# More Green Time and Less Screen Time

*Health Care Column by Dr. Paul Preston, Family Physician and VP of Clinical for the North East Local Health Integration Network (North East LHIN)*

**August 17, 2017 --** As a family physician, I'm often asked by parents: "How much screen time is too much screen time?

Well parents, this summer I want you to think about upping your child's "green-time" and dropping their "screen-time."

In fact, if they are younger than 2 years of age, the Canadian Paediatric Society does not recommend any screen time at all. If they're between two and five years of age, then it's one hour a day. That's right, one hour.

My work as VP of Clinical with the North East LHIN, includes often meeting with other primary care providers to talk about best practices. Screen-time, especially among younger people, is an important issue because it can be habit-forming and early overexposure increases the likelihood of overuse in later life.

What do we mean by screen time? Well, if are you reading this column on your phone or iPad that counts as screen, so does your computer and television.

The Canadian Paediatric Society has pulled together a lot of research in coming up with its recommendations. Did you know that high exposure to background TV has been found to negatively affect language use and acquisition, attention, cognitive development, and even executive function in children under 5 years old?



**Ethan Broome proudly displays his catch of the day! "Green-time" has been shown to be beneficial to both children and adults.**

Signs that your child may be getting too much screen time include the "wired yet tired" kid. They are in a state of being hyped-up but also exhausted with a short fuse and attention span. And they don't deal with delayed gratification well.

For kids too much screen time when they are constantly stimulated and not enough free creative play time, where they must generate their own ideas and play out their own stories and games face to face with other kids, or sit quietly and read a book or watch and the frogs and smell the flowers, impairs their development of doing such tasks later in life. As an adult this means less ability to hold focus for long periods, concentrate deeply, and to develop generative ideas as well as the subtle social skills to interact well with others.

The risk of ADD increases with the younger the child's age of their exposure and the greater the dose of screen time.

It's OK to say "No" to screen time. The excuse "but I'm bored" is a sign they need more practice learning to use their imagination, play, make things up, read a book, talk face-to-face to others, and have less virtual and more real life experiences.

Time away from screens can help their body re-set and start to develop these skills.  And certainly "green-time" -- time outside -- has been shown to be beneficial to both children and adults. Going without screens altogether for a while, may help your child sleep deeper and also cope with stress better – fewer melt-downs in young children and less apathy and tiredness in teens.

As adults, you'll feel better too if you take a break from the screen and spend some time in a nature type setting. If you put down your devices, it will also increase the one-on-one time you spend with your child, which they need to grow into healthy human beings.

There plenty of ways to model good screen use, such as turning off your device during "family time," not leaving the television (or computer) on as background noise, and declaring "screen-free" times at dinner and at least one hour before bed. Because the light from those hard-to-put-down screens mimic day-time, this means screens can mess with your melatonin levels and therefore your sleep.

So go out and get some green time. You'll be rewarded with lower stress levels and a natural mood boost … and so will your children.

To read more about these very important Canadian Paediatric Society recommendations visit: http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/screen-time-and-young-children and for a more extensive review click here.