

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

Guidance for Purposeful Screen Use in Schools

Purpose

Schools across the country are navigating growing concerns from families and communities about student device use. This guidance is intended to provide clarity and a shared understanding grounded in research, student voice, and educational best practice. Today's students experience technology as an integrated part of their learning, communication, and daily life. This reality requires schools to move beyond reactive approaches and toward intentional guidance that supports healthy habits.

This guide expands on existing screen use principles to provide research-based, actionable practices for schools and teachers across grade levels. The goal is not to eliminate screens, but to help students develop healthy, intentional, and developmentally appropriate digital habits that support learning, well-being, and long-term self-regulation.

What Research Tells Us About Screen Use

A growing body of research from national health, education, and child development organizations indicates that both unrestricted and completely eliminated screen use are ineffective approaches. High levels of unstructured recreational screen use have been associated with sleep disruption, reduced attention, and mental health concerns (Adelantado-Renau et al., 2019; Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023; American Psychological Association [APA], 2025). At the same time, the American Academy of Pediatrics does not recommend eliminating screens, recognizing that digital tools can support learning, communication, and access when used intentionally (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2026).

Specifically, research indicates that the effects of screen use are not determined by time alone. The type of content, the purpose for use, and the context in which screens are used all influence outcomes (AAP, 2026). For example, interactive and educational uses of devices may support engagement and skill development, while prolonged, unstructured recreational use may crowd out sleep, physical activity, or face-to-face

interaction. This distinction underscores the importance of structure, and developmental appropriateness rather than relying solely on strict time limits.

The American Academy of Pediatrics “5 Cs” of Healthy Media Use

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends evaluating media use through five key considerations, often referred to as the “5 Cs” (AAP, 2026):

- Child – The age, developmental stage, and individual needs of the student
- Content – The quality and purpose of what is being viewed or used
- Calm – Whether screens are being used in ways that support or replace healthy emotional regulation
- Crowding Out – What screen use may be replacing (sleep, movement, reading, relationships)
- Communication – Ongoing dialogue between adults and students about expectations and habits

This framework reinforces that healthy technology use depends on developmental appropriateness, intentional design, and shared responsibility rather than strict time limits alone.

The guidance found in this resource reflects a research-based approach by differentiating between active and passive technology use and by emphasizing structure and purpose.

Passive Screen Use

Passive screen use includes any activity where the student is primarily the consumer of content, with little to no interaction, decision-making, or creation.

Passive technology use is not inherently negative. In many cases, it plays an important role in learning, access, and engagement, particularly when it supports reading, exposure to new ideas, or accessibility needs (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2026). The impact of passive technology use depends on why it is being used and what it replaces in a student’s day (Adelantado-Renau et al., 2019).

Purposeful Passive Screen Use

Passive screen use can be appropriate, valuable, and necessary when it is intentional and aligned to learning goals. In evaluating whether passive screen use supports

students, educators and families may consider several key factors consistent with the American Academy of Pediatrics' "5 Cs" framework: the developmental needs of the child, the quality of the content, what the screen use may be crowding out, whether it supports emotional calm in healthy ways, and the role of ongoing communication about expectations (AAP, 2026).

Passive screen use may support learning when it:

- Provides access to reading materials that may not otherwise be available in print
- Supports students with disabilities through tools such as text-to-speech, audiobooks, adjustable fonts, captions, or translation
- Allows students to engage with complex or grade-level texts through listening while reading
- Expands access to diverse texts, perspectives, and languages beyond what is available in a classroom or home library
- Supports sustained reading, listening, or viewing as part of a broader learning experience

For many students, digital reading and listening are not substitutes for learning, they are the pathway to it (AAP, 2026). When the content is purposeful, developmentally appropriate, and part of a broader instructional plan, passive screen use can meaningfully support growth.

When Passive Screen Use Needs Boundaries

Passive screen use becomes a concern not because it is passive, but when it is unstructured, prolonged, or begins to crowd out other essential experiences (Adelantado-Renau et al., 2019). When evaluating boundaries, it is important to consider what screen use may be replacing, including sleep, movement, face-to-face interaction, sustained reading in multiple formats, or opportunities for active learning (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2023).

Concerns may arise when passive technology use:

- Replaces sleep, physical movement, or face-to-face interaction
- Becomes background noise rather than an intentional activity
- Is a default filler rather than used for a clear purpose
- Contributes to divided attention (e.g., watching content while attempting other tasks)

Examples that may require clearer boundaries include:

- Endless scrolling or auto-play content without purpose
- Background videos during independent work time
- Prolonged passive viewing late at night that disrupts sleep
- Watching content while “doing homework,” resulting in reduced focus

While passive technology use can support access and understanding when used intentionally, deeper learning often requires students to move beyond receiving content and into active engagement.

Active Screen Use

Active screen use involves students actively engaging with technology to think, create, problem-solve, communicate, or make decisions. In these moments, the student, not the screen, drives the experience. Technology serves as a tool to extend cognitive engagement rather than replace it (Kolb, 2017; Kolb, 2020).

Consistent with pediatric and educational guidance, effective active screen use considers the developmental needs of the child, the quality and purpose of the content, what the experience may be crowding out, and the importance of clear communication and structured expectations (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2022). When thoughtfully designed, active screen use can deepen understanding, promote creativity, and build real-world skills (Kolb, 2020).

In schools, active device use has instructional value when it is purposeful, time-bound, and clearly aligned to learning goals. Research suggests that interactive and creative uses of technology are associated with improved engagement and academic outcomes when used intentionally (Adelantado-Renau et al., 2019; Kolb, 2020).

Purposeful Active Screen Use

Active screen use supports learning when it is intentional and clearly connected to instruction. Educators and families can consider whether the activity requires students to think, create, problem-solve, communicate, or make decisions, whether it aligns to the developmental stage of the child, and whether it complements, rather than replaces, other essential learning experiences (AAP, 2026).

Active technology use may support learning when it:

- engages students in thinking, problem-solving, or decision-making
- supports creation, communication, collaboration, or application of learning
- provides opportunities for feedback, revision, and/or productive struggle
- builds digital literacy, organization, and real-world technology skills
- expands access to tools that support participation, expression, or individualized learning needs

When the activity is purposeful, developmentally appropriate, and part of a broader instructional plan, active screen use can deepen understanding, strengthen engagement, and help students build skills that transfer beyond the classroom.

When Active Screen Use Needs Boundaries

Active screen use becomes a concern when it becomes excessive, unstructured, or disconnected from a clear learning purpose. Even when students are creating, collaborating, researching, or interacting with content, screen-based learning can still reduce focus if it continues for too long, involves too many competing demands, or replaces other important forms of learning. Without boundaries, active screen use can contribute to distraction, mental fatigue, shallow task completion, or cognitive overload, especially when students are navigating multiple tabs, apps, notifications, or directions at once.

Boundaries are also important because even active technology use can begin to crowd out experiences that support deeper learning in different ways, including discussion, hands-on practice, reflection, movement, and sustained attention without a device. In these cases, the concern is not that students are using technology, but that the technology may be taking up too much space in the learning experience or is being used in ways that no longer add instructional value.

Clear expectations, defined boundaries, and thoughtful transitions help ensure that active screen use remains purposeful and supportive of learning. When adults model intentional use and provide structured opportunities for students to practice self-regulation, students are more likely to build the judgment and habits needed to use technology responsibly over time (Kolb, 2020; AAP, 2026; APA, 2025).

Shared Responsibility Across the School Community

Healthy technology habits develop when expectations are clearly explained, consistently enforced, and modeled by adults. Research in pediatric and developmental psychology

suggests that children and adolescents are more likely to internalize expectations when they are reinforced through visibility, consistency, and adult modeling (AAP, 2026; APA, 2025). Students themselves often express a desire for alignment between what is expected of them and what they observe from adults. As one student noted, *“What’s expected of us should be modeled by the teachers.”* When expectations are inconsistent or unclear, technology rules can feel arbitrary rather than instructional.

Consistent with the AAP’s emphasis on communication and context (AAP, 2026), this guidance views responsible screen use as a shared responsibility among educators, students, and families. Tech-free instructional moments are important and should be intentionally protected, particularly during periods that require sustained focus, reflection, or interpersonal connection. At the same time, schools must recognize that technology is integrated into learning and daily life, and occasional urgent or necessary uses may occur.

When expectations are applied consistently and transparently, students are more likely to understand the purpose behind them. Over time, this clarity supports the development of self-regulation and responsible decision-making rather than compliance driven solely by enforcement (APA, 2025).

Motivation, Trust, & Student Accountability

Effective screen use guidance is stronger when students are not only expected to follow expectations, but also included in shaping and reflecting on them. Students frequently express frustration with technology rules that are introduced without explanation or dialogue. Research suggests that when young people understand the purpose behind expectations, they are more likely to internalize them (APA, 2025).

Because students experience technology expectations across classrooms and school settings every day, their perspectives can help adults better understand what is working, what feels inconsistent, and where policies may need adjustment. Including students in conversations about technology norms, whether through advisory groups, classroom discussions, or structured feedback, supports transparency, trust, and shared responsibility.

Ongoing feedback loops help ensure that screen use guidance remains responsive rather than reactive. Listening to students does not mean relinquishing structure; it means strengthening understanding. When schools create meaningful opportunities for student input, they are better positioned to develop expectations that are clear, developmentally appropriate, and grounded in lived experience.

Over time, this shared approach can help students see screen use guidance not simply as a set of rules to follow, but as a framework designed to support learning, well-being, and responsible technology use.

Grade-Band Specific Guidance

Effective screen use guidance recognizes that attention, impulse control, and decision-making skills develop over time (American Academy of Pediatrics [AAP], 2026). A one-size-fits-all approach does not reflect how students grow and mature and may either over-restrict younger learners or under-support older ones.

Developmentally appropriate expectations support both academic learning and student well-being by gradually shifting responsibility from adults to students as skills strengthen (AAP, 2026; APA, 2025).

Screen Use Progression

Grade Band	Primary Driver of Screen Use	Student Skill Focus	Educator Role
Elementary School (K-5)	Adult-guided	Attention, Foundational Skills, Understanding Purpose	Structure, Model, Co-engage
Middle School (6-8)	Shared responsibility	Self-regulation, Habit Formation, Emotional Awareness	Teach, Scaffold, Reinforce
High School (9-12)	Student-managed	Autonomy, Accountability, Real-world Readiness	Set Expectations, Coach, Hold Accountable

This progression reflects a gradual release of responsibility, supporting students as they move from externally structured environments toward greater independence.

Elementary School (K-5)

Short, intentional, adult-guided use focused on learning goals.

At the elementary level, students are developing foundational skills in attention, language, and self-regulation. Research emphasizes that younger learners benefit from highly structured and adult-mediated technology use (AAP, 2026).

Guiding Principles

- Screens are tools to support specific instructional goals, not default activities
- Adult modeling and co-engagement are essential
- Screen use should be brief, focused, and clearly connected to learning

Effective Practices

- Use screens for:
 - Interactive, feedback-rich practice (e.g., responding, predicting, manipulating objects)
 - Creative expression (drawing, storytelling, music)
 - Guided exploration tied to classroom instruction
 - Support accessibility needs (e.g., text-to-speech, visual supports)
- Pair screen use with:
 - Adult co-engagement (discussion, questioning, modeling)
 - Off-screen follow-up activities that apply learning hands-on
- Avoid:
 - Passive viewing without interaction
 - Using screens as rewards or fillers

Middle School (6-8)

Increased structure with explicit instruction in self-regulation and digital habits

Early adolescence is marked by increasing independence and heightened sensitivity to social feedback. Research suggests that this developmental stage may increase susceptibility to distraction and sleep disruption when screen use is unstructured (CDC, 2023; APA, 2025).

Effective guidance emphasizes structure paired with skill development rather than unrestricted access or purely punitive restriction.

Guiding Principles

- Structure supports independence; it does not limit it
- Self-regulation with technology must be taught, practiced, and reinforced
- Screens should serve clear learning or organizational purposes
- Social and emotional impacts of screen use should be addressed directly

Effective Practices

- Use screens to:
 - Support collaboration, problem-solving, and guided inquiry
 - Engage students in interactive learning, simulations, and game-based experiences connected to learning goals
 - Develop organizational habits (calendars, assignments, feedback review)
- Explicitly teach students how to:
 - Manage notifications and use focus tools
 - Recognize digital distraction and refocus attention
 - Understand how social media algorithms and “highlight reels” influence emotions and self-perception
- Pair Screen Use with:
 - Clear time boundaries and defined transitions
 - Opportunities for reflection on attention, mood, and learning
- Avoid:
 - Unstructured or continuous access to personal devices during instructional time
 - Passive viewing without discussion, interaction, or application
 - Assuming students will self-regulate without instruction and modeling

High School (9-12)

Greater autonomy paired with clear expectations, accountability, and reflection.

High school students are preparing for postsecondary education, careers, and independent life. Research indicates that adolescents benefit from increased autonomy when it is paired with structure and accountability (APA, 2025; AAP, 2026). High levels of unstructured screen use during instructional time remain associated with distraction and academic concerns (Adelantado-Renau et al., 2019; CDC, 2023).

Effective guidance focuses on responsible choice-making rather than constant monitoring.

Guiding Principles

- Autonomy increases as expectations become clearer
- Students should understand the purpose and consequences of their technology use
- Screens should support learning, organization, and creation, not passive consumption
- Digital habits should align with college, career, and workplace expectations

Effective Practices

- Use screens to:
 - Create, revise, and publish complex work (writing, design, coding, multimedia)
 - Conduct research that requires evaluating sources and synthesizing information
 - Collaborate with peers using shared digital tools
 - Manage academic responsibilities (calendars, deadlines, feedback review)
- Provide explicit instruction in:
 - Managing attention and digital boundaries during independent work
 - Understanding how multitasking impacts learning and productivity
 - Sleep hygiene and the effects of late-night screen use and blue light
- Pair screen use with:
 - Transparent expectations for when devices are appropriate
 - Clear accountability for off-task or inappropriate use
 - Opportunities for self-assessment and reflection on digital habits
- Avoid:
 - Assuming students will automatically self-regulate without guidance
 - Allowing personal device use to default to entertainment during learning time

- Overly restrictive policies that remove opportunities to practice responsible use

Technology Beyond Screens

Technology in schools extends beyond traditional screen-based activities. Robotics, makerspaces, assistive technologies, audio tools, and hands-on digital learning experiences all contribute to engagement, creativity, and skill development. Reducing passive or excessive screen use does not mean reducing meaningful technology integration. In many cases, it means shifting how technology is experienced, from consumption to creation.

By broadening the definition of technology, schools can continue to innovate instruction while prioritizing focus and developmental appropriateness.

Implementation Considerations

Effective screen use guidance is most successful when implemented through clear communication and consistent expectations across settings. Families, staff, and school leaders all play a role in helping students understand what is expected, why it matters, and how those expectations support learning and well-being.

Communication with Families

Families and communities play an important role in supporting healthy screen habits. Proactive communication reduces confusion and builds shared understanding.

Districts and schools may:

- Clearly communicate the purpose and goals of screen use guidance
- Emphasize skill-building rather than restriction
- Share practical examples of how screens are used during the school day
- Provide resources or conversation starters to support consistent expectations at home

Transparent communication reinforces that screen use guidance is intended to support learning and well-being, not limit innovation.

Consistency Across Classrooms

While instructional approaches may vary, core expectations for technology use should remain consistent to support student understanding and self-regulation.

Districts and schools may:

- Establish common language for on-screen and off-screen activities
- Align routines for transitions, focus periods, and device management
- Allow flexibility within a shared framework rather than individual classroom rules
- Support administrators in reinforcing expectations across settings

Consistency helps students understand what is expected and transfer responsible habits from one classroom to another.

Closing: Supporting Learning and Lifelong Habits

Technology is continually evolving, as are the ways in which students are engaging with it. This guidance is not intended to provide a fixed set of rules, but rather a shared framework for thoughtful decision making grounded in research, student voice, and professional judgement.

Classroom device use is not about eliminating technology or enforcing uniform limits. It is about helping students learn when, why, and how to use digital tools in ways that support learning, well-being, and personal responsibility. Skills such as attention management, self-regulation, and purposeful use of technology are essential for success both in the classroom and in life beyond the classroom.

Schools play a critical role in shaping these habits. When expectations are clear, consistent, and developmentally appropriate, and when adults model the behaviors they expect, students are more likely to internalize healthy practices rather than comply out of obligation.

This guidance invites schools and districts to continue learning, reflecting, and adapting. Through shared responsibility, ongoing discussion, and intentional implementation, schools can create environments where technology supports learning without overtaking it, and where students are equipped to navigate a digitally rich world with confidence and care.



References

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Resources

Parent Resources

- [5C's of Media Use Parent 1-Pagers by Age](#)
- [5 Cs of Media Use Resource Hub with Posters, Handouts, and Videos](#)
- [Kids & Screen Time: How to Use the 5 C's of Media Guidance](#)
- [Early Childhood Development and Screen Time Toolkit \(Available in English and Spanish\)](#)
- [Conversation Starters for Families of Tweens and Teens](#)

School Resources

- [CoSN 2025 Blaschke Report and Toolkit](#)

Educator Resources

- [Screentime Cheat Sheet for Educators](#)