



Triple threat of too much screen time

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A GENERATION ago the worst threat to a television-loving child was developing "square eyes".

Today, a child who spends too much time in front of the television or computer is at higher risk of becoming overweight or obese and potentially facing a lifetime of health problems.

Numerous studies in Australia and overseas have shown a direct link between obesity and too much time spent in front of a television screen.

A senior psychologist with the Children's Hospital at Westmead's Weight Management Program, Gerri Minshall, said excessive screen time posed a triple threat to children.

"You're more likely to eat in front of the TV, you're exposed to greater food marketing and you're not moving for a long period of time," she said. "Nothing else is as easy to do for three or four hours."

Health experts recommend children spend no more than two hours of leisure time before a screen each day. Data from the 2010 NSW Schools Physical Activity and Nutrition Survey, however, showed more than half of primary school children and three-quarters of high schoolers exceeded this limit.

"People worry so much about cyberbullying but there are physical

repercussions of spending too much time on the computer as well as mental repercussions," Ms Minshall said.

A senior policy adviser with the Obesity Policy Coalition, Jane Martin, said children who spent an excessive amount of time on the computer or watching television were exposed to more marketing, much of it subliminal.

"In the case of programs like *Junior MasterChef* and *It's a Knock-out*, the marketing is embedded in the show," Ms Martin said. "It's quite subtle."

Similarly, websites marketing food to children, such as McDonald's Happy Meals and Paddle Pops, tempt young people with games and competitions.

"It's about repeat visits, it's about keeping the children on for as long as they can... They don't realise they are being sold to."

Thirty per cent of Australians now subscribe to pay TV, which offers a slew of dedicated children's channels, while 72 per cent of homes have a computer – offering a plethora of viewing possibilities.

"When today's adults were kids, there weren't as many screens around," Ms Minshall said. "How much *Simon Townsend's Wonder World* could you watch?"

"Now kids have so many options why would they ever go outside?"