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## SWITCHED ON

With screen use now common in homes and schools, researchers are assessing the effect it has on a child's mental health

By Cathy Saunders

**M**any WA children ranging from as young as eight years old to late teens are spending up to 12 hours a day looking at electronic screens. This is far beyond the recommended maximum screen use of two hours each day.

The findings are from the results of the first data collection of a University of WA study of 2700 WA primary and secondary students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9 from 26 rural and metropolitan, government and private schools.

The study is looking at the prevalence, frequency, intensity and types of screen-based activity used by young people and how it relates to mental health.

The range of screen use was from 10 minutes to more than 12 hours each day.

Lead researcher Stephen Houghton, of the Graduate School of Education, said the recommended limit for children over two years of age was two hours daily of quality media time, including entertainment media.

The recommendation was put out by the American Academy of Pediatrics and has been endorsed by the Canadian Paediatric Society and the Australian Health Department.

But children and teens were now regularly using iPads, iPods, smart phones, tablets, laptops, desk computers, TVs, games consoles or other devices.

Winthrop Professor Houghton said, "We are wondering whether it is virtually impossible now to limit screen use to two hours a day," he said. "How tenable is it when schools have students using iPads for a considerable number of hours a day?"

It might be more appropriate to have recommendations for the number of hours spent on global screen use at different year levels, he said.

The study has found that 45 per cent of Year 3 students and 50 per cent of Year 5 students are using screens more than two hours on a typical weekday.

In Year 3, for more than two hours on a typical weekday, 40 per cent of boys and 30 per cent of girls play screen games, 38 per cent of boys and the same percentage of girls watch TV or DVDs, 23 per cent of boys and 21.5 per cent of girls surf the net and 11 per cent of boys and 5.5 per cent of girls use social networking.

More than 4 per cent of all students use four different types of screens – for gaming, social networking, internet and email, and TV or DVD – on a typical weekday for more than two hours on each screen. One in 10 students spends more than two hours on each of three screens, 16.5 per cent on two screens, and 24.5 per cent on one screen.

"The good thing that

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comes out for schools — and we send them all a detailed report — is that what the kids are doing at school with their screen use is what the schools want them to do," Professor Houghton said.

"For example, in one of our biggest schools which has gone over to the use of iPads, very few of the kids are using them for things like social networking. The majority of it is used for class work-based tasks."

The study, titled screen use and mental health from ages eight-18, received \$355,591 in funding over three years from Healthway. It is an international collaboration with Simon Hunter from the University of Strathclyde in Glasgow, Scotland.

Findings from the second data collection from the same students, which included measures of positive mental health, are being collated.

Co-researcher Lisa Wood, of the UWA school of population health, said the study would distinguish between school and leisure use of screens and examine whether it was quantity or type of screen use that was most associated with mental health.

Associate Professor Wood said while the Australian physical activity guidelines recommended no more

than two hours per day of screen use for children to promote sufficient physical activity, there were no guidelines relating to mental or social wellbeing.

"And the two hours per day recommendation in the physical activity guidelines was set in an era when screens were far less pervasive in children's lives — at home, school and leisure," she said.

"A typical child could easily be spending three to four hours on screens at school, a couple of hours on computer for homework, several hours watching TV or playing computer games, texting on the phone, using Facebook and so on.

"Add to that the fact that they use multiple screens simultaneously, it is increasingly only their deep sleep hours that are screen free."

She said the study results would be used to draw up evidence-based guidelines for screen use with the aim of preventing mental health problems and to develop interventions for schools, families and health professionals.

In all, there will be about nine data collections over three years in order to follow the same students over time.

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