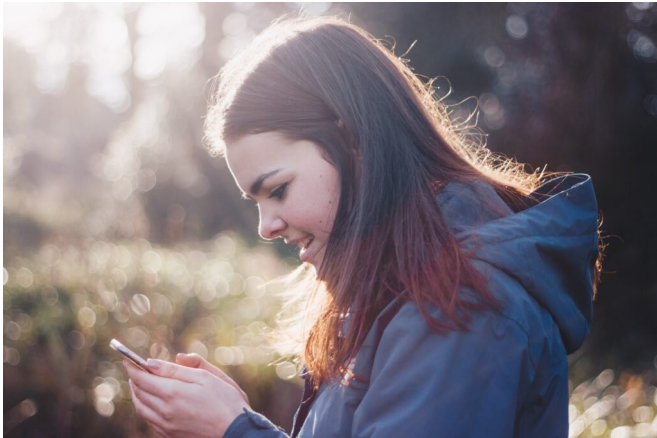


# Teens who participate in extracurriculars, get less screen time, have better mental health

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Credit: Luke Porter/Unsplash

A new study from UBC researchers finds that teens, especially girls, have better mental health when they spend more time taking part in extracurricular activities, like sports and art, and less time in front of screens.

The study, published in the journal *Preventive Medicine*, found that spending less than two hours per day of recreational screen time (such as browsing the internet, playing video games, and using social media) was associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and optimism, and lower levels of anxiety and [depressive symptoms](#), especially among girls, the researchers found. Similarly, extracurricular participation was associated with better [mental health](#) outcomes.

"Although we conducted this study before the COVID-19 pandemic, the findings are especially relevant now when teens may be spending more time in front of screens in their free time if access to [extracurricular activities](#), like sports and arts

programs is restricted due to COVID-19," says the study's lead author Eva Oberle, assistant professor with the Human Early Learning Partnership in the UBC school of population and public health. "Our findings highlight extracurricular activities as an asset for teens' mental wellbeing. Finding safe ways for children and teens to continue to participate in these activities during current times may be a way to reduce screen time and promote mental health and wellbeing."

Data for this study was drawn from a population-level survey involving 28,712 Grade 7 students from 365 schools in 27 school districts across B.C. The researchers examined recreational screen time such as playing video games, watching television, browsing the internet, as well as participating in outdoor extracurricular activities such as sport and art programs after school. They then compared its association with positive and negative mental health indicators.

Highlights of the study's findings include the following:

- Adolescents who participated in extracurricular activities were significantly less likely to engage in recreational screen-based activities for two or more hours after school
- Taking part in extracurricular activities was associated with higher levels of life satisfaction and optimism, and lower levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms
- Longer screen time (more than two hours a day) was associated with lower levels of life satisfaction and optimism, and higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms
- Differences among boys and girls, with longer screen time negatively affecting girls' mental health more significantly than boys

- Among both boys and girls, however, mental health was strongest when teens both participated in extracurricular activities and spent less than two hours on screen time

Oberle says further research is needed to examine why the negative effects of screen time were more detrimental for girls than for boys. She also hopes to focus future research on the effects of different types of screen time.

"We do know that some forms of screen [time](#) can be beneficial, like maintaining connections with friends and [family members](#) online if we cannot see them in person, but there are other types of [screen time](#) that can be quite harmful," she says. "There are many nuances that are not well understood yet and that are important to explore."

**More information:** Eva Oberle et al, Screen time and extracurricular activities as risk and protective factors for mental health in adolescence: A population-level study, *Preventive Medicine* (2020). [DOI: 10.1016/j.ypmed.2020.106291](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ypmed.2020.106291)

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