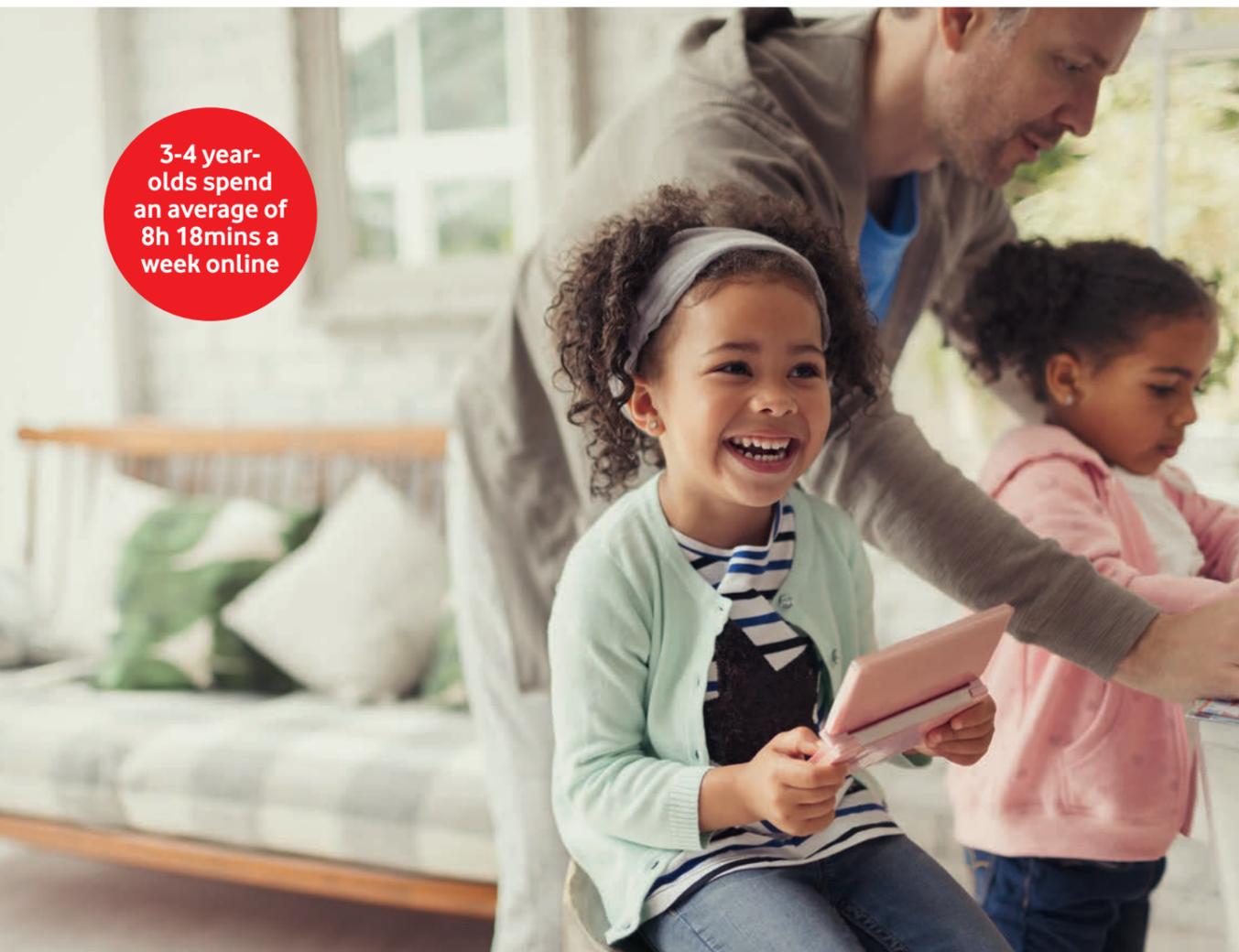**3-4 year-olds spend an average of 8h 18mins a week online**

Quality is key

As part of a research project for the London School of Economics and Political Science, **Sonia Livingstone** and **Alicia Blum-Ross** have been speaking to parents about the controversial issue of screen time. Here's what they've learned

In our research with parents, we've been struck that, no matter how different their family circumstances are, parents nearly all watch the clock when it comes to their children's screen time. Whatever the activity, be it chatting with friends, downloading music, doing homework or Skyping Granny, parents lump it together as 'screen time' — and then worry about it.

What should parents do?
The original 'rules' concerning screen time from the American Academy of Pediatrics were heavy-handed and included no screen time at all for under-2s, but this has now been revised.

Today, many experts agree that it isn't the amount of time with media that's important, but the quality of the time spent.

Nor do they agree that digital media is always harmful and needs to be restricted, or that allowing children screen time makes someone a bad parent.

Although research shows that when parents restrict internet use, their children are exposed to fewer risks, it also indicates that they miss out on opportunities.

If you are open to improving your own digital skills, and don't allow yourself to be scared off by technology, you will be better able to support your children when they do (inevitably) run into some form of trouble.

Talk with your kids about what they are doing, learning or struggling with, rather than simply telling them to 'turn it off'. Encourage their interests and try to understand them yourself by asking questions, or joining in, with what they're doing.

Screen time and children with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)
For some families, digital media provides a safe place to play when safety in the world outside isn't guaranteed. We interviewed families with children with special educational needs, and found that:
● Parents and children turn to digital media for a variety of reasons, including much-valued respite and calm
● Parents, siblings and children with special educational needs can play games together, providing opportunities to enjoy and engage
● Assistive technology, like digital Picture Exchange Communication Systems (PECS), helps many families with children with special needs participate in family life.

What you can do

Ask yourself the following questions:
1 Do you think what your child is looking at on their screen is imaginative, or provides opportunities for them to learn or be creative?
2 Does it affirm your child's own culture or, perhaps, introduce them to other lives and experiences?
3 Is your child responding positively — perhaps with concentration, or play, or social interaction, or thoughtful questions?

Screen 'time' is not created equal, but varies enormously by the context of how it is used, the content that is engaged with, and the connections it fosters (or fails to). Helping parents keep sight of this, and helping them balance their hopes and fears, is what really matters.

TOP TIP

How much is too much?
Rather than timing how long your child spends on screen, consider their screen use in the wider context of their life.
Ask yourself, is your child:
● Eating and sleeping enough
● Physically healthy
● Connecting socially with friends and family — whether with technology or not
● Engaged in and doing well at school
● Enjoying and pursuing hobbies and interests — again, whether with technology or not

Find out more at **www.parenting.digital**

The LSE has produced an infographic for parents on the positive use of screen time. It includes learning to code, watching educational videos, and even playing video games, which can help reading and writing skills, with the average text in popular video games being four grades higher than the text in newspapers. View the PDF at:
www.dmlcentral.net/screen-time-kids-getting-balance-right

Are you a tech role model?

How can parents help their children to control their tech time if we struggle to control our own, asks Parent Zone CEO, Vicki Shotbolt

My phone is my alarm clock and, with a teenage son, I like to have it close at all times so that if he gets stuck late at night, I can spring into action and kick his dad out of bed to pick him up.

I also have my phone beside me when I watch television, and it's in my pocket when I walk the dog.

But, like many parents, I worry that technology has become too big a part of my family life. And not just about the amount of time my son spends online — the amount that I do, too.

According to Ofcom research, two-thirds of adults with social media accounts are checking them more than once a day, increasing to 85% of 16-24-year-olds. We spend more than 21 hours a week on the internet. It's a bit like chocolate — we know we're having more than we should, but it's really hard to cut back.

Yet, although we might feel guilty about the amount of time we spend on technology, it is fundamentally a wonderful thing for families. So how do we deal with the guilt and resume control?

Do your children ever ask you to put your device down? Have you ever found yourself not really listening to what your child is saying because you're looking at your phone?

Your children will see how you use technology and they will copy you, disregarding any guidance you give them if they see that the rules you set for them are different to the standards you set for yourself.

Here are some simple steps to make sure tech doesn't nudge out some of the other things that make family life special.
1 Turn off notifications to avoid that constant 'ping'
2 Use an alarm clock so you don't have devices in the bedroom
3 Keep your phone on silent in your pocket or bag when you pick the kids up from school
4 Not all families eat meals at the dinner table, so a 'no phones at the table' rule won't work for everyone — try a 'no phones between 6 and 7pm' rule instead
5 Some radical folks have family tech-free days

"Have you ever found yourself not really listening to what your child is saying because you're looking at your phone?"