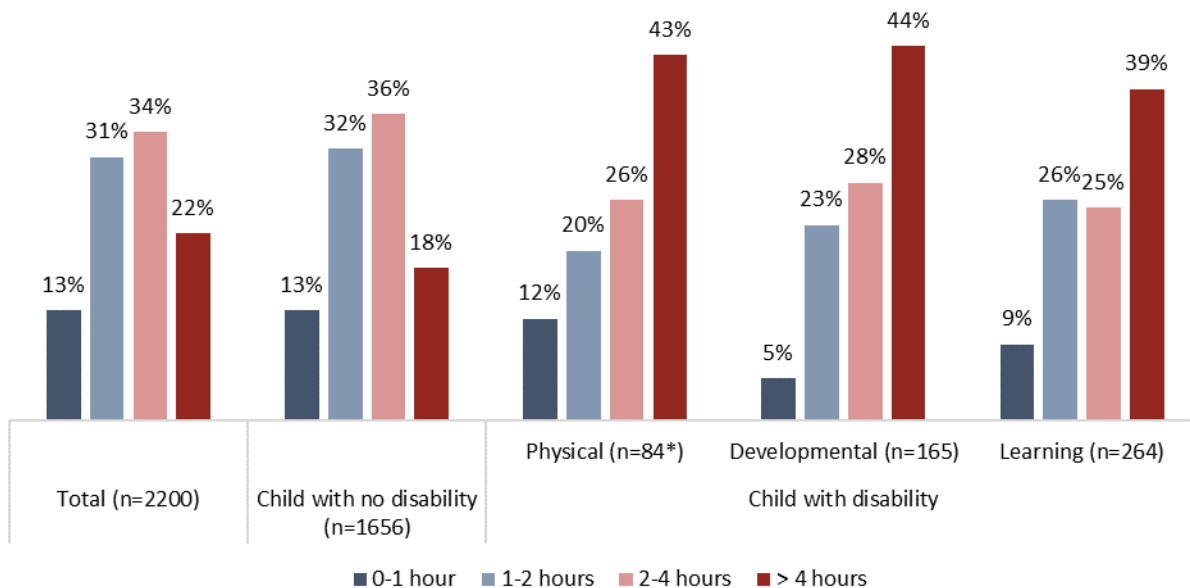
Shachi Kurl, Executive Director: 604.908.1693 shachi.kurl@angusreid.org @shachikurl
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On a typical weekday, what would you estimate your child's "total time" to be? (By age of child)



Notably, children with disabilities are more commonly placed in this “high technology usage” group. That is, parents of kids with physical, developmental or learning disabilities are more than twice as likely as other parents to say their child spends upwards of four hours per day in front of a screen. However, as will be seen later in this report, parents of children with disabilities often find significantly more educational benefit from digital devices:

On a typical weekday, what would you estimate your child's "screen time" to be?



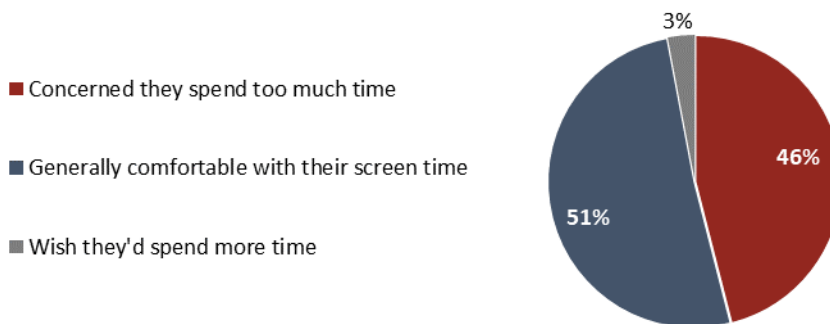
Part 2: Parents' feelings about children's tech usage

Concerns

As previously mentioned, excessive technology usage can be [detrimental to young children's cognitive and physical development](#), with the WHO as well as the Canadian Paediatric Society recommending less than an hour of screen time per day for children under the age of 5.

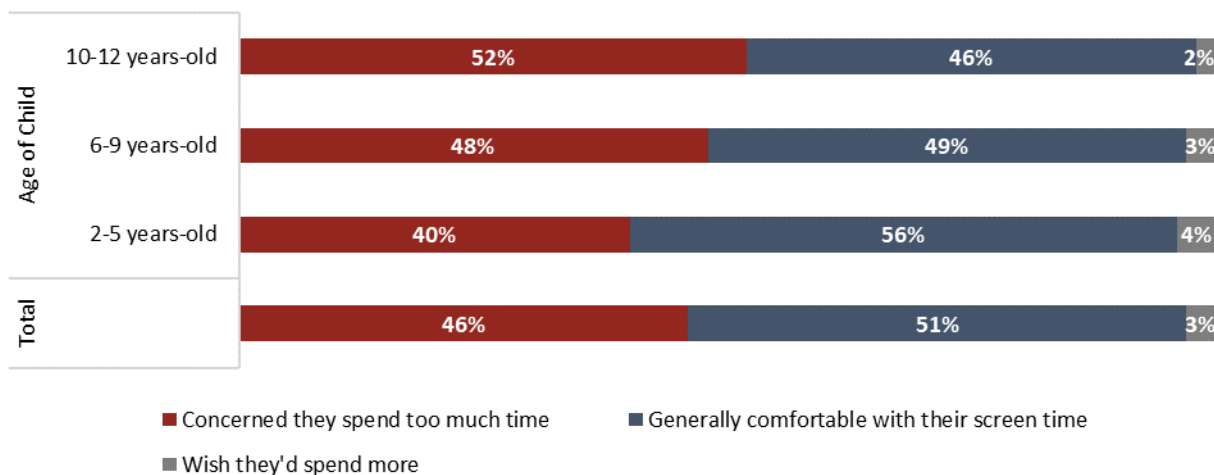
Many Canadian parents appear to share such concerns, with nearly half (46%) saying they are concerned their kids spend too much time using tech devices and a mere handful of parents saying they wish their kids had more screen time. The other half (51%) are generally comfortable with the amount of time their children spend using tech devices.

How do you feel about the amount of time your child is spending with these tech devices?



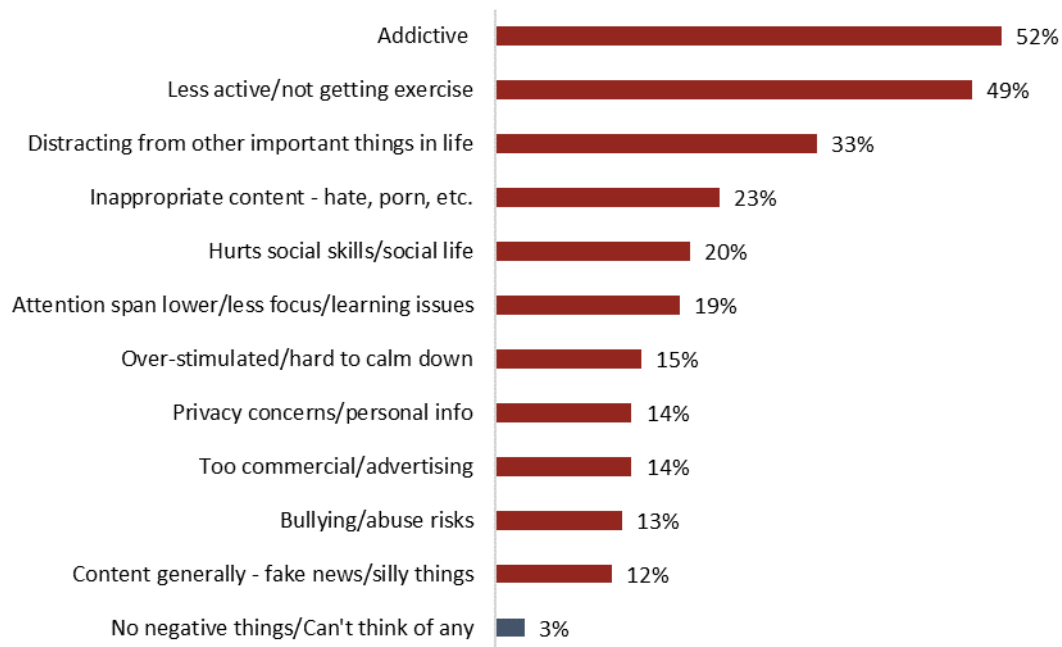
This unease is driven, in large part, by parents of older children. 52 per cent of those with children between the ages of 10 and 12 are concerned they spend too much time using in front of screens, compared to 40 per cent of parents with children between the ages of two and five.

How do you feel about the amount of time your child is spending with these devices? (All Respondents, n=2200)



Canadian parents cite a number of specific downsides to their kids' technology use. Half believe devices are addictive and/or contribute to children not getting enough exercise. Smaller, though still significant, proportions mention screen time's potential to distract from more important things (33%), expose kids to inappropriate content (23%) or impair their social skills (20%).

Overall, what do you believe are the negatives for kids spending time using tech devices?



Parents' evaluations of their children's well-being in a number of areas—from mental health and physical fitness to social skills and academic success—are also negatively correlated with the amount of time they spend using their devices. Many may be hesitant to concede that their child actively struggles in these respects, but as the number of hours in their daily "screen time" increases, there is a notable decline in the proportion of parents saying their child "does very well" in each of the areas mentioned.

For the overall purposes of our research, and not to get too personal, please share a general idea of how your child is doing in the following areas...

(Percentage responding “Does very well”)

(weighted sample sizes)	Total	Total Screen Time on a Typical Weekday					
		< 1 hour	1-2 hours	2-4 hours	4-6 hours	6-8 hours	> 8 hours
Mental health	55%	58%	62%	54%	51%	41%	40%
Sociability/Friends	55%	62%	58%	54%	49%	46%	38%
Physical Fitness	56%	66%	63%	54%	49%	45%	38%
Playing (e.g. outdoors/without screens)	59%	74%	65%	55%	52%	51%	37%
Marks at school [excluding children in school yet]	59%	68%	64%	62%	47%	40%	32%
Reading ability [excluding children not in school yet]	56%	68%	60%	57%	47%	38%	41%
Math ability [excluding children not in school yet]	56%	62%	60%	58%	46%	40%	46%

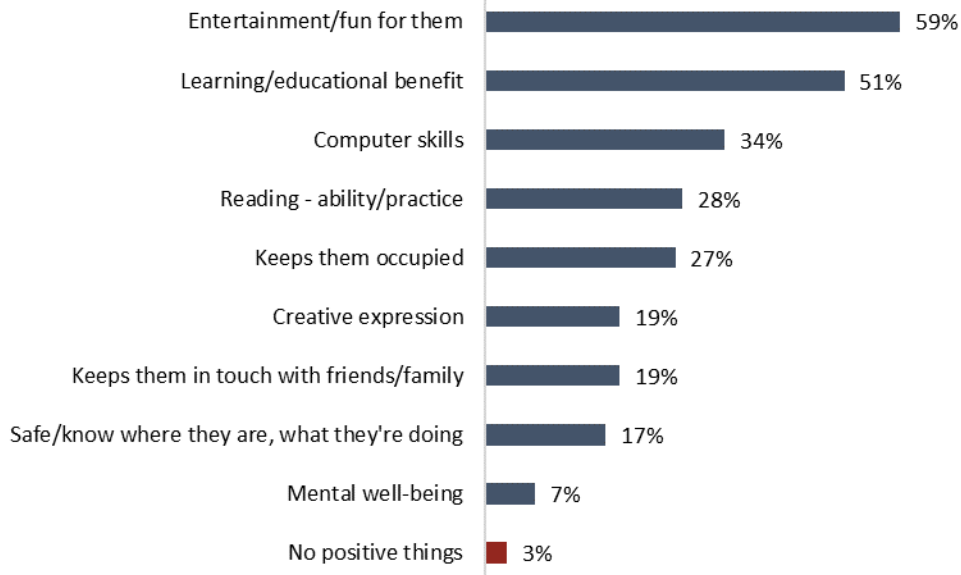
Potential benefits

There are also benefits for parents in having these technologies to offer their children. Indeed, six-in-ten (59%) say they are a source of entertainment or fun for their child. Half (51%) tout the educational benefits associated with screen time, while closer to three-in-ten say such devices are associated with better computer skills and more practice with their reading.

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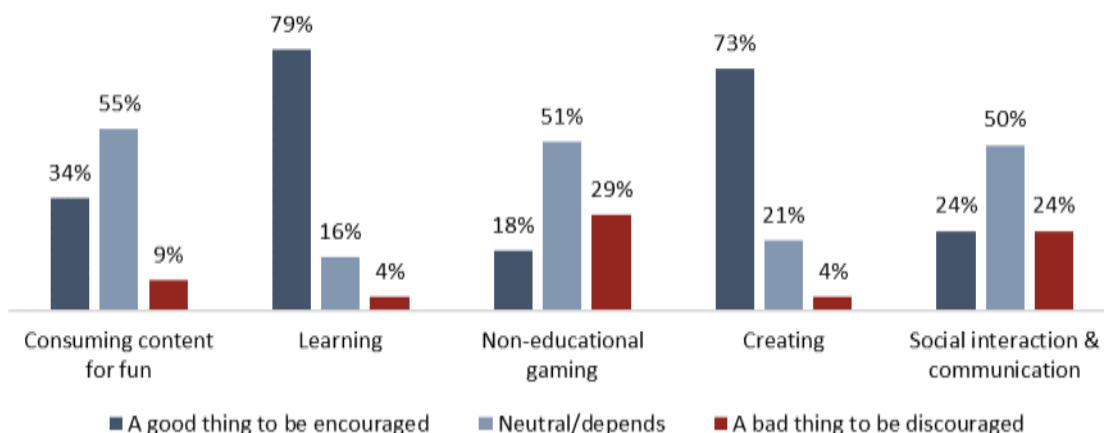
Overall, what do you believe are the positives for kids spending time using tech devices?



Screen activities that parents discourage

Despite some reservations about non-educational screen time, relatively few parents say they would actively *discourage* gaming or consuming content for fun, suggesting a belief that even these activities can provide benefits in moderation.

Personally consider these activities...



Indeed, Canadian parents overall appear to hold nuanced views of technology's potential benefits and drawbacks, with about six-in-ten saying screen time can be a good way for kids to learn, depending on the context.

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Parents of children with physical disabilities are especially optimistic about tech devices' educational value, with nearly two-thirds (64%) from this group saying screen time is an “excellent” or “good” learning technique. Conversely, parents of children with learning disabilities are most pessimistic in this regard, with just 28 per cent evaluating screen time as a positive educational tool:

Overall, do you think that screen time is a good way or a poor way for kids to learn?					
(weighted sample sizes)	Total (n=2200)	Do not have a child with disability (n=1656)	Have a child with disability		
			Physical disability (n=84*)	Developmental disability (n=165*)	Learning disability (n=264)
Excellent way for kids to learn	8%	7%	27%	12%	8%
Good way	23%	23%	37%	29%	20%
Can be/depends	58%	60%	25%	47%	54%
Poor way	5%	5%	2%	5%	9%
Very poor way for kids to learn	4%	3%	7%	6%	6%
Not Sure/Don't Know	1%	1%	2%	1%	3%

What do kids really use their devices for?

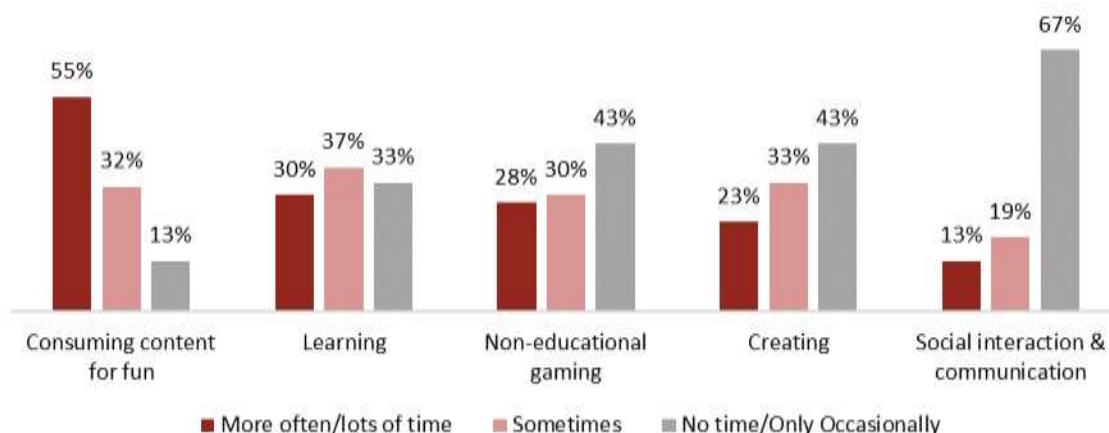
Clearly, there are pros and cons to the increased level of technology in Canadian children's lives today, but what do kids actually use their devices for?

When asked to focus on what their kids use tech devices for in reality, screen activities “focused on consuming content for fun” appear considerably more popular than other activities focused on learning or communication. More than half (55%) of parents say this is the case “more often” than other purposes.

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Thinking about your child's overall screen time, to what extent are they doing each of the following screen activities?



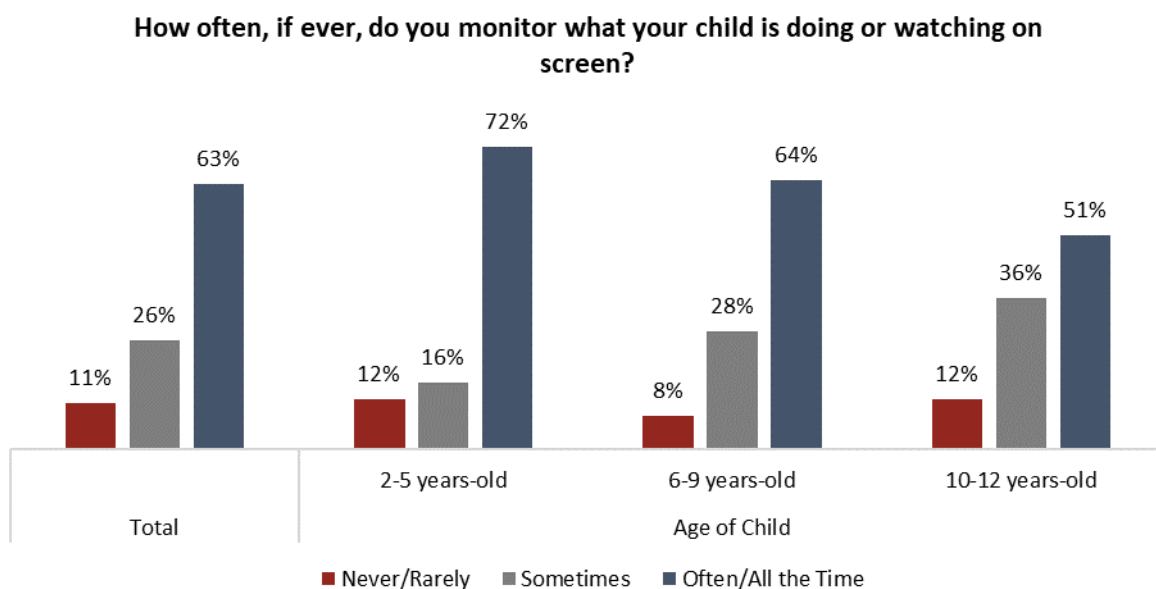
Children’s general uses of technology vary significantly based on their gender and age. Parents of boys are nearly twice as likely as parents of girls (35% vs. 20%) to say their child frequently uses their device(s) for gaming, with this proportion rising to half (49%) among pre-teen boys. On the other hand, screen activities focused on learning or creating appear more popular with girls, and pre-teen girls stand out as the group of children most likely to rely on their devices for social interaction and communication.

To what extent is your child doing each of the following activities?								
(Percentage responding “More often/lots of time”)								
(weighted sample sizes)	Total (n=2200)		Boys (n=1128)			Girls (n=1072)		
	Boys	Girls	2-5 years-old	6-9 years-old	10-12 years-old	2-5 years-old	6-9 years-old	10-12 years-old
Screen activities focused on consuming content for fun	53%	58%	51%	56%	52%	55%	60%	58%
Screen activities focused on learning	27%	33%	35%	21%	24%	42%	31%	22%
Screen activities focused on creating	18%	30%	17%	19%	17%	26%	27%	38%
Screen activities focused on non-educational gaming	35%	20%	16%	43%	49%	10%	24%	29%
Screen activities focused on social interaction and communication	12%	14%	8%	10%	19%	9%	8%	32%

These findings are perhaps surprising, given that parents express significant reservations about non-educational uses of technology. When asked their personal opinions about various screen activities, only one-in-three (34%) parents say activities focused on consuming content for fun are a “good thing to be encouraged,” less than half the proportions who say the same of screen activities focused on learning (79%) or creating (73%). Non-educational gaming garners even less parental support, with just one-five (18%) saying this activity should be encouraged ([see detailed tables](#)).

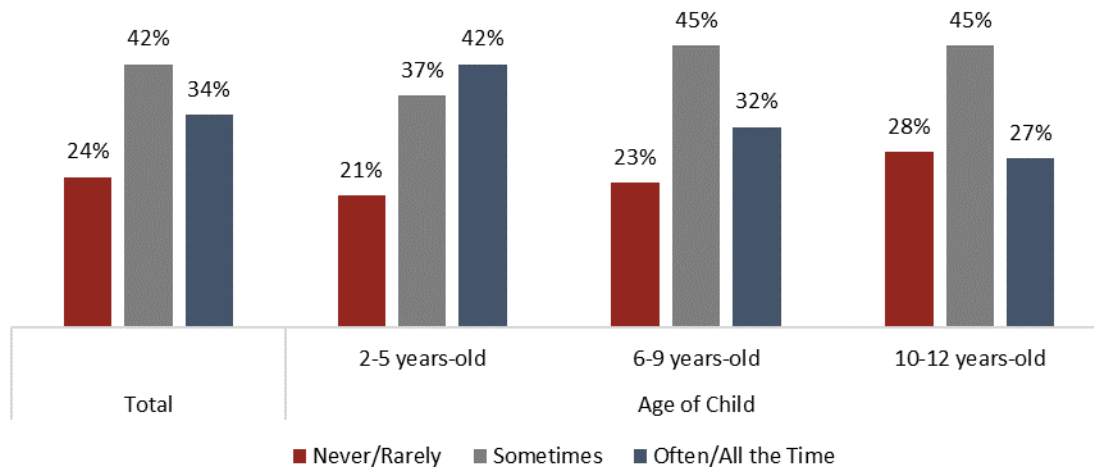
Part 3: Parental monitoring of device use

Canadian parents appear to utilize a number of approaches for managing their children’s screen time. Six-in-ten (63%) say they often or always monitor what their child is doing or watching online, rising to more than seven-in-ten (72%) among parents of kids under 5.



Parents of young children are also more likely to say they personally take part in screen activities with their child, such as playing games together.

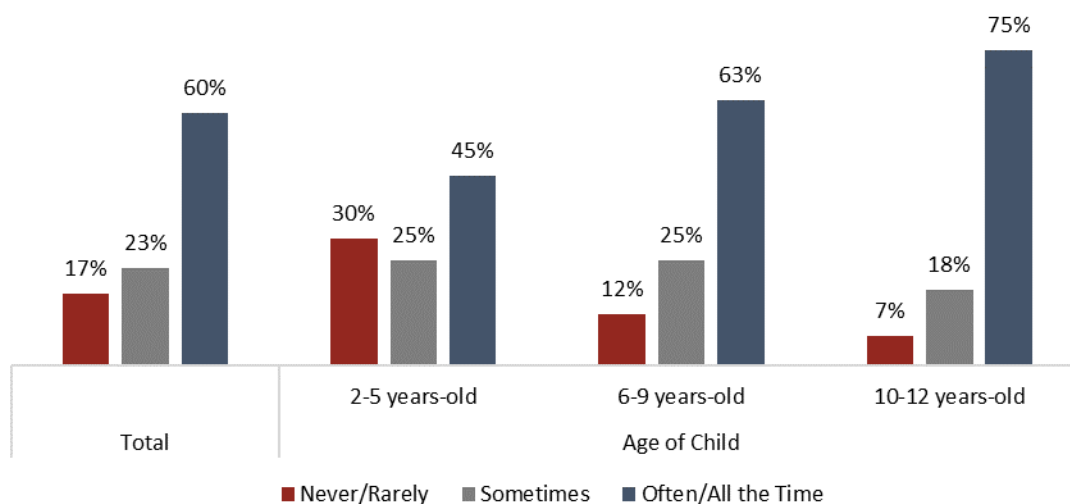
How often, if ever, do you do screen activities with your child, such as making things or playing games?



Parents more cautious with older children

Meanwhile, for parents of older children, ensuring their online safety appears critical. Three-in-four (75%) from this group, including eight-in-ten (79%) parents of pre-teen girls ([see detailed tables](#)), say they talk to their children about being careful online, such as how to deal with inappropriate content or protect their privacy on social media.

How often, if ever, do you talk to your child about being careful online?



For detailed results by age, gender, region, education, and other demographics, click [here](#).

For detailed results among parents of children with disabilities, click [here](#).

For detailed results by total screen time, [click here](#).