

APPENDIX C

(Halton Best Start in Life Strategy)

Emerging Risks Impacting Early Childhood Development

Halton Borough Council

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SCREEN USE IN THE EARLY YEARS (0-5): NATIONAL EVIDENCE AND LOCAL IMPLICATIONS

Alongside established factors affecting early childhood development, national evidence highlights increasing concerns about screen use in the early years.

The House of Commons Education Committee (2023-24) has identified screen exposure as a growing developmental risk, particularly affecting communication, physical development, behaviour, sleep, and family interaction.

These issues are highly relevant to Halton's Best Start priorities, where improving early language, strengthening parent-child relationships, and reducing inequalities are central aims.

Problem statement

The House of Commons Education Committee Report (2023-24) identified significant risks relating to screen use in the early years (0-5 years):

Screen exposure begins extremely early

- Children are engaging with screens from as early as 6 months old.

High access to phones among very young children

- 1 in 5 children aged 3-4 have their own mobile phone.
- This accelerates into later childhood, showing an early pattern of high device availability.

Increased need for guidance for parents of babies and young children

The Committee emphasised that early years families require tailored, practical advice that:

- prioritises face-to-face interaction,
- highlights how screen time can reduce crucial engagement,
- encourages adults to minimise their own device use during supervision.

They recommend delivery through family hubs and children's centres.

Concerns about physical development

Evidence highlighted that excessive or unsupervised screen use contributes to:

- reduced physical activity (impacting motor skill development).
- reduced opportunities to develop hand strength, grip and fine motor skills.
- sleep disruption linked to behavioural and developmental difficulties.

These issues are especially relevant during the 0–5 period of rapid motor development.

Language and communication risks

- Parental device use has been shown to reduce responsive communication, limiting conversational turns essential for early language development.
- Speech and language professionals report that distracted caregiving reduces opportunities for interaction – an important predictor of language outcomes.

Poor quality control of “educational” apps

- Reviews of popular “educational” apps for young children showed very limited evidence of educational value.
- For example, among the top 25 maths apps marketed for 5-year-olds, only one had proven benefit and several contained no mathematical content, affecting nursery and Reception-aged children.

Vulnerable children face greater risk

Children experiencing poverty, care involvement, or additional needs are:

- more likely to spend higher screen time, and
- less able to apply self-protective behaviours online, making the Early Years period particularly critical.

Parents often lack insight into what young children access

- While many believe screen time can support learning, parents frequently do not know what their children are actually viewing, raising safeguarding and developmental concerns.

Clear national recommendation

The Committee concluded that:

“Screen time should be minimal for younger children and balanced with face-to-face socialisation and physical activity.”

Possible Action (Local Implications)

The Government has committed to publishing national early years screen time guidance in April 2026. This will offer practical, non-judgemental advice to help parents balance screen use with activities known to support early development (e.g., reading, talking, playing, exploring).

This emerging evidence will be embedded within Halton’s Best Start approach, informing workforce development, Family Hub practice, early communication pathways and future parental guidance once national recommendations are published in 2026.