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Many parents of special needs kids say they get too much screen time: Study

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Children with special needs are introduced to digital devices, on average, at 2½ to three years old, and about half of their parents feel that they have too much screen time.

These are findings from a recent National Institute of Education (NIE) study of 550 children with special needs, which found that the majority of them – about 65 per cent – spent less than two hours on digital devices daily at home.

Nearly 23 per cent clocked two to four hours each day, and the remaining 10 per cent chalked up more than four hours.

Other local studies with typically developing children have had similar outcomes.

The latest NIE study found that screen time for those with special needs in primary schools is spent mainly on play, such as games, and watching videos.

For children in special education schools, which cater to those with moderate or moderate-severe intellectual disabilities, screen time took place mostly when the caregivers were busy with other activities like housework.

One-third of the parents surveyed said they needed help managing their child's digital habits.

It is the first such study here to analyse the use of digital media among children with special needs of primary-school age.

Those involved were aged six to 11, and came from 49 mainstream primary schools and 13 special education schools.

Their conditions include autism and intellectual disabilities.

Data was collected in batches from 2019 to last year via questionnaires completed by parents and interviews with them.

The study, which is part of a larger project tracking the development of children with special needs over three years, also examined possible factors in screen time usage.

Its principal investigator, Associate Professor Kenneth Poon, said families are crucial in determining digital media usage at home.

Mothers who had lower education levels reported higher levels of screen time use among their children.

“But it is unclear what might be the direct cause of the higher screen time use,” said Prof Poon.

He added: “Digital media has a lot of opportunities, especially for children with special needs, but there are also risks. So we're not saying it's bad and we should not have it.

“What we want to know is its pattern of use and possible risks.”

A study led by KK Women's and Children's Hospital (KKH) that was published in 2019 found that early screen exposure could worsen emotional and behavioural difficulties among kids with neuro-developmental disorders such as autism.

Dr Mae Wong, senior consultant at KKH's Department of Child Development, said: “It is important to start educating parents about delaying exposure to screen devices, and having screen-use rules when children start using screen devices.”

Parents should also balance screen use with other healthy activities like outdoor play, she said.

Besides being less aware of professional guidelines, less educated parents may struggle with finding activities to entertain children without screen time, or balancing caregiving with housework, she added.

“They may also sometimes think that screen devices might be able to provide more educational input for the child than they themselves can.”

Civil servant Vaani Arun, 40, said her seven-year-old son with autism uses digital devices daily for communication and leisure.

The iPad also helped him pick up phonics and numbers through educational apps, she said.

“He has restrictions. I let him recharge the battery level of the device only up to 15 per cent at one shot, so his usage is limited.”