

Children under three should be banned from watching TV to improve health and wellbeing

By Emma Clark

Parents need to drastically cut the number of hours children spend watching television, while under threes should be stopped from watching altogether, a leading psychologist has warned.

Limiting the amount of time youngsters are sat in front of a screen could have significant advantages for their health, development and wellbeing, according to Dr Aric Sigman.

By the age of seven, a child born today will have spent a full year glued to screens and over the course of childhood youngsters spend more time watching TV than in school.



The average child has watched a year of television by the time they are only seven years-old

The population's vast use of games consoles, tablet computers, televisions, smart phones and laptops has been linked to obesity problems and an increased risk of cardiovascular disease and Type 2 diabetes - with the average child exposed to five different screens in each household.

Writing in the influential medical journal *Archives Of Disease In Childhood*, Dr Sigman said such extensive use could also lead to attention problems and other psychological difficulties.

'Reducing total daily screen time for children, and delaying the age at which they start, could provide significant advantages for their health and wellbeing,' he writes.

'While many questions remain regarding the precise nature of the association between screen time and adverse outcomes, the advice from a growing number of both researchers and other medical associations and government health departments elsewhere is becoming unequivocal: reduce screen time.'

The amount of time spent in front of a screen could also adversely affect children's social relationships, he added.



The average child is exposed to five different screens at home, including smart phones

He said many parents use the devices as 'electronic babysitters' as a means to occupy their children.

'Screen time appears to have created the three-parent family,' he added.

There are emerging concerns about the amount of time children spend watching 3D televisions and consoles - saying such devices could affect the development of the child's depth perception.

Dr Sigman - who is also a child health expert - has made a raft of suggestions for children's screen consumption including delaying the age children start using screens to at least three.

Children aged between three and seven should be limited to half-an-hour to an hour of screen time each day, he said.

Those aged seven to 12 should spend just one hour in front of screens.

Children aged 12 to 15 should have a maximum of 1.5 hours in front of screens and those aged 16 and over should spend just two hours, he recommends.

He concluded: 'As health risks are reported to occur beyond exposure of two hours of screen time per day, although the average child is exposed to three times this amount, a robust initiative to encourage a reduction in daily recreational screen time could lead to significant improvements in child health and development.

'Britain and European medical establishments should consider screen time as a separate entity from sedentary behaviour, and offer an advisory on the average number of hours per day young children, in particular, are viewing screen media, and the age at which they start.'