

Nursery interviews probe screen-time habits

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A three-year-old's favourite character is more likely to be from a cartoon than a book.

An innocuous question about whether a child enjoys eating can sometimes elicit an answer that the child has to be given a phone to finish a meal.

Calcutta: Several schools, during conversations with parents as part of the nursery admission process, are trying to assess the screen time of three- and four-year-olds without directly asking parents how much time their children spend on devices.

A direct question about screen time is often met with a denial. However, as conversations progress, teachers pick up several clues that help them assess a child's dependence on devices.

"When parents come for a school interaction, they are usually proper and try to give politically correct answers. But it could be a different story at home. We try to strike up a conversation to find out whether a child



relies on a gadget to finish a meal or how often the child reads a book," said Loveleen Saigal, principal of Birla High School.

Schools try to create an informal and familiar setting for children by keeping toys and bookshelves in the interaction rooms.

If a child picks up a toy, teachers may ask questions about it — whether it is a character from a cartoon, where the child has seen it,

and when they last watched it. Such conversations can offer clues about a child's exposure to screens.

"There are many give-aways. We can see through the parents," said a teacher.

Some children, however, pick up a book because they are accustomed to seeing books at home, another teacher said.

Questions about how the family spends weekends can also elicit rehearsed

responses, such as playing cricket with the child or taking them to the zoo.

"Going to a play zone in a mall is often a more honest answer. Nobody would go to the zoo in this monsoon. We appreciate honest answers because they give us a window for discussion, which is more helpful than falsely representing things," said Sharmistha Dutta, associate head, junior school, Sri Sri Academy.

Teachers said they do not always need to ask direct questions. A child's behaviour can itself be revealing.

"The way they speak — children can pick up certain accents if they spend too much time watching videos on devices — or the way they jump around imitating characters can make it obvious to the seasoned eye of a teacher," said a pre-primary head.

Many schools are now at the fag end of their admission process. The process began in July, and interactions with parents and children continue through September.

"We try to find out the screen time of a child through dialogue and conversation and assess how dependent the child is on a device to stay distracted," said Nandini Bhattacharjee, education director of the Loreto schools.

"There are long-term adverse impacts of excessive phone use on a child's concentration, eyesight and mental health. Even when children go out with their parents, they often hardly interact because they are left

with devices to fiddle with. This is an unhealthy trend," Bhattacharjee said.

Some schools have also noticed a change among parents, suggesting greater awareness of the problem, a pre-primary head said.

"Since last year, we have noticed that young parents increasingly want to wean children of that age off mobile phones. Some have also admitted that they struggle to do so on their own and have consulted counsellors for solutions to keep their children away from phones," Dutta said.

Teachers acknowledge that they do not expect parents to completely keep children away from phones or other devices.

However, allowing a child unrestricted access to a device is unacceptable, they said.

"Children will watch cartoons, and it is natural for them to do so. But usage has to be limited. A device cannot become a substitute for a babysitter or an excuse to give up on everything else," Saigal said.