



A Hummingbird Parenting Series

**IT'S NOT JUST THE SCREEN TIME,  
IT'S THE SCREEN CONTENT**





In recent times, experts have been observing increasing restlessness, impatience, irritability, and difficulty in social behaviour among children.

A child's behaviour is shaped by many experiences at home and outside, but one important and often overlooked influence is screen usage, especially the kind of content children are exposed to.

During early childhood, the brain is still developing important abilities such as self-control, attention, emotional understanding, and patience. These skills develop slowly through real-world experiences: play, conversation, routine, waiting, listening, observing, and interacting with people.

When a child regularly watches fast, loud, flashy, or highly stimulating screen content, their brain does not get enough practice in being still, patient, and calm. And because children cannot express this struggle in words, they often express it through behaviour.



## How Screen Content Influences Behaviour

Fast and highly stimulating videos create a habit of expecting constant excitement, making real-life play or class activities feel slow or boring.

Irregular or frequent screen exposure, especially before sleep, can disturb sleep cycles. Disrupted sleep affects mood, patience, and learning.

Noisy, aggressive, or dramatic content can increase irritability and emotional outbursts.

Reels, Shorts, and TikTok-style content give the brain quick rewards, reducing attention span and making it harder to sit, focus, or wait.

Screens do not cause behaviour problems alone, but overexposure to overstimulating content can strongly contribute to irritability, restlessness, emotional imbalance, and difficulty in listening or social behaviour.



## How Children Absorb What We Watch

Children below 6 usually don't have their own devices. They use their parents' phones, which means: The app (YouTube, Instagram Reels, Shorts, etc.) learns the parent's viewing habits, not the child's.

So the recommendations the child sees are based on what the parent watches, because the algorithm assumes the same person is using the phone.

Even if the child watches only for a few minutes, the suggestions are still shaped by the parent's usage history.

This is why a child may suddenly end up seeing:

News clips, Movie dialogue edits, • Random reels, Or worst: sensational, fast-cut, clickbait content because that's what the algorithm has been trained on.



## What Children Cannot Process

Children below 6 years of age:

- Cannot understand sarcasm
- Cannot separate fiction from reality well
- Cannot interpret emotional tone accurately

So when they watch exaggerated reactions, loud arguments, fast movements, or hyper-excited characters, their mind absorbs the intensity but does not understand the context.

This leads to:

- Being easily frustrated
- Difficulty settling down
- Sensory overload
- Hyperactivity



## Perils of Ignoring Screen Impact

If screen habits are unmanaged, children may gradually develop:

- Low tolerance for waiting
- Reduced focus and listening ability
- Emotional outbursts or frequent mood swings
- Dependency on screens for entertainment
- Difficulty enjoying outdoor or imaginative play
- Reduced ability to interact socially or share space calmly

These effects build slowly and show over months, not overnight.



## Plan of Action for Home

Limit screen exposure for children, especially during mornings and evenings.

Avoid fast-changing, high-stimulation content (Reels, Shorts, TikTok, fast cartoons).

Watch along when possible. When adults co-watch, children feel safer and more grounded.

Keep meal times and before-bed hours screen-free.

Encourage outdoor play, cycling, drawing, pretend play, reading, and music.

Allow children to experience boredom. Boredom is how imagination begins.

Keep phones out of the child's reach when not needed.



## Healthy Screen Habits for Parents

Avoid watching reels or scrolling in front of your child.

Keep background TV off.

Slow down your own digital habits; children copy emotional pace.

Control the your child's accidental viewing , especially the unsuitable content such as violence, death, or any such negative and aggressive content.

Check the viewing history once your child completes his/ her quota of screen viewing.



## Conclusion

The goal is not to remove screens completely, but to use screens thoughtfully and calmly. When we choose gentle content and create steady daily routines, children become calmer, more patient, and more emotionally stable. Small changes at home can create a big positive difference.

## Additional Reading

American Academy of Pediatrics Screen Guidelines:  
<https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/media-and-children/>

Harvard Center on the Developing Child:  
[Healthy Screen Habits for Parents](#)