Written Evidence provided to the Education Committee
Screen Time: Impacts on education and wellbeing

Written evidence submitted on behalf of the Small Steps Big Changes Partnership by
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1. Introduction to Small Steps Big Changes

[Small Steps Big Changes (SSBC)](#) is funded through The National Lottery Community Fund's ['A Better Start' Programme](#), which received a 10-year investment (2015—2025) to improve the life chances of babies and very young children. SSBC utilises a test-and-learn approach to support the improvement of social and emotional development, communication and language, and nutrition outcomes amongst 0—4-year-old children in four ethnically diverse wards in Nottingham City. SSBC is a partnership programme, which includes parents, health providers, early years, early help, academics, and community and voluntary sector providers.

SSBC's core principle is 'Children at the heart, parents leading the way, supported and guided by experts.' The SSBC programme acknowledges parents and primary caregivers as a child's most important teacher and supports parents from pregnancy up to their child's fourth birthday. For children, this is critical period of development that lays the foundation for their health and wellbeing across their lifespan.

SSBC is well-placed to share evidence around screentime because of the learning from its programme activity, including the commissioning of online resources for families to support learning in the home environment, as well as the commissioning of speech, language and communication services for babies and young children.

SSBC addresses three of the questions raised by the call for evidence "Screen Time: Impacts on education and wellbeing".

1. What is the current understanding of how screen time can support and impact children's development and educational outcomes, including the effect on concentration and behaviour?
2. What is the current understanding of how screen time can support or impact children's wellbeing and mental health, including the use of social media?
3. How can schools and parents be better supported to manage children's screen usage, for example, through age-related guidance? Could the Department for Education be doing more in this area?

2. What is the current understanding of how screen time can support and impact children's development and educational outcomes, including the effect on concentration and behaviour?

2.1 Positive parent-child interactions improve children's outcomes. Online resources can model such interactions, with a view that parents then adapt these at home to support their child's learning. More research is needed to understand how engagement by parents/caregivers and their

children with online resources can foster positive parent-child interactions.[1]
Research indicates that screen time can have positive, neutral or negative effects on infants' cognition, depending on the context. This context includes various factors, such as behaviour of the parent/caregiver during screen time, age-appropriateness of the watched content, interactivity of the screen, and whether the screen is being watched or is in the background.[2,3]

2.2 The SSBC programme has made various online resources available that aim to provide high-quality content to families with babies and young children in Nottingham.

    2.2.1 The SSBC commissioned National Literacy Trust Nottingham has published "Fantastic Phonics", a series of online videos for parents to find out more about phonics. Most adults weren't taught to read with phonics and aren't familiar with how phonics work. This can make things confusing for the parents and their child as they read and learn together at home. The video series thus aims to empower parents to support their child's literacy development.

    2.2.2 During Covid restrictions SSBC also commissioned a local artist, Sojo Animation, to produce an online video series. SoJo videos aimed to help families with fun and educational activities to do at home at a time. Each episode included stories, songs, low-cost craft ideas, animations and lots of puppets. These videos offered an opportunity for families to keep engaged with the SSBC programme at a time when face-to-face contact was not possible.

    2.2.3 SSBC partnered with the parenting app, EasyPeasy, to support children aged 0-5 across Nottingham to learn through play. The EasyPeasy app brings together ideas, advice and inspiration from a global community of parents, experts and well-known early year brands that families can try out in every day settings. Content is tailored to the child's age and topics of interest, with an emphasis on real-world interactions between parent and child. Findings from previous efficacy trials of the EasyPeasy app showed some promising results in terms of children's outcomes, and a group of parents receiving EasyPeasy reported improvements in the home learning environment.[4] Nottingham families were able to activate free, premium access to the app for the duration of one year. However, despite several streams of marketing activity across different platform, downloads of the app were limited. As for people who did download the app, ongoing engagement with the app was low.

2.3 In supporting learning at home via online resources, potential adverse impacts from these digital technologies on inequalities need to be considered. Families from poorer backgrounds may have reduced access to technological devices and the internet. Lower levels of numeracy and literacy can make it harder for parents to engage with online resources that aim to support their child's learning.[5]

2.4 Nearly 40% of Nottingham children do not reach the expected level in communication, language and literacy areas of learning in reception year. SSBC commissions the award-winning Nottinghamshire Healthcare NHS Foundation Trust's Early Intervention Speech and Language Team (EISLT) to provide speech and language services to help address this local need.[6] The Early Intervention Speech and Language Team targets families with children aged nine months to four years in the four SSBC wards. Their services aim to model language-supporting strategies to parents and coach parents to successfully adopt these strategies as part of their daily routines.

2.5 Based on their work with families with babies and very young children, staff members of the EISLT describe the following experiences related to screen time and its effect on children's concentration and behaviour.

    2.5.1 All children supported by the EISLT appear to have some screen time.

    2.5.2 When children have been watching screens right before a session, it can be difficult to capture children's attention and get them to engage with the EISLT staff.

    2.5.3 Some children become distressed when they do not have access to a screen. If the attention of the staff member shifts away from the child to the parent, for example, to discuss a leaflet, some children will cry for a phone or TV. Staff notice they make adjustments to prevent children from becoming distressed. One staff member mentioned she now books in the next appointment with parents before rather than after tidying the toys away, as some children otherwise become upset and want screen time to occupy them.

    2.5.4 Staff have the impression that screen time is affecting the attention span of children and their ability to engage in independent play. This observation is supported by research, which finds that excessive screen time in children can be associated with attention problems.[7]

3. What is the current understanding of how screen time can support or impact children's wellbeing and mental health, including the use of social media?

3.1 As discussed in section 2, online resources can provide a means of reaching families with babies and young children with support and ideas to improve children's learning at home.

3.2 It is important, however, to weigh benefits and risks associated with screen time. Research has evidenced the correlation between children's screen time and adverse health outcome, such as sleep problems, depression and anxiety.[8,9,10]

3.3 Staff from the EISLT have expressed concern that young children's screen time is taking away time for other life experiences that are known to benefit their development and wellbeing. For example, children are often sedentary when watching screens, while physical activity is known to have a positive correlation with the development of motor skills.[11]

4. How can schools and parents be better supported to manage children's screen usage, for example, through age-related guidance? Could the Department for Education be doing more in this area?

4.1 According to guidelines by the World Health Organisation, screen time is not recommended for infants under one year old. For one-year-olds, sedentary screen time (such as watching TV or videos, playing computer games) is not recommended. For those aged two to four years old, sedentary screen time should be no more than one hour with the advice that less is better.[12]

4.2 Based on their work with families with babies and very young children, staff members of the EISLT describe the following experiences when it comes to supporting parents to manage their children's screen usage.

4.3 In a context where parents feel public scrutiny and judgment around children's screen time, alongside the EISLT's impression that some parents appear feel shame or guilt around their child needing SLC support, it is difficult to get a clear view on how much screen time children are having.

4.4 Due to screen time being a sensitive topic, the EISLT do not discuss screen time in group sessions but only in one-to-one contact with families after a trusting relationship has already been built in previous sessions.

4.5 Parents accessing the EISLT's services may already have concerns about their child's speech and language. It is important to empower parents and not make them feel guilty or judged regarding their screen time use. Research supports recommendations to limit screen time, to provide high quality programming and co-view when possible.[13] In practice, the EISLT supports parents with their child's screen time usage by exploring any misconception parents may have around screen time and discussing how parents mediate their child's screen usage.

4.5.1 The EISLT discusses limitation rather than prohibition of children's screen time with parents. Parents generally find no screen time not realistically achievable. Limiting the places where the child has screen time, for example only using the TV at home and not a smartphone, can help reduce screen time use.

4.5.2   In their experience, parents often give different answers when asked how much television children are watching, compared to how often the television is on in the background. It is thus important for any screen time recommendations to be considerate of the potential interpretations of them by parents[14] and ensure that the advice is clear. It would be helpful for guidance to make suggestions to parents to still improve behaviours around screen time if complete adherence to the recommendations is not achievable. The EISLT advises families to minimise background television, or, if this is difficult for the family, to turn the sound off. Research has shown ways in which chronic exposure to television may have a negative impact on children's development. Background television negatively impacts on the toy play behaviour of very young children and is correlated with significantly reduced toy play episode length as well as focused attention during play.[15] Background television also decreases the quantity and quality of parent-child interaction.[16]

4.5.3   The EISLT emphasises that parents/caregivers and not screens are best-placed to support children's learnings.[17] Staff give evidence-based information and highlight that interaction is key to children's language learning. The EISLT encounters misconceptions from parents about their child acquiring language from screen time. For example, when asked what helped their child to talk so far, some parents would answer television. Likewise, when asked if they do nursery rhymes, parents may say yes because they watch them on YouTube. The EISLT also shared that some videos might be disheartening for parents, as they potentially view themselves as less effective teachers than these videos. This highlights the importance of increasing parental knowledge, skills and confidence in supporting their child's language by means of interventions that teach, model and coach parents on the use of language supporting strategies.

4.5.4   The impression by the EISLT is that parents joining children while watching screens is quite limited. Families may benefit from guidance that highlights the benefit of adult caregivers co-viewing content with their child. Watching together with the child gives parents the opportunity to interact with their child and support their child's learning from the content[18] and helps parents to manage safe screen from moderated channels.

4.5.5   Creators of media for babies and young children as well as parents may also benefit from guidance around what makes content high-quality. A pilot study has suggested key evidence-based principles for selecting or designing screen media for young children against which the educational quality of YouTube videos created for young children can be assessed. These are age appropriateness, content quality, design features and learning objectives.[19]

4.5.6   The team raises awareness of more beneficial uses of screen time such as video calls with family members[20] or watching videos that can teach the family elements which the

parents can then incorporate in their own play with their child to support their child's development, such as nursery rhymes[21] and story lines.[22]

4.6 In an increasingly digital world, it is important to inform and support parents in behaviours that mitigate adverse effects of children's screen time.[23] For example, more screen time at age two is associated with lower scores in communication at age four, but outdoor play has been shown to reduce this potential risk of screen time on communication development.[24]

5. Conclusion

5.1 Digital resources provide a potential pathway to reach families with babies and young children and support and promote positive parent-child interactions. More research is needed to understand how this can be done in the most positively impactful way.

5.2 It is important to advise and support families in protecting their children from potential adverse effects of screen time.

5.3 SSBC recommends that guidance around screen time is evidence-based, non-judgmental and formulated in a supportive, realistic way so that parents do not feel successful management of children's screen time is an 'all-or-nothing' matter.

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