



Small screens, big questions

Rethinking screens in the early years and what the latest UK research suggests for toddlers

Screens are part of modern family life. For many parents, they are practical tools in busy households. The question is no longer whether children will use technology, but when and how.

New UK research is prompting fresh discussion about how technology fits into early childhood. National data shows that by age two, 98% of children use screens daily, averaging 127 minutes, more than double the World Health Organisation's recommended limit. Children in the highest screen-use group had weaker vocabulary and were more likely to present with emotional and behavioural difficulties.

A screen-free approach

To explore what this means in practice, Yalla spoke with Siog Moore, Principal and Founder of Little Land Nursery Dubai, one of the region's few fully screen-free nurseries.

She is careful to frame her approach as intentional rather than alarmist. "I am not anti-technology. I am pro-childhood."

For Siog, the Early Years are crucial. "Early childhood is a sensitive period for brain development. The foundations laid in these years influence emotional regulation, attention, communication and resilience for life." She adds: "I do not believe screens are necessary

in early childhood education. Young children learn through movement, touch, repetition, conversation and human connection. A screen cannot replace that."

At her Montessori nursery, the day centres on face-to-face interaction and real-world exploration. Children pour water, build, climb, sing and converse. Adults get down to their level. Small, ordinary moments are treated as developmentally significant. "Best learning is relational," she says. "It is eye contact, naming what a child is doing and waiting for their response."

Attention, language and transitions

Siog has observed that when screens form a big part of home life, some children may find sustained conversation or transitions more challenging. This can show up in everyday moments – moving away from a device, settling into quieter play, or navigating routines that require patience.

"Language grows through serve and return," she explains. "We are not just teaching words. We are teaching children how to listen and feel heard."

She also notes that screens are designed for fast stimulation and instant reward. Real life, by contrast, is slower and requires patience.

While some digital content is thoughtfully designed, Siog believes the key question is how

Managing toddler screen time at home

- Prioritise at least ten minutes of fully present, face-to-face time daily.
- Create clear and predictable boundaries around screen use.
- Keep screens out of bedrooms.
- Protect meal times as device-free moments.
- Allow boredom; it's often the beginning of creativity.
- Offer purposeful alternatives such as water play, drawing, reading or music.
- Model the behaviour you want to see.

young children learn best. "Under five, language grows through conversation, storytelling, singing, shared experiences and emotional connection." If families choose to use screens, she suggests sitting alongside children and discussing what they see. "The most powerful language builder will always be a responsive adult."

Balance, not perfection

Siog is clear that a completely screen-free life is neither realistic nor necessary long-term. "The goal is not perfection," she says. "The goal is connection."

For parents navigating life in a digital world, the conversation may be less about eliminating screens and more about understanding what children need most in the earliest years, when attention, language and emotional regulation are still forming. As she notes, technology can be learned at any age, but self-control must be built early.