



‘ACTIVE’ USE OF SCREENS

This strategy is suggested in the 11-14 BrainWaves lesson: **Protecting your wellbeing in a world of screens**

About the strategy

The growing scientific consensus is that how we use screens matters much more than how long we use them. The distinction between ‘active’ and ‘passive’ screen use has become a primary focus for mental health researchers. ‘Active screen use’ involves deliberately following your interests, connecting directly with others, learning, and creating things. This includes purposeful activities like messaging friends to make plans, video calling family, creating digital content, or watching online tutorials to learn a new skill. In contrast, ‘passive screen use’ involves mindlessly consuming whatever content is algorithmically fed to you with little personal thought or direction, such as scrolling endlessly or binge-watching videos because you cannot switch off.

The scientific evidence behind the strategy

A major cross-sectional study conducted using a large cohort of UK schoolchildren from the BrainWaves dataset (N = 6,820, average age 16.72) investigated how adolescent mental health correlates with underlying screen motives. Rather than treating screen time as a single monolith, the research distinguished between "avoidant-escapist" motives (using screens for boredom, distraction, procrastination, or out of habit) and "social-recreational" motives (using screens actively for socializing, entertainment, communication, and following interests).

The research revealed a distinct division in wellbeing outcomes:

- Avoidant-escapist (passive/habitual) use was strongly linked to poorer outcomes, showing a direct association with higher levels of anxiety and depressive symptoms, alongside lower overall wellbeing and resilience.
- Social-recreational (active) use was associated with more favourable outcomes, including lower anxiety and depressive symptoms, combined with significantly higher levels of general wellbeing and resilience.

Further reading

You can find further details about this study here: Lian, J., et al. (2026). *Motives of social media use are differentially associated with mental health outcomes in adolescents.*

https://osf.io/preprints/psyarxiv/jfs79_v1