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# Parental Voices on Screen Time Guidelines in Early Childhood: Time to Rethink and Revise Recommendations and Policy?

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## Abstract

This article critically engages with the concept of screen time. We explore the screen time recommendations from the World Health Organization (WHO) and their application in a Swedish context. We also investigate the experiences and opinions of the recommendations and advice on screen time, as well as screen media use in early childhood among parents of young children (0–3 years of age) in Sweden. The study draws on qualitative semi-structured interviews during multiple home visits from a diverse sample of 16 families. Findings are discussed through the prism of the 'moral economy' of the household and the 'social imaginaries' underpinning this. We have identified two types of approaches to guidelines on screen time among parents. Based on our findings, we recommend organisations in Sweden and beyond to rethink and revise the current guidelines, including the WHO recommendations.

**Keywords:** *screen time, early childhood, digital parenting, Sweden, WHO*



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## Introduction

Screen time has become a highly controversial concept, and screen time regulations have been addressed in media debates and research in the Nordic countries and far beyond. In 2018, for example, Blum-Ross and Livingstone argued against the influential American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) guidelines on screen times, for being conservative and promoting a 'precautionary approach in the absence of solid evidence' (2018, p. 184). Later, they also put forward the view that the concept of screen time seems to be used by parents as a metric of parenting 'success', but instead of offering 'a path forward, the screen time rules have proved a new rod for parents' backs' (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020, p. 33).

In 2019, the World Health Organization (WHO) launched guidelines on screen time in early childhood, igniting debate and concern among parents in many countries. In Sweden, the term *screen time* has appeared more than 8,110 times in editorial media, including print, web, TV, radio, and podcasts, in over 3,000 different media outlets since 2019 (Media Retriever search, February 22, 2024).

This article investigates Swedish parents' experiences and opinions regarding regulations on screen time in early childhood. We address this by posing the following questions: How do Swedish parents of children aged 0–3 perceive the WHO guidelines on screen time? How do they balance their infants' and toddlers' digital screen activities with ongoing debates on screen time regulations?

In our research, we use the concept of *the moral economy* of the household (Silverstone et al., 1994) and Taylor's notion of *social imaginaries* (2004) as an analytical prism. Our study is based on interviews with 16 families, conducted as part of a four-year media ethnographic project investigating the engagement of 0–3-year-olds with screen technology in their homes.

This article introduces an overlooked perspective in research on children and media by highlighting the challenges parents face in a world where screens are ubiquitous. Based on our findings, we argue for the necessity to rethink and revise the WHO recommendations, as they bear little resemblance to the practicalities and lived experiences of modern families, not only in Sweden but in many parts of the world.

## Living with screens

Screens are an important part of everyday life. Though not without friction or uncertainty, they are deeply entangled, embedded and embodied in our daily activities and contemporary way of living (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020). Our media-rich lives involve constantly negotiating, struggling with and adjusting screen media practices in active and creative ways (Sandberg et al., 2021). In the fast-growing media and technology industry, enormous economic powers are at stake, putting children and families under great pressure as consumers within that system.

Children grow up surrounded by screen use for multiple purposes from surveillance to entertainment and education. Screen time increases with age, along with the number of new 'baby-friendly' technologies and services on offer at affordable prices (Kabali, 2015; Nikken, 2022). Rideout and Robb (2020) report substantial differences in

children's screen time and mobile media use based on ethnicity/race, household income and parents' education in the US. In a Swedish context, the Swedish Media Council (2023) reports that children aged 0–4 engage with digital media for less than an hour daily. The most common screen activities include listening to music, reading books, and watching movies, television and YouTube. They also emphasise the importance of family composition and the presence of older siblings as influential factors in younger children's digital screen use. Lafton et al. (2023) support this view, arguing that personal relationships among family members in their daily interactions 'greatly affect the well-being of family members and their use of digital technologies' (p. 2).

The research on children and their media use is immense, and we already know a lot about childhood in the digital age and the challenges of digital parenting (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2020; Mascheroni et al., 2018). There is extensive research on internet use, exemplified by a recent review by Lafton et al. (2023) that synthesizes positive and negative outcomes of children's use of ICT in families. The authors point out that previous research exaggerates the harmful aspects and focuses too strongly on the amount of time spent with digital devices while neglecting the content and purpose of their use. Additionally, they critique this research for relying heavily on quantitative studies, 'while depth and context are less visible' (p. 11).

For some time, there has been growing concern about the impact of digital screens on children's health, particularly in the Nordic countries. This is evidenced by a recent Swedish research review (Public Health Agency of Sweden, 2024) and ongoing policy work on guidelines in Sweden. Denmark and Norway have also recently implemented national guidelines (Dahlström, 2024).

To some extent, these fears echo those that accompanied the introduction of television into children's lives. From the late 1950s onwards, the number of households with televisions increased, prompting concerns from educators, politicians and experts about the social and educational impact of the new medium (Gunter & McAleer, 1990). These fears have persisted up to the present day (Jensen, 2016; Sandberg et al., 2021). New technologies often provoke strong emotions and anxiety, sometimes leading to what is referred to as moral panic – an exaggerated reaction to the media representation of a cultural phenomenon, often viewed academically as irrational (Cohen, 1972, 2011; Leick, 2019). We acknowledge that interaction with screen media today differs significantly in quantity and quality compared to earlier screen technologies. Today's digital screens offer opportunities for mobility, interactivity and immersion that are unmatched by the analogue TV screen. In a systematic review of existing research, Stiglic and Viner (2019) conclude that while there have been several recent initiatives investigating screen use among children, studies still demonstrate inconsistent results. As a result, evidence remains insufficient to guide policy on children's and youths' 'safe' screen-time exposure.

## Policy and screen time recommendations

In 2019, WHO issued recommendations on screen time. These guidelines were aimed at policymakers in health agencies, education, social welfare, and governmental and

non-governmental organisations that provide advice to parents of children under 5 years of age via professionals such as nurses or paediatricians. The goal was to promote health by encouraging good lifestyle habits, including a balanced approach to sleep, physical activity and sedentary time.

The recommendations are described as 'strong' and were based on systematic reviews and literature searches conducted up to December 2017, most of which were assessed as providing 'very low quality evidence' (WHO, 2019, pp. 8–11). The guidelines emphasise increasing physical activity and minimizing *sedentary* and *restrained* time. The latter refers to young children being strapped into baby carriages. Sedentary time should be limited, particularly screen-based activities. They should be avoided entirely under the age of 2 and kept below one hour per day – 'less is better' (WHO, 2019, p. ix) – for children aged 2 to 4. At the same time, the guidelines encourage sedentary, non-screen-based activities such as reading and storytelling.

In the report, WHO (2019) refers to time in two ways in its glossary of terms: (1) *non-screen-based sedentary time,* which equals 'time sitting not using screen-based entertainment' (p. V); and (2) *sedentary screen time,* which is defined as 'time spent passively watching screen-based entertainment (TV, computer, mobile devices)' (p. V). As media scholars, two things come to mind. First, the characterisation of entertaining screen content as something *negative* and to be avoided in early childhood. Second, the notion of media use or screen activities as *passive* does not align with the last fifty or sixty years of audience and reception research (Curran, 1990; Hall, 1973, 1980).

It is also worth pointing out that the WHO guidelines are not fully aligned with the American Psychological Association (APA, 2019) or the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP, 2016), who recommend that parents avoid screen-based media *except video-chatting* for children younger than 18 to 24 months. Both organisations underline the importance of choosing content of high quality but do not offer any comprehensive explanation or definition of what high-quality programming means for children of various ages and backgrounds. With one exception, for children aged 3 to 5, *Sesame Street* is still epitomised by the AAP as the ideal for 'well-designed television programs' (2016, p. 2). While this ideal may be valid in a US context, it has historically been questioned in other settings, such as the Nordic countries (Jensen, 2023).

Now, the WHO report has spurred unintentional concern among educators and parents with young children. This can be evidenced by the media debate in the Swedish context, a country aiming to be 'the best in the world at harnessing the opportunities of digitalization' (Government Offices of Sweden, 2017, p. 10) and one which has made the introduction of digital technology – screen activities – a mandatory element in the preschool curriculum (0–6 years) (Swedish National Agency for Education, 2019). So far, the Public Health Agency of Sweden (2021) has refrained from issuing strong recommendations on screen time, while the Swedish Media Council (2023) has simultaneously urged parents to contact nurses at their local healthcare centres for screen time advice on its website.

In sum, there seems to be tension between the WHO guidelines on the nil screen time policy in early years and the Swedish policymakers' ambitions to foster digital citizens from early childhood. In this article, we present one of the first studies of parental perceptions on screen time recommendations about children's screen use in a Swedish context.

## Conceptual framework for the study

Households are constantly engaged with the cultural artefacts that enter the house and the meanings attributed to them, including dominant public discourses. *The moral economy* of the household is a key concept within the domestication approach of media technology (Kennedy et al., 2020; Silverstone et al., 1994). It refers to our understanding of digital technology and how it is made meaningful and used once appropriated. The concept provides us with better insight into the various meanings and values attributed to digital media technologies, for example, what is good or bad, fair or unfair, meaningful and practical in any given context (Silverstone et al., 1994; Thompson, 1991). The moral economy is the result of negotiations, either on an intra-individual level or between household members, including parents and their children. Thus, the moral economy is far from constant in any household. It is a dynamic, complex set of beliefs and attitudes – a nexus of *individual* moral assessments – as much as it is impinged by *social* norms and imaginaries (Taylor, 2004).

According to Taylor, 'social imaginaries' are larger and deeper than the cognitive schemes people develop to make sense of reality. The social imaginaries appear in 'images, stories and legends' (2004, p. 23) and are distributed and shared in our communication, for example, via the media. They are what we share with 'large groups, if not the whole society' (p. 23) about our expectations of each other and are a common understanding based on facts and norms. This common understanding makes it possible to carry out collective practices, including a capacity to sift out the right (ideal) and the wrong (foul) (p. 24), for example, concerning childhood, parenthood and screen media uses. The theoretical underpinnings of the moral economy of the household and the social imaginaries will guide the analysis and discussion of how parents navigate and position themselves regarding children's screen use.

## Method

The presented study is part of the larger DIGIKIDS project, investigating how digital screen technology permeates the everyday lives of children aged 0–3 years. The project explores children's digital media practices and agency to deepen our understanding of their impact on childhood and modern family life, including the early development of digital literacy skills (Sundin et al., forthcoming). The overall aim of the project is to identify implications for policy in areas such as education, parenting and the media industry. It was approved by the Swedish Ethical Review Authority.

The project applies a qualitative, in-depth and contextualised approach, bringing important nuances and variations in early childhood and modern family life to the fore.

Consequently, the project focuses on a small number of children and their families in a time-condensed ethnography, inspired by the 'A Day in the Life' methodology used by early childhood researchers to study the development of learning (Gillen et al., 2007). The approach consists of multiple family visits (2019–2022), family interviews and video recordings of the child's naturally occurring engagement with digital technology as the day unfolds in the home. The intrusiveness of the methodology and potential ethical dilemmas have been discussed in an earlier publication (Sandberg & Gillen, 2021) and are not reported here. In this study, we draw on interviews with parents from 16 households, each with at least one child in the target group (aged 0–3 years). The sample includes 10 girls and 6 boys. The age range is between 6 weeks and 40 months. The families are geographically spread out and diverse in composition, ethnic background and education.

The parents were interviewed twice (1–2.5 hours). The interviews were transcribed verbatim. For the analysis, we used the software NVivo 1.7.1. and the module Collaboration Cloud, allowing for close collaboration and simultaneous coding of the data by all researchers in an iterative process, in which we tested, shared, merged, elaborated on and revised codes to agree on the coding. Thus, the codes emerged organically from the interviewees' words and our conceptual framework. The analysis can be described as inductive and deductive in its approach (Seale, 2017). In this article, we focus on a specific subset of the data, concentrating on parental views on screen-time policy and their experiences with advice on digital technology use from childhealth clinics.

## Results and analysis

The households in our sample were diverse, ranging from single-parent households to large families with two parents and several siblings of varying ages. The older children (aged 2–3) attended preschool regularly, while several of the youngest (aged 0–2) were still at home with one of their parents. In most cases, the children engaged with digital screen technology for one or several hours daily. Few children used digital technology extensively. One child was not exposed to screen media before the age of two.

We begin below by presenting parents' perceptions of their digital media competence and the sources of information they used to shape their views on children's screen time and media use. Then the identified approaches parents took in seeking and following advice and guidance on screen time are discussed.

### Being a competent parent in a scattered information landscape

Some of the parents had a background in engineering, working with IT support or computing. They were skilled and comfortable with digital technology. However, most parents expressed confidence in handling technology: 'I think I am pretty modern for my generation… we can handle it' (Mother to Elsa, 36 months old). They also expressed interest in and curiosity for gadgets and digital media technology, for example, 'I am probably a nerd of gadgets and technology' (Father to Maj, 40 months old) and 'I like technology a lot. I could surely have had much more advanced stuff' (Father to Olga, 20 months old).

Even though there was a general liking of digital technology, parents admitted that it was difficult to keep up with the development of new apps and platforms, for example, TikTok: 'When it's faddish, that's when you hear about it' (Father to Elsa, 36 months old). Still, parents described themselves as being in control and competent enough, relying on the fact that they belonged to the generation that grew up with the internet: 'We grew up with computers, and have had smartphones for a very long time so we get it, I think' (Father to William, 16 months old).

The parents were exposed to and had access to plenty of information on digital media technology. Still, the parents, even those who were confident and skilled users, expressed uncertainty about how to deal with digital technology in early childhood, particularly their children's daily screen time. In their efforts to handle screen technology, they drew on ongoing societal discourses in the media debates. These societal discourses fuel or underpin the social imaginaries (Taylor, 2004) that influence parents' self-understanding of what good parenting is about and what a good childhood should bring concerning screen media:

> Well, it is mainly that you have had a feeling that it is bad. But then you think that many media maintain an image that it is bad, and the thing about your parents saying 'you get square eyes' or whatever it is they say. It feels like there has always been resistance in society. (Father to Annie, 6 weeks old)

Another parent told us that they got the idea, but they were not sure where it came from, that their child 'will not be so creative with a lot of mobile phone use' (Father to Stella, 23 months old). This parent compared it with 'when we were young, we didn't have any mobile phones, we were out playing and exploring'. These examples show how parents referred to a general bad feeling and societal resistance concerning screen media, involving a moral judgement of screen technology as something evil, not being part of childhood, and putting children's natural creativity at risk. The social imaginaries transplanted from media and public opinion afford parents the legitimacy to act in line with the moral order of the common understandings and expectations that the social imaginaries preserve (Taylor, 2004). They were balanced in their views and moral assessments of the media (individual media imaginaries), often grounded in their media memories (values imprinted while growing up). The mother of Ines, 18 months old, talked about how the TV was always on in the background in her home when she was a child, and so it is in her present household. The mother of Isabelle (33 months old) repeatedly returned in our conversations to the importance of her upbringing and how it had influenced her as a parent:

> And for me, it is kind of important, I grew up with one TV […] and we, it was like a family we watched it together. So, I want to give her the same thing, because I can kind of get sucked into all sorts of trash now, and it is not a good habit (laughs) … and she is like so young and there is so much time for that, I want to maintain her youth.

The individual media memories were balanced and negotiated within the household into a present position, which formed the 'moral economy' of the household: their current values and attitudes concerning digital screen media and communication technology (Silverstone et al., 1994). Additionally, the parents experienced that they were, at the same time, impregnated with external messages on the need for limited screen time:

> Mother: It's drummed in that there shouldn't be too much screen time, you hear that early like […] it is here and there, I mean, so you hear it a lot from media, and then from the childhealth clinic to some extent, I think, and screen time, didn't you get some info?
> Father: For sure, you heard something there, she was *not* to watch, no screens at all. (Parents to Olga, 20 months old)

The households were thus in constant dialogue with the outer world, and the moral economy of the parents was continuously negotiated between parents, and between the household and society, evoking a guilty conscience when not able to meet the 'ideal'.

Parents are not only targets for information; they also report that they actively search for information on screen time and how to handle digital technology in the best interests of their child. In this quest, they refer to various sources: the media in general, specific experts appearing in the media, commercially published handbooks, online parental forums and websites, and online public health websites. Additionally, they seek advice from family members and only occasionally discuss the topic with friends. One reason for this is the strong polarisation of opinions, which makes it even more difficult for those seeking guidance.

> Mother: Sure, there are so many extremes, like we have your brother who has a one-year-old child. They think he will *never* watch TV. Or at least not until he is two. And then there are others with free access. I think it is a bit difficult to relate to it since in our circle of friends, it is very different.
> Father: Yeah, lots of opinions and many combinations. (Parents to Elsa, 36 months old)

All the abovementioned sources of information had some relevance for the parents. However, they were far from content with the information supplied, and they struggled to make sense of it and to transform the information into practice, as guiding principles for their everyday lives.

## Different parental approaches to guidance

In the analysis, we identified patterns in parents' approaches to seeking advice on screen use. The patterns denote two broader types of approaches to guidance: (1) self-reliant parents in no need of guidance; and (2) uncertain parents who sought advice. Among the latter, two

subcategories were identified: (A) parents who sought advice from professionals (child-health clinics), and (B) parents who sought advice from policy (WHO).

**Self-reliant parents in no need of guidance**

In this category, 'the self-reliant parent', we find parents who were very relaxed about screen time and activities. They were quite skilled users themselves and were confident and comfortable in their role as parents. These parents trusted their young children to handle digital technology responsibly with some guidance or light surveillance from them.

> Mother: We don't have any routines for it [screen time].
> Father: No specific routines and I am not very keen on this thing about screen time. I think it is more about what is going on *on the screen. Not the time with the screen per se*. Eh…it is fairly free but sometimes, when we notice it becomes too much, we make restrictions. (Parents to Maj, 40 months old)

Within this approach, the parents developed their moral economy (Silverstone et al., 1994) in close connection with their family values and experiences of having been brought up without any restrictions or guidelines, and it worked out well:

> I was raised without guidelines and advice, and it went well. But I think it is a good thing that they raise attention to this at school, and in due time there will be more talk about it because children have many ideas. (Mother to Ines, 18 months old)

Parents paved their own way and relied upon the ideology of 'learning by doing parenthood', observing, evaluating and adapting the practices.

> Mother: You notice some of it yourself, of course. A child does not feel well after four hours in front of a screen, but if it played for four hours, it would feel good. We have noticed a thing now with Olga when she has been sitting more with the iPad and she woke up in the morning with neck pain.
> Father: It has been obvious, and it makes you think. (Parents to Olga, 20 months old)

Some parents talked about the importance of being practical, and 'making it work': 'You can only hope for the best and try to adjust. You must do what is best for you and your children' (Mother to Hugo, 15 months old).

**Uncertain parents who sought advice**

Parents often expressed a wish to know more and to be advised about screen time. Some asked explicitly for research-based knowledge and expressed disappointment in not finding it.

Mother: How can you as a parent help your child to navigate in this *jungle* of media and how to relate to everything?
Father: Yeah… more guidance, so more research, it is weird there is so little research about it, at least that is what I experience. I don't know, I am not into it, but it feels like a vacuum, weird… several generations have experienced computers, and smartphones have been around for quite a while now. (Parents to Annie, 6 weeks old)

The parents actively seeking advice turned to either (A) professionals or (B) policy.

*A. Parents who sought advice from professionals*

The reason why parents perceived a lack of research and expertise to draw on was partly grounded in their experience at the childhealth clinic they turned to for advice. They described the centres as conservative, not keeping up with current research and developments. Parents were disappointed to find nurses unable to answer their questions about screen time and content.

Father: It is rather weird that the childhealth clinic doesn't know, it is surely because there is no knowledge about it. Because there is not much advice to get.
Mother: Nope. (Parents to Annie, 6 months old)

They may express opinions spontaneously, which may not be accurate at all. That's how I have perceived it. And I have a problem with that. If I go to the nurse at the childhealth clinic and ask questions, I want her to reply with facts. Not what she thinks. I am not interested in *that*. (Mother to Hugo, 15 months old)

Parents were sceptical about the information the childhealth clinic provided. The father in the quote below perceived the knowledge of the nurses as out of date and not reliable. He perceived it as based on anecdotal (lay) knowledge, rather than scientific evidence.

We are quite interested in science and updated, it shows when you are at the centre or take your courses that there isn't much that is embedded in like tip-top science, but a lot of things are kind of 'culture', I believe. Just your own experience and I think a lot of what is said generally about kids is just 'BS', but also statements from experts and those kinds of things. (Father to Pelle, 5 months old)

Another parent told us how frustrated she was with not getting comprehensive answers when asking for detailed advice on screen time at her local childhealth clinic. Feelings of guilt arose when she was unable to follow the recommendations. She felt embarrassed about reporting the screen time exposure of her child, which was more than the recommended amount.

> I think it is an hour a day they recommend from 1 to 2 years of age. I don't know exactly. And then I asked, 'How should you distribute this hour?' and, 'What are the recommendations?' Because it could be a quarter of an hour in the morning, a quarter of an hour in the evening and how do you count during the day if she is allowed to look at the mobile phone, what should I think about this, this hour? But then I experienced that between 1 and 2 years, she had more screen time than one hour. I know it, but to tell is embarrassing. I think that even in this forum, the mindset is outdated. And you are *ashamed* to say that the child is using screens more than they should. (Mother to Stella, 23 months old)

It was common that the parents expressed frustration and feelings of guilt and shame, and that they were 'doing wrong', while ultimately just trying to be good parents. Their negative experiences at the centre were significant in causing them to blame themselves for not meeting expectations and living up to the social imaginaries (Taylor, 2004) of being good parents, who prevented their children from screen time exposure. 'You always feel a bit bad when you are fiddling with your phone when you are with the kids, or if they are allowed to sit and watch' (Father to Elsa, 36 months old). When talking about feeling bad, the mother of Hugo, 15 months old, said, 'You worry that the screen time will negatively influence the child, but at the same time, I don't know if it is right or not. Is it?' In our conversations, several returned to feeling, being or doing 'right or wrong'. Rather than fixed categories, right and wrong were continuously renegotiated in relation to the child and the parent's needs, and the context, demonstrating the fluidity of the moral economy of the household.

> Mother: So, sometimes she says, 'I want to watch a cartoon' and I turn the TV on, but I think that it is a bit of my *fault*.
> Researcher: It doesn't need to be wrong…
> Mother: What I mean is that she doesn't need to come down to watch TV. There is more to it; I am the one with a need. To turn on the TV so she will sit and watch TV, and I can make breakfast. It's the way it is. But *it turns out to be wrong.* (Mother to Milena, 23 months old)

It was evident that parents with their first child expressed more concern, and sometimes even fear, about making mistakes and introducing digital technology to their child inappropriately. However, having a second or even a third child changed this dynamic. Parents tended to trust their parenting abilities and judgement more, having gained experience in managing children and their screen activities. A father of three children said:

> You were told something there [referring to the childhealth clinic]. She [Olga, 20 months old] shouldn't watch screens at all. With the first child, you are much more prone to follow those kinds of advice, partly simpler to follow, partly because you are more worried. With the third child, you have the other two children to entertain with the help of the TV, and then well, 'all right, it will probably be fine'.

Yet, as a parent of several children, the father expressed a wish for reliable information. He raised his critical voice that all kinds of information could be found online, but there was no specific agency to turn to. That is, a reliable source that could be trusted and that published sensible advice, not least for first-time parents.

*B. Parents who sought advice from policy*

Several families spontaneously mentioned WHO as an authority to listen to, and they were aware of the organization's screen time guidelines. However, few found the guidelines helpful, as the recommendations were perceived as being too disconnected from the realities they faced in their everyday lives as families with very young children. Even parents who described themselves as being 'restrictive' had huge difficulties in meeting the 'nil screen' policy in early childhood. There were a lot of conflicting thoughts around the recommendations, and parents found the concept of screen time difficult to relate to. It was perceived as both unrealistic and open to criticism. 'The recommendation feels impossible' (Mother to Hugo, 15 months old). The father of Elsa (36 months old) asked for more nuanced guidelines, 'Instead of just saying – *no screen time*', and the mother added, 'If you listen to WHO, it is no screen time, but I don't think it is realistic. Even if we are very restrictive, we are far from the WHO recommendation'.

Parents in this category not only perceived the guidelines as unrealistic and unhelpful but also pointed out that they overlook key dimensions of screen time, particularly the 'what', that is, what appears on the screen during use. The quote below demonstrates that parents did not view screen time as a homogeneous category and believed it warranted further examination. According to this family's moral economy (Silverstone et al., 1994), there was a distinction between good and bad screen time, which relates to the content rather than the duration per se. However, WHO appears to disregard these important aspects in their recommendations for no screen time.

> No way, up to two years nothing at all, and then one hour. But really… what is screen time and what is screen time? It is very different. It makes it difficult because I think there is also good content. But there are also bad things. Then it doesn't matter if it is only ten minutes. But what is good? I don't know. Maybe no one knows, but I could use some help to decide. (Father to Elsa, 36 months old)

The omission of an in-depth discussion of content quality in guidelines on screen time makes them problematic to follow and leaves parents confused with little guidance. They do not resonate with their moral economy. The fact that WHO still underpins its recommendations with certain moral values related to quality screen content (not entertainment) and acceptable sedentary time (reading books) risks undermining confidence in them, thereby contesting the social imagination of WHO as a reliable policy body.

We came across one family that followed WHO's recommendations strictly. The child had not been exposed to screens before the age of 2. Having watched her niece and nephew nagging for access to TV, the mother decided to enforce a strict limitation on her child.

'In the long run, for her sake, it is a good decision not to put technology in front of her like a crutch, because you do not know what to do with her' (Mother to Isabelle, 33 months old).

In this family, the parents applied a strict parenting style on their child's use of digital media and other activities: 'I am the parent. I dictate, here you can have this now, and now it is not the time for it, kind of like with food.' WHO guidelines were followed accurately to the extent that the child did not know what a television, smartphone or tablet was. She referred to the big flat screen in the living room as 'the black mirror'. The mother and father described how they still struggled to protect their child at the age of 33 months from screens, banning screen interaction when visiting grandparents and urging relatives to shut down screens when visiting.

> We asked my niece and nephew not to stream stuff when they were in my parents' house. So, it was like: 'You need to turn the TV off *now*, because I do not want Isabelle to watch', or 'She doesn't watch this', and some of them making Minecraft so way over her level. And the guy narrating was just not appropriate for her either. I do not want her to pick up some of those phrases so… my niece will watch just about *anything*, she likes the Paw Patrol and Mickey Mouse.

It is difficult for parents to live up to the WHO recommendations in the long run, not least because the media are so embedded in social lives and interactions. Maintaining contact with family members and relatives outside the home in a non-screen media setting becomes a major strain. The zero tolerance for screen time risks causing conflicts and tensions between the closest ones who do not adhere to the same moral economy on media practices.

## Conclusions

Our study, based on a limited sample of households with young children (0–3 years old), highlights the importance of their perspectives despite statistical limitations. These parents come from diverse backgrounds and have varying resources, but they all face similar challenges in navigating the pervasive presence of digital screen media in modern family life.

Parents' views on screen time and screen use in early childhood are complex and often conflicted, influenced by social imaginaries and personal moral values (the moral economy of the household). They struggle to reconcile these with recommendations on screen media use, leading to feelings of guilt and failure.

We identified two parental approaches to managing screen technology. Some parents rely on personal values and past experiences (the self-reliant parent), while others (the uncertain parent) actively seek guidance but find existing sources inadequate. Childhealth clinics are perceived as outdated and untrustworthy, and policies offer little practical assistance. The nil limit of screen exposure until the age of two is unrealistic for most families, but it has real consequences for parents, who blame themselves for being unable to protect their children from screens. Our findings thus align with arguments put forward by

Blum-Ross and Livingstone (2018) in their earlier discussion on the trouble with screen-time rules.

In Sweden, even digitally skilled parents seek evidence-based guidance on introducing screen technology to their children. While WHO provides guidelines, they are perceived as unrealistic ('impossible', 'make no sense') and they do not resonate with modern family realities.

Interviews with Swedish parents revealed a mismatch between WHO and national guidelines and advice from childhealth clinics. The emphasis by the Media Council on contacting nurses for screen time advice also risks 'medicalising' media use, transforming human everyday practices into treatable disorders, and alienating parents, since parents find this information circuit unreliable and outdated. The WHO guidelines, focused on minimising screen exposure, were criticised for not considering content quality and practical guidance. The parents expressed a need for clearer advice on navigating media content.

We advocate for revising existing recommendations, educating healthcare professionals and providing more relevant guidance and advice aligned with modern family dynamics, taking the child, content and context into consideration. Collaborative research involving media scholars and other disciplines is essential to better understand digital screen practices in early childhood and inform guidelines.

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