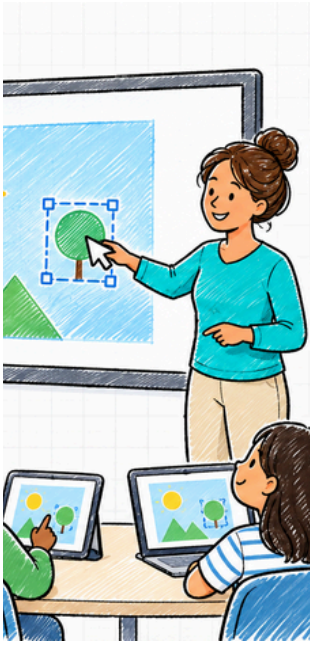
Best Practice for Screen Use - a Guide for Primary Teachers

Digital technology is now a routine part of teaching and learning in primary classrooms. Used purposefully, screens can help students access information, practise literacy and numeracy skills, investigate questions, create written and multimodal work, communicate and develop digital literacy. However, devices can also contribute to distraction, lost learning time and inequitable participation when activities lack a clear purpose, transitions are slow or technical problems interrupt lesson momentum.

Quality screen use depends on clear learning goals, explicit routines, good pacing, active teacher presence and timely support. Good teaching combines digital and non-digital activity, including teacher explanation, discussion, handwriting, mini whiteboards and practical materials. Primary students need guidance and repeated practice to learn when to use a device, how to focus, how to share equipment and when to put down devices.

Teachers therefore have an important co-regulation role. Expectations and support should develop across the primary years as students become more capable and independent.



Use screens for a clear learning purpose

Choose short, structured activities that help students explore, practise or demonstrate the intended learning. Combine digital activities with discussion, handwriting and hands-on experiences, adapting resources to students' needs and accessibility requirements.

Teach foundational digital skills explicitly

Model logging in, navigating tools, typing, saving work and using simple research processes, then provide guided practice before expecting independence. Check what students can actually do and introduce age-appropriate ways to question information and recognise online risks.

Establish routines and model responsible habits

Teach when devices should be used, closed or put away, and supervise students actively while they work. Reinforce respectful communication, privacy and help-seeking, working with families to support consistent expectations.

Teachers cannot do this alone. Reliable devices, technical support, consistent school expectations and communication with families all help students develop safe, purposeful and increasingly independent screen habits.

NSW GOVERNMENT

Best Practice in Screen Use for Education

PROUDLY FUNDED BY THE NSW GOVERNMENT

In this research project, we surveyed 1057 NSW students, 1686 parents, 166 school leaders and 914 present and 805 future teachers, in both government and non-government schools. We also held 133 focus groups with 426 participants across these stakeholder groups and observed 68 classrooms in NSW government schools. All data were collected in 2025. For our full report, and toolkit resources for parents, teachers, students and school leaders, visit **http://screensineducation.org**

TIPS & LINKS FOR PRIMARY TEACHERS

Plan for purpose
Start with the learning intention. Use a device when it improves access, explanation, practice, feedback, inquiry, collaboration, creation or accessibility. If technology does not add clear learning value, consider a non-digital option.

Teach start, stop and pack-up routines
Before devices are opened, explain the task and success criteria. Use consistent cues to gain student attention (e.g., clapping routine) and instruct students to close laptop lids or place tablets face down while you are talking. Allow students time to save, submit, log out and return devices correctly.

Stay visible and move
Make sure you can see student screens so you can monitor their work and provide support. Circulate during independent work and ask students to explain their progress. Intervene early when attention begins to drift.

Reduce waiting time
Check links, logins, updates, sound, charging and device availability before the lesson. Provide a paper-based, partner or extension task so students remain engaged while waiting for help.

Use time boundaries and checkpoints
Break long digital tasks into shorter phases. Use a visible timer where appropriate and pause periodically to check understanding. Provide feedback at each stage and remind students of the next step.

Balance screen and non-screen activity
Combine screen use with teacher explanation, discussion, handwriting, mini whiteboards, movement and practical materials. Ask students to talk about, apply or reflect on what they have viewed or created.

Teach safe and thoughtful use
Explicitly teach privacy, cybersafety, respectful communication, source checking, acknowledgement of sources and appropriate use of AI where relevant to the task and school policy.

Support equitable participation
Plan for shared devices, accessibility needs and different levels of digital experience. Assign and rotate roles during group work so that all students have equitable access to devices and all students contribute.

Communicate with parents
When communicating with parents, explain how and why your students are using screens. For example, at parent information nights you might explain the digital skills students are learning to help them safely research and develop their literacy. Use communication with parents to help establish shared expectations surrounding technology use.

Other resources

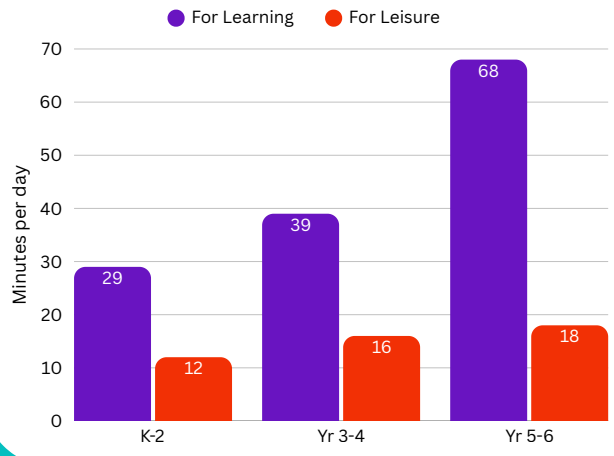
- Professional learning for educators (eSafety Commissioner)
- Classroom resources (eSafety Commissioner)
- Best practice toolkit (Screens in Education)

Best Practice in Screen Use for Education

Screen Use at NSW Primary School

Snapshot from 2025

Student reported time spent on screen at school



Common learning apps

Reading eggs, Google, Seesaw, Mathletics, Google Classroom, Canva, YouTube, Essential Assessment, Google Docs

48%

of observed class time involved no student technology use.

93%

on-task rate in the primary classes observed.

57%

of primary students reported being distracted when using screens in class.

40%

of observed lessons had teacher imposing time constraints to support focus.

90%

of observed lessons had teachers circulating to manage student tech use.

28%

of observed lessons included closing laptop lids, placing iPads face down or turning screens off to listen.

NSW GOVERNMENT

Best Practice in Screen Use for Education

PROUDLY FUNDED BY THE NSW GOVERNMENT

Based on the NSW statewide screen use survey findings with 1057 NSW K-12 students in **2025**, before implementation of the social media ban. The survey asked students to report their screen use in the last full school day at school, for learning and for fun, as well as their experience with using screens for learning in general. Surveys were conducted in both NSW government & non-government schools. Researchers also observed 68 classes in NSW government schools. For our full report, and toolkit resources for parents, teachers, students and school leaders, visit **http://screensineducation.org**