



Together for Neurodiversity

Empowering Futures, Embracing Differences

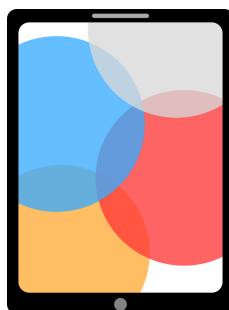
Navigating Screen Time

Screen Time and Autistic Children

Screens are a big part of life today. For autistic children, screen time can bring relaxation, joy, and comfort. It may also support their special interests, provide learning opportunities, or give them a way to connect with others.

At the same time, screens can be tricky. Many autistic children find it hard to stop using screens because the activity is highly engaging and predictable. Transitions away from screens can feel stressful and may lead to meltdowns or shutdowns.

This guide is designed to help you navigate screen time positively with your autistic child. It gives practical ideas for setting limits, using visuals, and supporting smooth transitions—while still respecting how important screen time can be for your child's wellbeing.



Why Managing Screen Time Matters?

Screen time itself isn't "bad." The key is finding the right balance for your child. Too much screen time can affect sleep, physical activity, and family routines. But with the right structure, it can also be a useful tool for calming, learning, and enjoyment.

For autistic children, managing screen time can:

- Make transitions more predictable and less stressful.
- Support regulation (helping your child stay calm).
- Reduce meltdowns around stopping screens.
- Build a routine that includes a mix of activities.



Setting Clear and Consistent Boundaries

Autistic children thrive on predictability. Clear, consistent rules help screen time feel safe and manageable. For example:

- Decide when screens are allowed (after school, after meals, weekends).
- Set time limits that are realistic for your child (e.g., start with 10–15 minutes if transitions are hard).
- Use visual rules (a poster or chart) rather than just verbal reminders.
- Keep rules consistent—avoid changing them suddenly.

Boundaries should be fair and achievable. Remember: screen time may be one of your child's strongest coping tools. The aim is balance, not removal.



Using Timers to Aid Transitions

Transitions are often challenging for autistic children, especially when leaving a highly preferred activity. Timers can help by showing when screen time will end.

- Visual timers (digital countdowns, sand timers, or apps) let your child see time passing.
- Step warnings help prepare your child: “10 minutes left... 5 minutes left... finished.”
- Consistent signals (the same sound or phrase every time) help your child link the timer with ending.

Pair timers with visuals: for example, a picture of the next activity. This makes the transition less sudden and more predictable.



Screen Time Token Board

A token board is a visual way for your child to earn screen time. This makes screen time structured and motivating.

How it works:

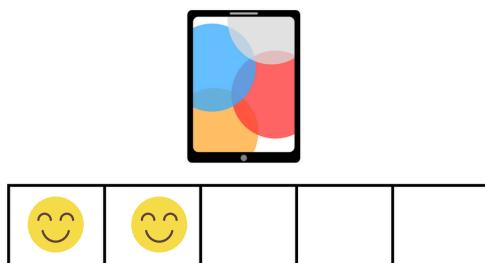
1. Decide how many tokens your child needs (start small —3–5 tokens).
2. Give a token for each task or positive behaviour (e.g., brushing teeth, helping tidy, finishing homework).
3. When the board is full, your child gets screen time.

Benefits for autistic children:

- Clear visual structure.
- Teaches waiting and reward skills.
- Reduces verbal negotiation or conflict.
- Encourages positive routines.

Keep it simple, consistent, and always follow through once the board is full.

Steps for Screen Time



Screen Time Routines

Routines help autistic children feel secure. Screen time should be part of a predictable daily flow, for example:

- After school: Snack → Homework → Screen time → Outdoor play.
- Evening: Dinner → Screen time → Bath → Story → Bed.
- Weekend: Chores → Screen time → Family outing → Screen time.

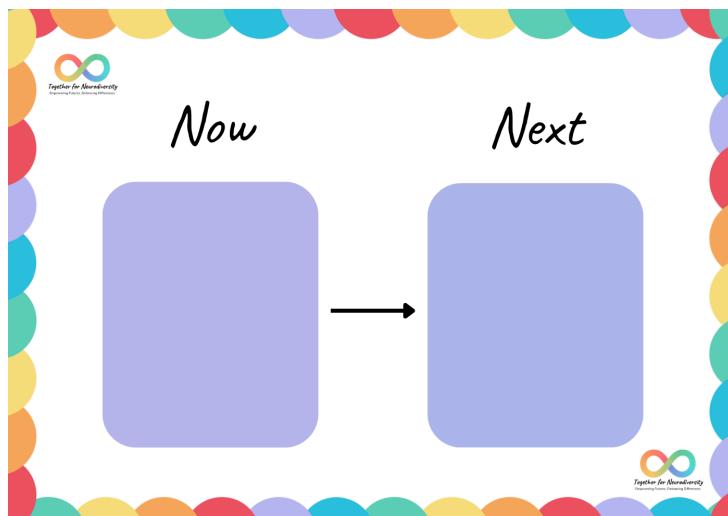
Visual timetables or “now and next” boards make routines concrete. This helps your child see that screen time is part of the day, not something uncertain or negotiable.



Helping with Transitions away from Screens

Ending screen time can be very hard for autistic children. These strategies may help:

- First-Then approach: “First bath, then iPad tomorrow.”
- Offer a preferred alternative: Transition to something your child enjoys, like Lego, drawing, or outdoor play.
- Use visuals: A picture of the next activity helps them understand what’s happening.
- Stay calm and consistent: Gentle repetition works better than long discussions.
- Make endings predictable: If screen time always ends before dinner, your child learns to expect it.



Encouraging Balance

Screen time doesn't need to be restricted harshly—it just needs to sit alongside other enjoyable activities.

Encourage:

- Sensory play (sand, water, playdough).
- Outdoor activities (walks, park, trampoline).
- Creative play (arts, Lego, role play).
- Reading or audiobooks.
- Quiet downtime (safe space, weighted blanket).

If your child resists other activities, link them to screen time: “First we play outside, then iPad.” Over time, this builds balance into their day.



What to Do if Screen Time Ends in Meltdown?

If meltdowns happen, remember: this is not “naughtiness”—it’s overwhelm.

- Check if the limit was too sudden or too long.
- Use warnings and visuals to prepare them earlier next time.
- Offer a calming tool (fidget, blanket, headphones).
- Stay calm and consistent—don’t extend screen time during a meltdown, or your child may learn that meltdowns bring more time.

With patience, your child will learn that screen time always ends the same way, and that it comes back again later.



Balance Not Battles

For autistic children, screen time is often more than entertainment—it can be a safe, predictable, and regulating activity. The aim is not to take that away, but to help your child use it in a balanced and healthy way.

With clear routines, visual supports, and positive tools like timers and token boards, screen time can become calm, structured, and enjoyable for the whole family.

♥ Remember: your child isn't "difficult" because they struggle with screens—they simply need structure and support. With patience and consistency, you can reduce stress and create a routine that works for both of you.

