Screen Use Guidance for EYFS and Reception Settings

The updated Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) statutory framework for schools (section 3.94, p. 43), effective from September 2026, requires providers to have regard to the DfE screen-use guidance when caring for children aged 0 to 5. The DfE's screen-use guidance promotes a precautionary approach, recognising that healthy development depends on sleep, physical activity, play, real-world experiences and responsive interactions with adults. It is aimed at nurseries, childminders, pre-school settings and providers of wraparound care for children aged 0-5 and may also be useful for reception year.

This document aims to summarise the DfE guidance and offer practical examples. Practitioners should also read the full DfE screen-use guidance.

The guidance applies to all digital devices with screens such as, but not limited to: tablets, laptops, desktop computers, mobile phones, television, gaming devices and toys with screens, video platforms, interactive whiteboards and screens, large touch tables, e-readers, smart watches.

Computing in EYFS

The new screen-use guidance should not be interpreted as a requirement to stop teaching computing in EYFS. Instead, it encourages educators to take a purposeful and balanced approach, recognising that young children can develop key computing concepts without prolonged use of screens. Children in EYFS should continue to develop early computing and digital literacy skills.

In line with guidance, schools should prioritise practical, play-based and "unplugged" approaches that develop computational thinking through active learning; useful resources include Barefoot Computing. Screens should be used only for short, purposeful activities that enhance learning, with adult interaction and clear educational intent.

Key Message – Appropriate Uses of Screens

The guidance does not suggest banning screens altogether. Appropriate examples might include:

✅ Showing photographs from a recent visit to support discussion.

✅ Looking at a live video call with a visitor or another class.

✅ Displaying a short clip that cannot easily be replicated in real life (for example, a volcano erupting or animals in their natural habitat).

✅ Using visualisers or interactive whiteboards to share children's work.

✅ Supporting communication through assistive technology for children with SEND.

In all cases, staff should:

- Have a clear learning purpose.
- Keep sessions brief.
- Interact with children throughout.
- Return children to active play and learning as quickly as possible.

Use screens when they add something that cannot easily be achieved through direct experience, interaction or play. If the same learning can be achieved without a screen, choose the non-screen option.

Key Messages for Staff

1. Screens should be used sparingly

For children:

- Under 2 years - avoid screen time altogether other than in exceptional circumstances such as a video call with parents and carers.
- 2-5 years - screen time should be limited to 1 hour a day, less if possible.

As children may already be using screens at home, schools and settings should minimise additional screen exposure during the day.

Staff action

✅ Consider whether a screen is genuinely necessary before using it.

✅ Prioritise real-world experiences, play, physical activity, stories, songs and adult-child interaction.

✅ Ensure screen use is the exception, not the norm.

2. Screens must have a clear educational purpose

Screen use should be:

- Carefully planned.
- Linked to specific learning and development objectives.
- Used to enhance learning, not replace teaching.

The guidance stresses that an engaged adult reading a story, singing songs or interacting directly with children provides richer learning experiences than screen-based alternatives.

Staff action

✅ Ask:

- What is the learning intention?
- Could this be achieved more effectively without a screen?
- How does the activity enhance learning?

✅ Avoid showing videos or using screens simply to fill time.

3. Adult interaction is essential

Children should never use screens independently in an EYFS setting.

Adults should:

- Watch alongside children.
- Discuss content.
- Ask questions.
- Encourage thinking, prediction and conversation.

Staff action

✅ Use questioning, narration and discussion during screen-based activities.

✅ Treat screen use as a shared activity rather than passive viewing.

❌ Do not leave children to watch screens alone.

4. Choose content carefully

All content should be:

- Age appropriate.
- Reviewed by staff beforehand.
- Slow-paced, predictable and easy to follow.
- Free from advertising.
- Free from autoplay and algorithm-driven content.

The guidance advises avoiding fast-paced content with:

- Frequent scene changes.
- Flashing images.

- Excessive movement.
- Complex plots.
- Overlapping sounds or rapid speech.

Staff action

✅ Pre-screen all content.
✅ Use trusted educational resources only.
✅ Block access to public video platforms where possible.
❌ Do not stream content directly without checking it first.

5. Consider safeguarding risks

Staff remain responsible for safeguarding when children use digital devices.

Staff action

✅ Check content before use.
✅ Ensure children cannot access other content unintentionally.
✅ Follow school filtering, monitoring and online safety procedures.
✅ Minimise photographs and videos of children and share them securely.
✅ Follow the school's mobile phone and personal device policy.

6. Do not use screens for behaviour management

The DfE specifically advises against using screens to:

- Occupy children.
- Manage transitions.
- Calm upset children.
- Manage behaviour.

This can affect children's ability to develop self-regulation skills.

Staff action

✅ Use established behaviour and emotional regulation strategies.
✅ Support children through interactions with adults.
❌ Do not use videos or devices as rewards or distractions.

7. Protect sleep, play and social interaction

Screen use should not replace:

- Outdoor play.
- Physical activity.
- Story time.
- Social interaction.
- Sleep and rest opportunities.

Staff action

✅ Create screen-free areas.
✅ Avoid screens at mealtimes.
✅ Avoid screens within an hour of sleep or rest periods.
✅ Never leave screens running in the background.

8. SEND considerations

The guidance recognises that screen-based assistive technologies can be beneficial and sometimes essential for children with SEND or communication needs. Screen-time limits do not apply to assistive technologies used for communication and accessibility.

Staff action

✅ Assess individual needs.

✅ Use assistive technology where it supports inclusion, communication or participation.

✅ Apply professional judgement on a case-by-case basis.

9. Working with parents

Schools and settings should work in partnership with parents to promote healthy screen habits.

Staff action

✅ Share the school's approach to screen use.

✅ Explain why screen use is limited.

✅ Offer practical advice sensitively and without judgement.

✅ Provide information on recommended limits and alternatives to screen-based activities. BDSIP's Screen Time Guidance for Under 5s can be downloaded and shared with parents.

Recommended School Expectations

Schools may wish to adopt the following principles:

1. Screen use is limited and purposeful.
2. Every screen activity has a clear educational rationale.
3. Children are actively engaged and supported by an adult.
4. Content is pre-approved and age appropriate.
5. Safeguarding and online safety requirements apply at all times.
6. Screens are not used for behaviour management or childcare convenience.
7. Screen-free environments are prioritised.
8. Reasonable adjustments are made for children requiring assistive technology.

Staff Reflection Checklist

Before using a screen, ask:

- Is screen use necessary?
- Is there a non-screen alternative?
- What learning objective will it support?
- How will adults interact with children during the activity?
- Is the content age-appropriate and safe?
- How will children remain active and engaged?
- Are there any safeguarding concerns?

Examples of Replacing Screen-Based Activities with EYFS-Friendly Alternatives

Instead of...	Consider...	Why it is better
Watching a story being read on YouTube or a whiteboard	Adult-led storytelling using books, props, puppets or story sacks	Provides responsive interaction, questioning, eye contact, language development and shared attention.
Singing along to nursery rhyme videos	Practitioner-led singing, actions, instruments and circle-time songs	Encourages participation, movement and social interaction.
Watching an educational video about minibeasts	Outdoor bug hunts, handling models, magnifying glasses and non-fiction books	Provides real-world experiences and active exploration.
Using interactive phonics apps	Magnetic letters, sound hunts, sound baskets and oral blending games	Develops phonological awareness through hands-on learning.
Number games on tablets	Counting objects, number trails, dice games and block play	Builds mathematical understanding through concrete experiences.
Watching exercise or movement videos	Teacher-led movement sessions, dance, yoga, obstacle courses or outdoor games	Promotes physical development without relying on screens.
Digital colouring activities	Drawing, painting, mark-making and collage	Develops fine motor skills more effectively.
Watching videos about people who help us	Visitors from the community, role play areas and small-world play	Creates meaningful, memorable learning experiences.
Online matching or sorting games	Sorting real objects by colour, shape, size or function	Encourages sensory exploration and problem solving.
Watching a virtual farm tour	Visiting a local farm or using small-world animals and photographs	Provides richer experiential learning where possible.
Screen-based emotion activities	Emotion cards, puppets, mirrors, role play and talking circles	Supports self-regulation and communication skills.
Using videos to occupy children during transitions	Action songs, finger rhymes, counting games or "I Spy" activities	Keeps children engaged while maintaining interaction.

Common Situations Where Schools May Need to Change Practice

Situation	Instead of:	Consider:
Wet Playtimes	Putting a film or television programme on.	• Storytelling. • Board games. • Construction challenges. • Singing games. • Drawing activities. • Small-world play.
Before Home Time	Playing cartoons while children wait.	• Rhymes and songs. • Reflection on the day's learning. • Shared story time. • Quiet table-top activities.
Settling Children After Lunch	Using a calming video.	• Mindfulness activities. • Relaxing music without visuals. • Story time. • Breathing exercises. • Quiet conversation. *This aligns with the DfE recommendation not to use screens to calm children or manage behaviour.*
Whole-Class Teaching Inputs	Showing lengthy video clips.	• Using a single image or photograph as a discussion stimulus. • Demonstrating with real objects. • Using puppets and role play. • Bringing artefacts into the classroom.
Managing Transitions	Screen-based activities to keep children occupied.	• Counting games. • Action rhymes. • Singing. • Turn-taking language games. • Physical challenges. *The guidance specifically advises against using screens simply to occupy children during transitions.*