

# Small steps, big futures.

with 50 things to do

How **50 Things to Do Before You're Five** supports the Best Start in Life Strategy

Briefing Paper 2

**75%**

of 18 month olds are  
exposed to screens daily.

**1 in 5**

of 3-4 year olds have  
their own smartphone.

**52%**

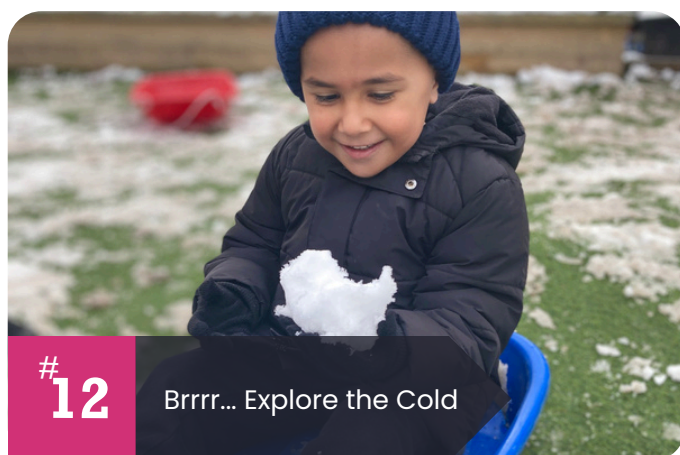
of 3-4 years olds are  
online 9 hours a week.

## Reducing Screen Time to Support the Best Start in Life

### The Best Start in Life

The Best Start in Life Strategy places children's early development at the heart of improving their life chances. It's all about giving every child the strongest possible foundations, from pregnancy through the early years, so they grow up healthy, confident, and ready to learn. It recognises that the first five years are a time of rapid brain growth, when children's experiences shape how they think, feel, and connect with the world around them not just as a very young child but in their future lives as adolescents and adults.

The Department for Education's new strategy recognises that nurturing relationships and high-quality early experiences have the most profound impact on a child's health, communication, and cognitive growth.



### Findings from research

The work of Professor Patricia Kuhl, Co-Director of the Institute for Learning & Brain Sciences at the University of Washington, demonstrates that **babies' brains are biologically tuned to learn language through social interaction**. Her studies using brain imaging show that infants exposed to live human speech rapidly acquire the sounds and patterns of language.

However, when the same linguistic input is delivered through screens, television, video, or digital media, this learning does not occur in the same way. The critical factor is social engagement: the shared gaze, turn-taking, and responsiveness that underpin how young children make sense of communication.



**50 Things to Do Before You're Five** is an exciting initiative of 50, screen free, low or no cost activities for families with young children, targeted at supporting children to reach their social, emotional and physical milestones and ultimately, improving their life outcomes.

**50** things to do **five** before you're

**BEST  
START  
IN LIFE**

# The Impact of Excessive Screen Time

**There is growing evidence that excessive screen time may be linked to a range of problems:**

- Research indicates that higher screen time may be contributing to children getting less physical activity than recommended.
- Children who use screens during meals can develop habits of eating in front of screens, which may be linked to increased intake of ultra-processed food.
- Increased screen use can be linked to rising rates of nearsightedness, which has grown from about 1 in 4 children in 1990 to over 1 in 3 in recent years.
- Using screens too much, especially before bedtime may interfere with sleep by exposing children to blue light and mental stimulation.
- Excessive screen usage can impair emotional comprehension, promote aggressive behaviour, and weaken social skills

## Advice from the World Health Organisation:

### 0 to 2 years old

Screen time is not recommended.

### 2 to 3 years old

No more than an hour a day for 2-year-olds, with less time preferred.

### 3 to 4 years old

No more than one hour a day.

Less screen time

More play time

• 50 things to do before you're five

## Why Less Screen Time, More Play Time Matters

This is where the message from 50 Things to Do Before You're Five's **Less Screen Time, More Play Time** fits perfectly. It's a simple reminder that real-world play and face-to-face interaction are far more powerful for children's development than time spent in front of a screen. And the message promoting alternatives to screen time is grounded in strong neuroscientific evidence.

By promoting less screen time and more play time, 50 Things to Do Before You're Five helps achieve the aims of the Best Start in Life Strategy at a community level. By harnessing scientific evidence, 50 Things ensures that every family, regardless of their background, has access to the knowledge and opportunities that enable children to thrive.

The best start in life isn't found through a screen, it's found in moments of laughter, learning, and love. But the reality for children today is a life with far too much time spent passively in front of a variety of screens. Play, conversation, and shared experiences builds brains. Every peek-a-boo game, every song, and every story strengthens a child's communication, curiosity, and emotional connection with others.

Get in touch:

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