50 things to do

Less Screen Time More Play Time

Screen time and early childhood development

Practitioner Perspectives



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Introduction

Although screens have long been a part of early childhood, since at least the widespread adoption of televisions by the early 1960s, in more recent years there has been a fundamental shift in just how prevalent they have become in the early years of a child's life.

Today, alongside TVs, you'll likely find in the average home an array of devices, from computers and laptops to tablets, smartphones and handheld gaming consoles.

Meaning screens are now a fundamental part of the early years of a child's life that would have been beyond anyone's imagination even at the turn of the 21st century. As one respondent put it: "We have never before seen such a change in children's development since the introduction of IT/screens."

For practitioners, the consequences of this seismic shift are beginning to show up in early years settings everyday and in increasing numbers, whether it's in how children communicate, how long they can concentrate for, the way in which they play and how they cope when things don't go their way.

"Having worked with young children for 15 years, I have observed that some children who appear to have had greater exposure to screens experience more difficulties with speech and language, maintaining attention and regulating their emotions," one of the practitioners told us.

"In some cases, children also adopt speech patterns and accents from the content they regularly watch. From my professional experience, these differences have become much more apparent over the course of my career."

The evidence and the public conversation around this are catching up and everyone from local authority leaders and government departments to educators, practitioners, researchers and clinicians are paying even more attention to the impact that unregulated and unsupervised screen time is having on young children and families.

And what's clear is that there is a real need for practical, non-judgemental ideas, guidance and tools to address this growing challenge. Given the unique role that early years practitioners play in the lives of young families, they are among some of the best placed professionals to begin to move the needle.

This report sets out to understand how ready they are.

Introduction

Drawing on a survey of more than 120 practitioners and carried out throughout 2026 by 50 Things To Do, an initiative of Birth to 19's Institute for the Early Years, it shines a spotlight on what areas of development and learning practitioners believe screens are affecting, whether they feel they have the knowledge and resources to support families and how confident they are talking to families about screen time along with the challenges they experience.

What emerges is a workforce that sees the problem clearly, wants to act and is asking for the support to do so with confidence.

Section 1

Nearly every practitioner sees it: screens are negatively affecting children's development and learning

According to our survey, most practitioners agreed that screens had a significantly negative impact on the learning and development of the children they work with.

It was highest among practitioners who didn't use 50 Things To Do, with 62.7% responding that the detrimental effect was to a great extent, compared to 57.5% of respondents who did use 50 Things To Do.

Factoring in practitioners who marked "a little" on the survey, the negative impact of screens rose to 97.2% for 50 Things To Do users and 94.9% for non-users, suggesting that the concern about the impact of unregulated screen use in childhood is almost universal in the sector.

Those who responded "not at all" were a significant minority.

This agreement among practitioners reflects wider and growing concerns about the impact unregulated screen use is having on young children not just in the UK but more broadly across the globe, too.

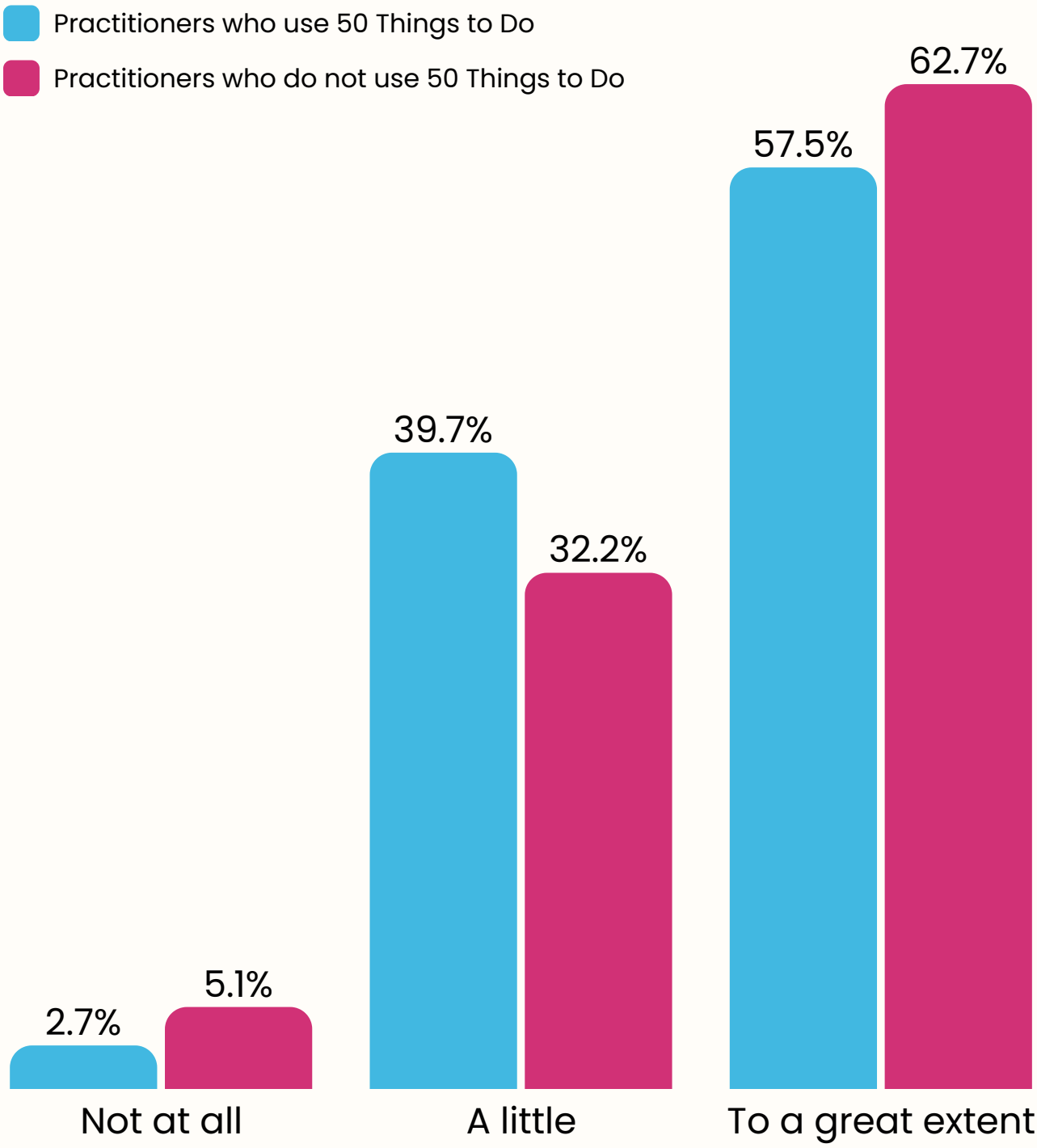
For instance, The Lancet in a recent editorial prefacing a series on the digital determinants of health, argued that "governing digital technologies … will be a defining public health challenge of the 21st century", with young people and adolescents described as being "a population at particular risk".

Meanwhile, researchers at the University of Calgary described high screen time as not only being associated with lower overall academic achievement and poorer language development, but that the "effect sizes are similar in magnitude to or larger than … socioeconomic status, parenting behaviour and preterm birth."

Similar conclusions were reached by the charitable foundation Kindred Squared in its 2025 School Readiness Survey, which was released at the start of the year. In just 12 months, it stated, the number of "school ready" children starting reception had declined significantly (37% were not ready in 2025 compared to 33% in 2024).

"Primary school staff attribute children's use of electronic devices as the single biggest factor impacting on school readiness," the report stated. "In contrast, only a third of parents agree that children are spending too much time on screens."

Are screens having a negative impact on the development of children you work with?



Section 2

From language to attention, screens are leaving their mark on all aspects of early development

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“Children struggle with their emotions, their speech is very poor, they don't seem to have any concept of turn taking.”

Section 2 - Practitioner observations

"Children [appear] less interested in normal everyday activities - finding life boring."

"A lot of imaginary play can be seen around phones, taking photos and watching tablets."

"Pupils are less confident with physical development type activities due to fewer experiences."

"Lack of imaginative play, no concentration, addictive behaviour."

Section 3

Confident but not fully equipped: practitioners want more help with screen time

While our survey revealed that practitioners overall feel like they have the knowledge and resources needed to help families reduce the amount of time they spend behind a screen, most of the respondents said that they didn't feel fully equipped to be able support parents or carers.

Only 17.8% of practitioners who use 50 Things To Do in their work responded "definitely" to the question about knowledge and resources, compared to 69.9% who responded "somewhat" (the numbers for practitioners who didn't yet use 50 Things To Do were 52.5% and 11.9% respectively).

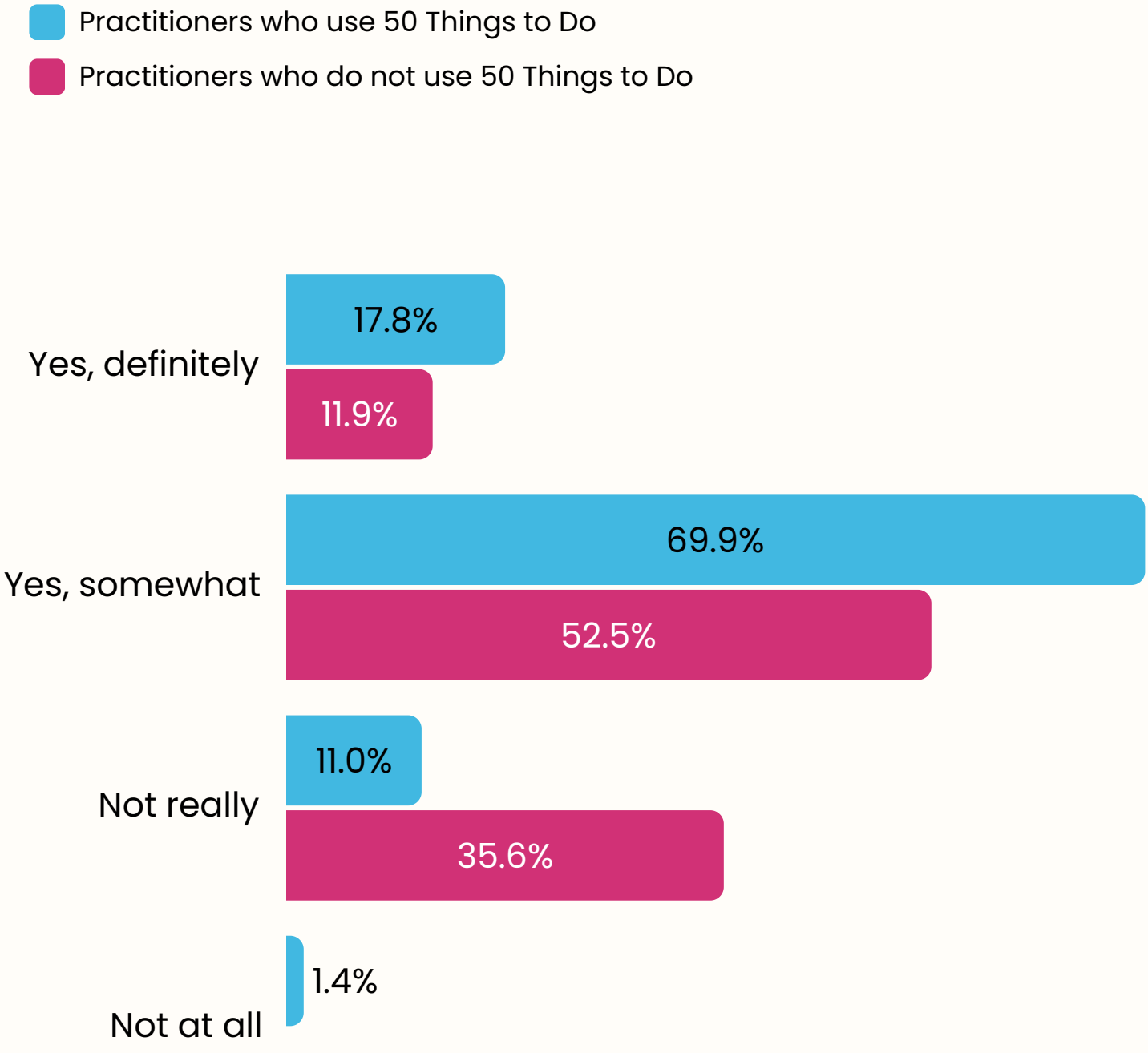
Interestingly, there was a sizable difference between the two groups when it came to acknowledging a gap in knowledge and access to resources. Our data suggested that non-users of 50 Things were more likely to feel that they didn't have all the insights, materials and tools needed to help families make positive changes to screen use than users of 50 Things (35.6% versus 11% for "not really").

When asked what helps them support change and what would help them bolster their work in helping families navigate their way around screens more positively, practitioners pointed to more research and evidence, more guidance and training, more support around parental education and engagement, and more tools and ideas for alternative activities and approaches.

"More research is needed so we can provide parents with the knowledge surrounding screentime," urged one of the practitioners. "Otherwise they do not listen. "More resources/tools we can share with parents to underpin our narrative is [also] needed."

"Top tips [and] activity ideas in short bursts with easily accessible, free or cheap resources would be useful along with short links to child development benefits," suggested another, with one respondent advising on "educating parents on the correct usage of screen time," explaining that messaging and approaches had to be geared towards reducing screen time and improving the quality of it.

Do you feel you have the knowledge and resources to support families in reducing children's screen use where appropriate?



Section 3 - Practitioner observations

"Rather than saying, 'don't use screens', suggesting fun, beneficial activities to try that will hopefully be bonding and interesting and will begin to redirect families away from screen time."

"I feel with statistics and backed up evidence from the negative impact of screen time, we would be able to educate our parents."

"It's important to not sound 'preachy'. Find the right opportunity, acknowledge that we all probably use our screens more than we should and maybe draw on personal experience."

"Having a good strong positive relationship with our families allows us to be honest and offer advice without parents feeling judged, attacked or targeted."

“Parents think TV can be educational, so it can be difficult to explain that children need real life situations, stories and play.”

Section 4

Most practitioners experience tricky screen time conversations

Challenges were a common experience for practitioners when they brought up children's screen time use with families, especially for respondents who didn't use 50 Things To Do (76.2% c ompared to 60.3% overall, 18.6% versus 9.6% for definite responses).

This highlights the fact that having conversations with parents around screen use remains a difficult area for practitioners to navigate. That said, it can also be said that having a play-based offer as a realistic alternative to screens can help to take pressures, concerns and fears out of the conversation – which shows no signs of abating.

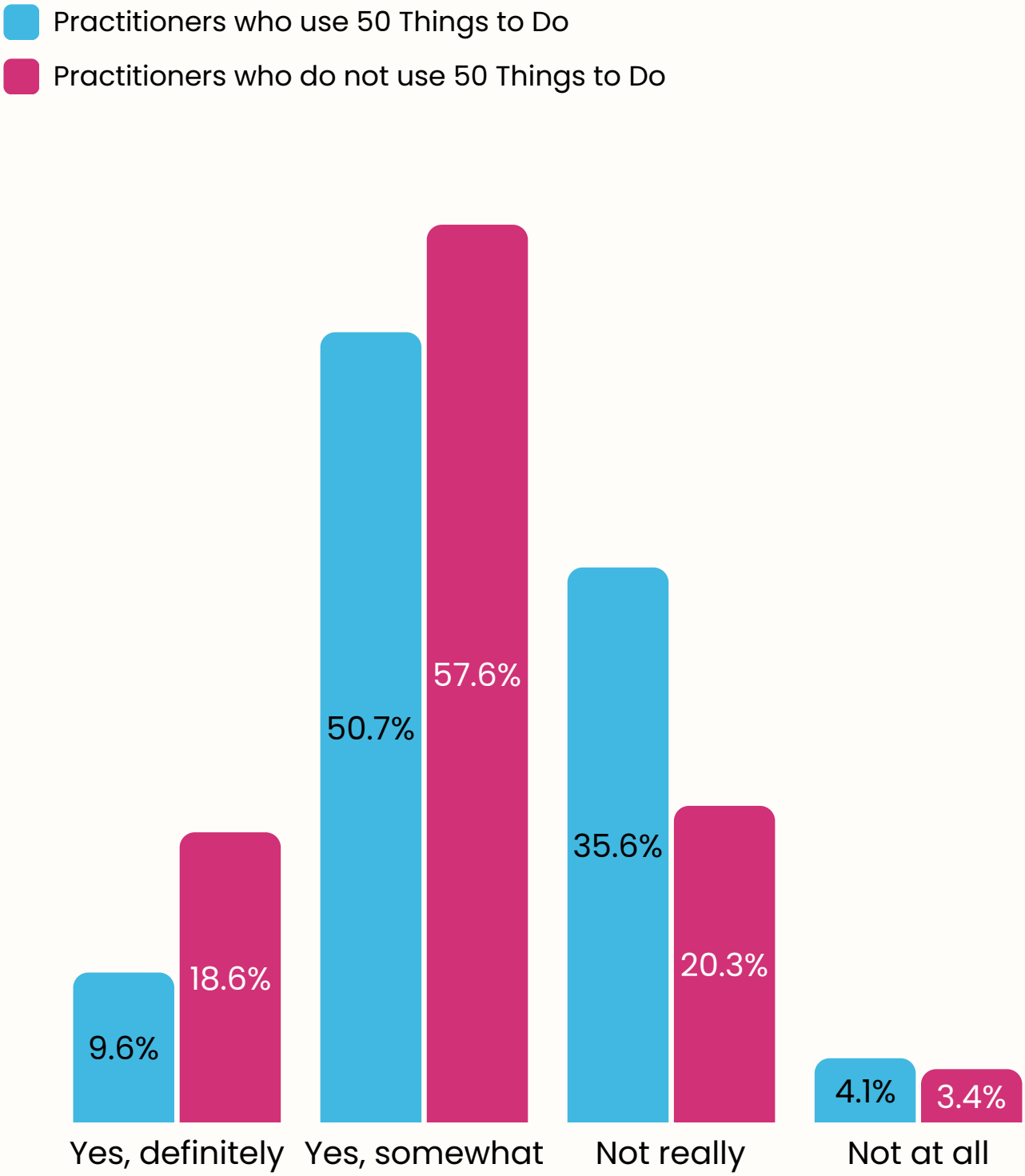
"Parents do not always understand the severity of too much screen time," one of the respondents explained when asked about the kinds of challenges they faced. It was a view shared by another:

"Some families need lots of support to understand the impacts of too much screen time. It's an easy tool to keep children quiet and all their friends are doing the same thing so it's very normalised."

There was also plenty of sympathy and understanding among respondents about the complexities around screen use in families. As one respondent commented, "parents have a lot of pressures on them currently with cost of living and working pressures". And as another revealed, "parents find it 'useful' like a babysitter. Many parents play it down or are in denial about usage".

A lot of these comments reflect some of the findings from the growing evidence base around screen use in young children. For instance, one paper from 2025 described how "family stress and reduced parental capacity for active engagement" was linked to a "greater reliance on screen-based 'babysitting'", while another reported how 24% of parents of 3–5-year-olds struggled to manage their child's screen time.

Do you experience challenges when talking with families about children's screen use?



"Most [parents] know they might be too heavily reliant and would like help, but it is only through fostering good relationships that it's possible for them to trust you and listen to your advice."

"Parents just seem unaware of the impact. They share openly about giving into their child's demands and cannot see how standing firm and regulating screen time is better in the long run. Parents are happy to listen and we are confident to explain, however I am not sure it has much impact."

"Parents are not always honest as they feel judged."

"Habits are being set at a really young age and products available on the market support this – e.g. strollers with a device pocket in the hood for babies to watch videos. This is a crazy concept when infants and toddlers should be looking at the world around them with their trusted adult."

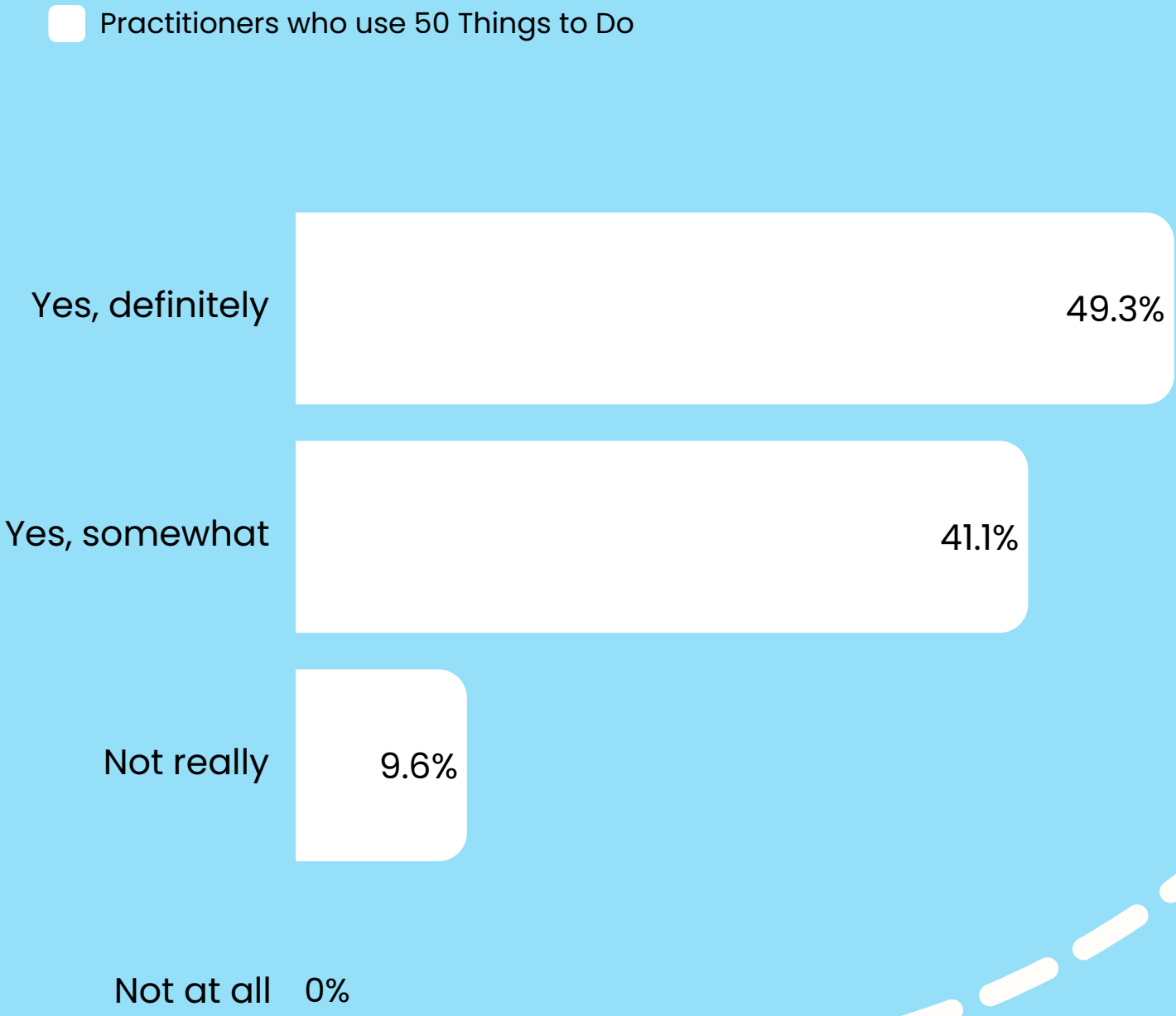
“Parents use devices to entertain children when they are busy, so may not always like your response or ideas as it does not fit in with their lifestyles.”



Section 5

50 Things makes the screen time conversation easier

Do you feel that 50 Things to Do Before You're Five makes it easier for you to talk with families about screen use and to confidently suggest screen-free activities?



Section 5

Respondents were significantly in agreement that 50 Things To Do makes it easier for them to not only have conversations with families about screen use but to also have the confidence to suggest screen-free activities designed to improve the home learning environment.

Over 90% of practitioners said that they felt this way, with 49.3% responding “definitely” and 41.1% responding “somewhat”. While that suggested the programme is working for almost half of users, it also revealed that there is ample room to make it even more helpful to a little over two fifths of practitioners who described the benefits in less absolute terms. There’s also 9.6% of respondents who use it who need markedly more convincing.

Because it matters. After all, practitioners are at the frontline of early years education and best placed to support families make positive changes to the way they use screens and how often.

Moreover, the issues around screen time are finally beginning to also make their way into the meeting rooms of policymakers and policy-influencers, demonstrating the need for more conversations and interventions around screen use in early childhood.

The government, for instance, announced new screen use guidance for early years providers earlier this year. It included a section titled, supporting parents and carers with their children’s screen use, with recommendations on “working in partnership” with families to promote “healthy screen use” and sharing information on “alternative activities to help reduce screen use”

Elsewhere, a systematic review carried out in 2023 concluded that future interventions in screen usage among developing children (0–5) should look to focus on factors “related to the physical environment (e.g., the presence of electronic devices in the bedroom) as well as on sociocultural factors (e.g. parental self-efficacy)”. Practitioners are some of the best placed professionals to lead this charge.

Conclusion

The findings in our report point in a clear direction – that practitioners overwhelmingly believe that screens are having a detrimental effect on the children they work with.

Almost all respondents to our survey – 97.3% of those who use 50 Things To Do and 94.9% of those who don't - told us that they had seen a negative impact on learning and development, with spoken language, attention and emotional self-regulation among the biggest concerns.

But those concerns don't necessarily translate into confidence. Most practitioners we spoke to said that they only feel "somewhat" equipped to support the families they work with. Similarly, most practitioners revealed that they often experienced challenges when having screen time conversations with parents (and even if they felt confident having these conversations). What they needed, they told us, was more evidence to share with parents, more guidance, more support and more practical and effective alternatives to screens.

"We need to give more support to parents, as some parents say they don't have enough time to sit down with their children," one of the respondents explained. "We need to support the parents in how to do so."

Yet concern doesn't automatically translate into confidence. Most practitioners said that they felt only "somewhat" equipped to support families, with most also finding conversations about screen time challenging experiences for a wide range of reasons.

"Parents are not always honest as they feel judged," as one respondent put it, while another noted that "Parents can be defensive". "Parents are stressed," went a further reflection.

In contrast, what practitioners asked for was fairly consistent: more evidence to share, more training and guidance, and practical, low-cost alternatives to screens.

This is where 50 Things To Do appears to be making a difference. Practitioners responding to our survey who used it in their work were generally more likely to feel that they had the knowledge, confidence and resources to help families .And over nine in ten users (90.4%) said it makes those conversations easier.

While these are associations rather than proof of cause and effect, the pattern was nevertheless encouraging – with plenty of room for improvement, too (41.1% of respondents, for instance, responded "somewhat" when asked if 50 Things To Do makes it easier to talk to families about screen time).

With the wider picture on screen time and early childhood shifting – 2026 feels, in a positive sense, like a breakthrough year – the case for action on this unique challenge has never been clearer and, increasingly, harder and harder to ignore.

Families need practical, non-judgmental support and limitless inspiration to rediscover – if not discover – the simple joy and brilliance of playful alternatives to tech. And practitioners are easily the best placed professionals to give it.

Our job is to make sure they have what they need to do so with confidence.

Because it's practitioners who will really make a difference to the growing screen time crisis, helping families make small but important changes that turn into lasting habits.

Elsewhere, an influential group of over 150 clinicians joined forces to write an open letter to both the education secretary and health secretary, highlighting the possible health risks of increased use of sx

Such is the growing recognition of the seriousness of unregulated screen time in young children, that the government announced that it had developed new advice for parents.

Responding to why it was publishing advice now, in March 2026, it said that over a thousand parents had delivered a clear message: "Families want practical, non-judgemental guidance on how much screen time is too much and how to limit any negative impact on their children.

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