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SCREEN TIME
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Emmanuelle Morival[1], Hélène Vaillant-Roussel[1,2,3], Mickael Bigeault[1]

1. Department of General Practice, Faculty of Medicine and Paramedical Professions, Clermont Auvergne University, Clermont-Ferrand, France.

2. Clermont Auvergne University, Research Unit ACCePPT, Clermont-Ferrand, France.

3. Department of Clinical Research and Innovation, Clermont-Ferrand University Hospital Centre, Clermont -Ferrand, France.

emmanuelle.morival@etu.uca.fr

Preventing screen time in children aged 3 to 6: creation of a children's picture book

INTRODUCTION

Screen time has increased among children, with exposure occurring at progressively younger ages, particularly since the Covid 19-Pandemic[1,2]. Numerous reports on this subject have been published by the French Ministry of Heath, the High Council for Public Health, the French Pediatric Society and the Academy of Sciences between 2018 and 2024[3–6].

However, there is no international consensus on the amount of screen time that offers a favorable risk-benefit balance. The World Health Organisation (WHO) recommends no exposure before the age of two, a limit of one hour per day between the ages of two and five, and a maximum of two hours per day between the ages of six and twelve[7]. These recommendations are similar to those proposed in Canada and in the US[8,9]. In France, the psychiatrist Serge Tisseron has developed the "3-6-9-12" rule, which provides guidelines for parents on limiting screen time. It recommends no access to television before the age of 3, to games consoles before the age of 6, to the internet before the age of 9, and to independent internet use (including social media) before the age of 12[10].

Despite these recommendations, only 13.5 per cent of parents are thought to follow them, according to the French study by Poncet and al[11]. Daily screen time averaged 1 hour 22 minutes per day amongst French children aged 3 to 5 in 2022[12]. This low rate of compliance is associated with certain socio-demographic factors such as parents educational level, parental immigration status, young maternal age or parental separation[13]. Apart from age, other recommendations relate to the appropriate use of screens: avoiding screen time in the morning before school, during meals or in the evening before bedtime, and ensuring there are no screens in the child's bedroom[10].

Studies on the negative effects associated with the misuse of screens highlight three main risks: impaired sleep quality, an increased risk of being overweight or obesity, and an increased risk of language disorders[11]. Despite growing knowledge on the subject, children are acquiring their first personal electronic device at an increasingly early age, according to a report by the Observatory for Parenting and Digital Education (OPEN)[14]. This finding reinforces the importance and necessity of addressing screen use during general practice consultations.

In 2018, the French Pediatric Society published five recommendations: do not demonize screens, avoid screens in children's bedrooms, introduce screen-free periods, make adults aware of their own relationship with screens, and prevent social isolation[5]. However, this topic is not always addressed during consultations: a 2016 Canadian study found that recommendations on screen time are among the top 10 unanswered questions during consultations[15,16]. Screen time prevention by GPs is on the rise but remains limited. Between 2017 and 2022, the proportion of GPs reporting that they carry out systematic prevention rose from 3 per cent to 17.5 per cent. However most GPs continued to address screen use only when concerns arose or when parents requested advice[17].

Alongside measures to limit screen time, the promotion of reading is another key area of prevention that fosters early literacy[18]. Literacy is a term referring to the "ability to read, understand and use written information in everyday life". As neuroplasticity is at its peak in early childhood, it is beneficial to develop these skills within the family home. From these various principles emerged the concept of the "Home Literacy Environment". This term, which is defined in various ways, encompasses environmental factors that promote the acquisition of reading skills, such as exposure to written language, the number of books at home and the level of parent-child interaction during reading[19–21].

The benefits of shared reading are maximized when parents go beyond the text: when they encourage the child to touch, point at and name the pictures, and by asking them questions[22]. This method, known as dialogic reading, promotes the development of vocabulary and listening comprehension, increases the desire to read, facilitates discussion between parents and children, and helps the child to better understand emotions and social behaviors.

Reading therefore offers numerous benefits for a child's neurocognitive development; yet it can be neglected in favor of screen time. A Canadian study found that early screen use was associated with a reduction in reading activities at 24 months, which in turn was linked to increased screen use at older ages[23]. The aim of this project was to create a children's picture book aimed at children aged 3 to 6 to prevent inappropriate screen use. This picture book was designed to facilitate interactive reading between the child and their entourage in order to address the issue of screens and their risks.

METHOD

Formation of a nominal group

A nominal group was formed to define and validate the book's content. The members were professionals from the fields of health, education and communication, as well as parents. Members were recruited for their expertise in the Puy-de-Dôme department, except for one member who was invited to join due to their specialization in screen time prevention.

Individual phone interviews were conducted with the experts to determine the content of the activity book for children aged 3 to 6. Each member of the working group answered the following questions:

- In your view, what are the key pieces of advice to give parents regarding screen use?
- Have you identified any type of message, approach or media that works well with children when it comes to screen time prevention?
- In your view, as a parent, what would help you to discuss this topic with your child in a picture book?
- What do you consider to be the most important message to convey to children in this age group regarding this topic?

The questions were defined in advance by the authors, using a consensus-based discussion method (unanimous agreement)

Editorial concept for the picture book

As shared reading has been shown to have numerous benefits for a child's development, it was decided to design the picture book according to the principles of interactive, or 'dialogic' reading, in order to introduce parents to this approach. Indeed, most existing picture books are not written in such a way that parents could interact spontaneously with their children without being familiar with this method. The guide produced by the Luxembourg Ministry of National Education was used as a resource to provide useful advice: encouraging the child to hold the book and turn the pages, asking the child to name the pictures, asking them questions, reading with facial expressions or gestures, and, above all, pausing to allow the child to respond[24].

The story in the picture book was created, drawing inspiration from Sabine Duflo's '4-step method', endorsed by the French Association of Pediatrics (AFPA) and the Collective on Excessive Screen Exposure (CoSE)[25]. This method sets out four screen-free periods, considered to be four key points in prevention:

- No screens in the morning, to help children pay better attention in class,
- No screens during meals, to encourage conversation,
- No screens before bedtime, to ensure a good night's sleep,
- No screens in the child's bedroom, to help them learn to be on their own.

Choice of characters

Non-human characters were chosen to make it easier for children to relate to the different situations.

Writing process

The writing process was based on a modified nominal group consensus method. An initial draft of the picture book manuscript was written following individual interviews. This draft was sent to the working group, then revised during a group meeting to produce a second draft. A description of the characters, including their names, personality traits and the prevention theme they might embody in another picture book, was drawn up. This description and the final manuscript were then sent to publishers and potential funders.

Publication

With a view to having the book published by a publisher, sixteen regional and national publishing houses were contacted.

Funding was sought from twenty-three organizations, in the event of self-publishing. Self-publishing would be the option chosen in the absence of funding or a favorable response from publishers.

Intellectual Property

Copyright protects intellectual creations from the moment they are created provided that they meet the requirement of originality. It grants copyright holders "the exclusive right to authorize or prohibit the use or reuse of their work"[26].

RESULTS

Individual interviews

The working group comprised eleven experts, including nine women and two men, all of whom were parents, with an average age of 44. (Appendix 1) The semi-structured individual interviews lasted an average of 20 minutes. The author transcribed the information during phone conversations. A summary of these interviews was then produced and organized according to the frequency of the topics discussed. It was sent to each member of the group: ten of them approved it without amendment, and one suggested a few rewording changes. (Appendix 2)

This summary helped to validate the editorial concept for the book presented earlier: the experts recommended the use of questions, the creation of interaction and a playful element. It permitted important informations to be raised by the experts in a manner appropriate to the age group. The resources cited by the experts in response to question 3 were all used during the writing process to reinforce the impact of the messages.

Writing Outline

The questions used to make the reading experience interactive were inspired by a questionnaire designed to identify screen misuse (Appendix 3)[27]. The questions were modified by the author and validated by open consensus with the co-authors to adapt them to the content of the picture book. They were annotated with prompts to help the child answer them using the illustration:

- "Like Martin, do you have any screens in your bedroom? Point to the screens you use at home."
- "And you, at what times of the day do you look at screens? Point to the corresponding times on the timeline."
- "Do you know how much time you spend in front of screens each day? Choose the battery that matches your usage."
- "What tips have you learnt about screen use? Look for and find the habits that Noa the Cat should change when it comes to screens."

Peer Review Meeting

Following the interviews, the group members were invited to a peer review meeting to review the manuscript. This meeting took place via video conference, chaired by the author of the picture book, and lasted 120 minutes. All group members were invited to attend: seven were present, four were absent. Each member presented their comments on the manuscript individually. These were discussed collectively to reach a consensus:

- The initial issue: the ogre and the wolf are used at the start of the story to build suspense. It was decided to retain them as they are common characters in children's picture books. Their presence puts the hero in danger, drives the plot forward, and contributes to the child's moral development by enabling them to distinguish between good and evil in contrast to the hero[28] ;
- The characters' names: it was decided to retain the animal's name – to enrich the child's vocabulary – and to give it a first name that rhymes with it, to help the child identify with the character ;
- The wording: this has been revised to be inclusive to match the widest possible range of family structures. The language used has been checked to ensure it is appropriate for the target age group ;
- The questions: it was decided to provide suggested answers to guide the child and help them engage in discus-

sion (illustrated suggested answers, a timeline, a scale to help them situate themselves, etc.) ;

• Parent's guide: the group expressed an interest in adding a practical guide for parents to support them in reading the picture book, providing them with theoretical knowledge relevant to everyday life and practical advice.

Final manuscript

The story features six characters, three of whom are faced with inappropriate screen use: Martin the rabbit has a games console in his bedroom and uses it at night ; Solange, the tit is faced with the use of a mobile phone during mealtimes ; and Léon the bear cub watches television unsupervised. These situations highlight different types of screen use. Juliette the weasel, on the other hand, uses screens sensibly and is keen on reading. The plot centers on Noa the cat, who sets off in search of his missing friends to rescue them from their screens. A final, observant character, Doc Owl, is there to provide readers with preventative advice tailored to the situations encountered. At the end of the book, all the characters come together to enjoy some screen-free time.

Parent's Guide

An introduction to interactive, dialogue-based reading has been written to guide parents as they read the book with their children. (Appendix 4)

At the end of the book, a document has been created for parents setting out key information on screen safety for 3–6-year-olds, as well as practical solutions for everyday life to help them manage their children's digital use more effectively. (Appendix 5)

The structure of this document was decided in consultation with the working group. The graphic design was carried out by the author of the album. The information in the guides was agreed upon by open consensus.

Choice of Title

The title was devised by the author of the book and consists of three parts: "A time for everything – Screens – A book to share". It was approved by the working group by open consensus. "A time for everything" could be used as the title for a future series and evokes the notion of balance to adopt regarding screen time management. The main title, "Screens", was deliberately kept simple so that the theme would be easily identifiable. "A book to share" emphasizes the aim of offering an interactive reading experience.

Illustration

Sketches and descriptions of the illustrations had been drafted by the author of the book to complement the writing and guide the artwork. The characters and their physical characteristics had been defined in advance. The illustrations were produced by Ms. De Clerck Bérangère, in consultation with the author.

Publication

Funding was provided by Casden Banque Populaire, Banque Populaire Auvergne-Rhône-Alpes, and the Association pour le Crédit et l'Epargne des Fonctionnaires (ACEF).

DISCUSSION

Choice of medium and target age group

Creating a children's picture book as a prevention tool enabled it to serve as a means of fostering communication between children and those around them. Alongside the information provided on screen use, it raises families' awareness of the benefits of reading. Drawing on the age guidelines provided by Serge Tisseron for sensible screen use, the decision to tailor the book's content to children aged 3 to 6 seemed a good compromise for early intervention in childhood and for promoting language and reading development. This was the first picture book on screen use developed through a consensus-based approach, emphasizing interactive reading and incorporating resources for those supporting children with reading. As the resources currently available for learning about screen use are predominantly digital, this picture book provided clear and concise information without relying on digital media. However, some of these resources were cited in the parents' guide, such as the "Déclic'écrans" website[29], a prevention tool also developed by a healthcare professional.

Choice of Characters

According to a study by Lemoine and al, the choice of anthropomorphic animals made the stories more engaging for children, which made it easier to address social issues[30,31]. They helped to foster both identification and intellectual and emotional detachment.

Interactive reading

The picture book introduced parents to interactive reading for future reading sessions. This way of reading enabled the child to be actively involved, to remain attentive throughout the story, and to develop a love of reading[18] .

Parental guide

A section on "common misconceptions" was included at the suggestion of the working group. An observational study carried out in Réunion in 2022 was used to select the statements presented. Indeed, more than a third of the parents surveyed believed that screens helped children learn to speak, whilst 23 % of them felt that screens were a good way to calm a child down.

The guide also reminded parents to lead by example, as high levels of screen use by parents are associated with an increase in children's screen time[33].

To explore the topic further, a range of printed and digital resources have been made available.

Strengths and limitations

The focus group added value to the project by bringing together 11 people with complementary areas of expertise. Several speech-language therapists have contacted but were unable to participate due to a lack of availability. Their involvement might have provided greater insight into language-related issues.

The picture book was developed using a modified nominal group consensus method, as it was not possible for all members to be in the same place at the same time. The questions were therefore asked individually during phone interviews, without a pause for reflection, rather than during a group where each one speaks in turn. The summary of these interviews enabled all members to be informed subsequently of the ideas put forward and to prioritise them according to the frequency with which the responses appeared. Furthermore, not all members of the group were able to attend the group meeting, which could have led to a bias in participation. The originality of the method may therefore have constituted a limitation to the work, as it was less reproducible and comparable; however, it was the method that best enabled us to achieve our objective.

This originality was also a strength, as there were no other prevention picture books on this subject developed using a consensus-based method.

The story was designed to present problematic everyday situations involving different types of screens. The parents' guide at the end of the book served to supplement the information provided in the book in a concise and clear

manner. However, the consequences of inappropriate screen use were not addressed, as the working group considered that this information was readily available and that the guide should focus on practical application rather than theory.

Outlook

This picture book was created with the aim of promoting prevention amongst children and their families, as well as encouraging reading. The child's immediate circle was therefore part of the target audience, including parents as well as grandparents. A recent study by Serman et al has, in fact, shown that there is a risk of increased screen time when grandparents look after their grandchildren[34].

As preventing excessive screen use is a major challenge in general practice, the picture book could be used as a resource during consultations or made available in waiting rooms. It would help meet parents' expectations by addressing the issue of screen use more regularly and comprehensively. Once the illustrations and editing have been finalised, a follow-up study could assess the quality of the picture book using an evaluation grid for the development of health tools, such as those produced by the French National Institute for Prevention and Health Education or the the French National Authority for Health[35,36].

While seeking funding, the idea of combining a presentation of the book with targeted sessions in schools or library centers was raised on several occasions. These sessions could target both children, for example through the involvement of a storyteller, and parents, through presentation of the guide followed by a question-and-answer session.

Summary

Context. Screen time for children aged 3–6 years should remain the exception, be limited in duration, and be supervised by an adult. In 2022, French children aged 3–5 years spent an average of 1 hour 22 minutes a day on screens. Activities such as reading, which are beneficial to a child's development, are sometimes neglected in favor of screen time.

Objective. To create a children's book aimed at children aged 3 to 6, with the aim of preventing inappropriate screen use. This book is designed to provide both children and their carers with an interactive reading experience that encourages discussion about screens and their potential risks.

Methods. The content was defined and validated using a modified nominal group consensus method. The book's design was based on the principles of dialogic interactive reading and on Sabine Duflo's four-step method.

Results. The nominal group comprised 11 members, including health professionals, education professionals, communication experts and parents. The book features five anthropomorphic characters facing problematic situations involving screens, followed by a sixth character who offers advice. The proposed interactions were inspired by a questionnaire designed to identify inappropriate screen use. Two parenting guides are also included in the book.

Conclusion. Choosing a children's book as a mean of prevention enabled it to serve as a mediation tool between children and their environment. It was the first prevention book on screen use developed using a consensus-based method. The book could serve as a resource during consultations, helping to meet parents' expectations by addressing the topic of the screen uses more regularly and comprehensively.

Keywords: Screen time, child, preventive medicine, children's literature

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APPENDIX I - Socio-demographic characteristics of the members of the nominal group (in ascending order of age)

Gender	Age (years)	Occupation	Number of children (and ages)
M	32	Director of Communications	1 (4 months)
F	34	Hired as a parent – Project Manager at the regional council	2 (4.5 years)
F	34	Childcare Worker	2 (5, 7 years)
F	35	Childcare Worker	2 (ages 7–9)
F	36	Hired as a parent – Area Manager for a home care organization	2 (ages 4 and 7)
F	38	PMI Physician	2 (3, 5 years)
F	50	Director of a health promotion and education	2 (ages 18, 23)
F	53	Preschool principal	3 (ages 14, 16, 19)
M	55	Master's in Public Health (MCU HDR)	2 (23, 25 years old)
F	58	PMI Physician	4 (ages 23, 24, 30, 32) 2 grandchildren
F	58	Elementary school teacher	3 (ages 24, 30, 33) 3 grandchildren

APPENDIX II - Individual interviews

1 What key advice would you give to parents about screen use ?

- Age: no screens before age 3 ; as little as possible between 3 and 6
- Content : choose it, discuss it, monitor it
- When : not in the morning, before bedtime or during meals
- Accompany the child ; do not leave them alone with the screens
- Avoid using your phone or leaving the television on : set an example for your children and do not create a barrier between parents and children
- Make it a tool for sharing and exchange
- Use the health record as a source of information
- Replace screens with periods of activity, alone or accompanied
- Challenge false beliefs, such as using screens to calm a child or fill their boredom – screens should not be a source of blackmail or reward
- Screens are not needed for healthy child development
- Establish a routine to make it easier to follow the established rules / state the instructions before screen use begins
- Set a framework and state the rules to prevent violations
- Do not feel guilty ; accept that you cannot do everything perfectly

2 Have you identified a type of message, medium or intervention that works well with children for prevention in general and screen-related prevention?

- Media:

Picture book : identification with the characters (they recognize their behaviour and understand why it is forbidden), integrated games (questions/answers, find-and-seek), repetition of a phrase like a slogan; the book format means the message does not come directly from parents and is sometimes better accepted ;

Educational cartoon ;

School interventions : listening to teachers ;

- Messages : short songs/slogans (because they stick in the mind)
- Resources : picture book "Nono et les écrans", poster "Lâche ton écran", card game "Ma pause sans écran"

3 As a parent, what in a children's book would help you to address this subject with your child ?

- Use emotions to engage children
- Use exaggeration to help recognize inappropriate behaviours
- Questions in the book or at the end so children reflect on their behaviours/habits
- Stage everyday life so children can identify with it
- A playful approach: use fun so the messages stay with them / use characters such as animals or creatures Create interaction: have
- children speak, rephrase and ask questions
- Use keywords and repetition to help information sink in
- Visual appeal with colourful illustrations; no sound book

4 What is the key message to convey to children in this age group about this topic ?

- Be cautious because screens act like a drug, and parents are there to protect children from them
- Respect the set time limit ; prioritize family interaction
- Screens take children away from everything that is good for them (growing well and learning well at school)
- Prioritize group activities over screens
- Never use screens without parental permission
- Use screens as a qualitative rather than quantitative tool, especially for educational purposes
- No screens in the evening, as they harm sleep quality

Suggestions:

- Detachable cover flap with a slogan/golden rule to display and integrate into the home
- Practical booklet with resources for parents : how to approach the subject, a guide of sentences to say/not say to your child
- A small game at the end of the book, such as "Find the 7 mistakes with screens"
- Gather feedback from children to see what they understand from an excerpt and assess its relevance
- Contact the Museum of Youth Illustration in Moulins to identify illustrations suited to the age group
- Hold events in libraries/leisure centres to present the book with quizzes and interactive activities

APPENDIX III - Early Detection Issues (for children ages 0 to 18)

Where?
Does your child have access to screens in their bedroom?

When?
Does your child use screens:
In the morning?
During meals?
Within 2 hours of bedtime?

Can you estimate the average amount of time your child spends in front of screens each day, including all types of screens?

How?
Does your family have rules regarding screen time?

APPENDIX IV - Parents' corner

PARENTS' CORNER

Let's work together for the well-being of our children

YOU ARE GOING TO READ AN INTERACTIVE PICTURE BOOK TO YOUR CHILD

You will find questions to ask throughout the story.
Here are some tips to share this reading experience with your child.

DURING READING

Read with your child

Ask them to:

- Name the characters, the objects...
- Point to the images
- Rephrase

Feel free to clarify their answers when they are incorrect or incomplete.

Ask them questions:

- About what they think/imagine
- About what they have seen earlier in the story
- About their own experiences

Feel free to read expressively and give your child time to react.

"Solange is having a meal with her family, but it's completely silent !"

What kind of animal is Solange?

A bird. It's in the tree.

Yes, it's on a branch. Can you show it to me in the picture?

"A funny noise is coming from his house. It sounds like Martin the rabbit is going back into his burrow !"

What do you think Martin is doing?

He's jumping everywhere!

You're right, rabbits jump. Do you remember where you have seen rabbits too ?

At the farm with school !

WHY MAKE READING INTERACTIVE ?

- Better understanding of emotions
- Supports language development, particularly vocabulary acquisition and listening comprehension
- Facilitates discussion and encourages attention throughout the reading
- Develops a love of reading

MORIVAL Emmanuelle - Parents' Corner

AFTER READING

Leave the book within reach so your child can read it again, even alone and in their own way.

Next time you read, give your child more space to take an even more active part in the reading.

APPENDIX V - Key takeaway

KEY TAKEAWAY

Screen use between the ages of 3 and 6 is not recommended.
It should be occasional, time-limited and supervised by an adult.

✓ IN PRACTICE

Prioritise screen-free activities

Use screens in a shared room

Choose age-appropriate content

Set rules

20 to 30 minutes per day maximum

✗ NO SCREENS

Before age 3

In the morning

During meals

Before bedtime

In the bedroom

COMMON MISCONCEPTIONS

"Screens calm my child"

As children develop, they learn to manage emotions that can sometimes overwhelm them. A screen may capture their attention, but only an adult can listen to how they feel...

Suggest a quiet moment, a meditation exercise...

"My child needs screens to develop"

Screens get in the way of a child's relationships with those around them. To develop, children need to interact, move and play...

Feel free to draw inspiration from these activity ideas !

SET AN EXAMPLE

You are a role model for your child !

- **No screens between you and your child**

When you are spending time with your child : put away your phone, turn off the TV...

The content you are watching may not be suitable for their age.

Your child needs your attention and interaction.

- **Be mindful of your own screen use**

Follow the rules set in your home. Your child will better understand what is not allowed.

Turn off your notifications, switch to airplane mode...

- **Screens should never be used as a bargaining tool.**

Screen time is not a reward, and taking it away is not a punishment.

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WANT TO LEARN MORE?

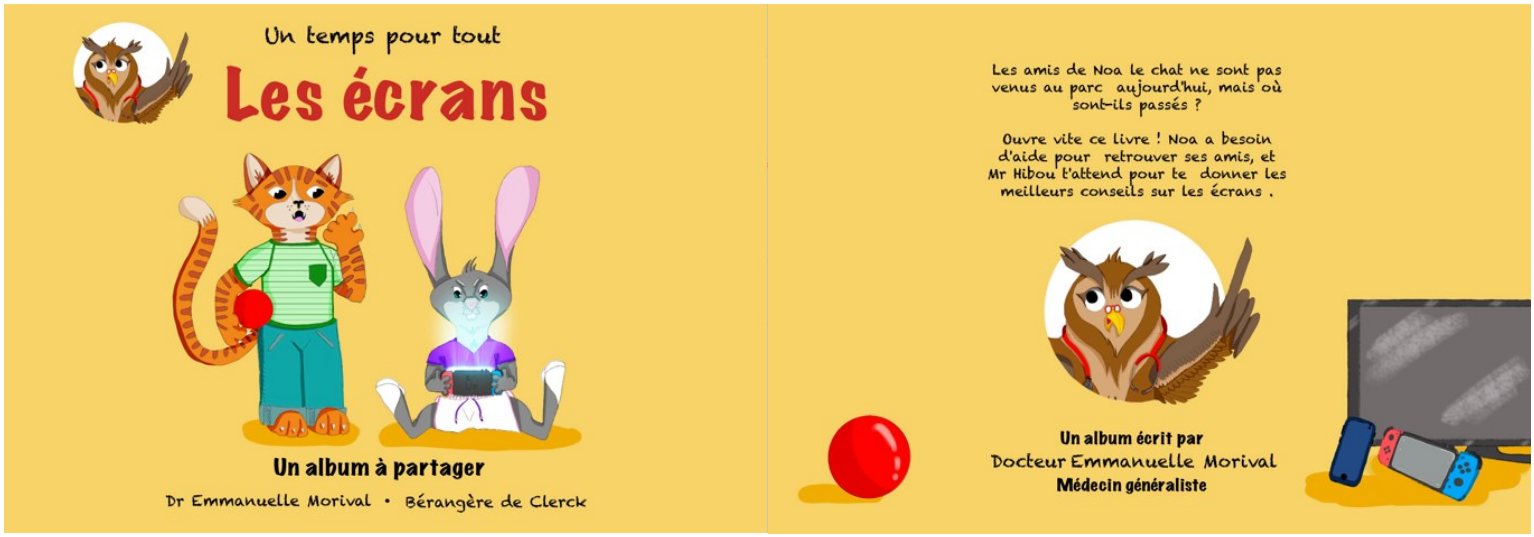
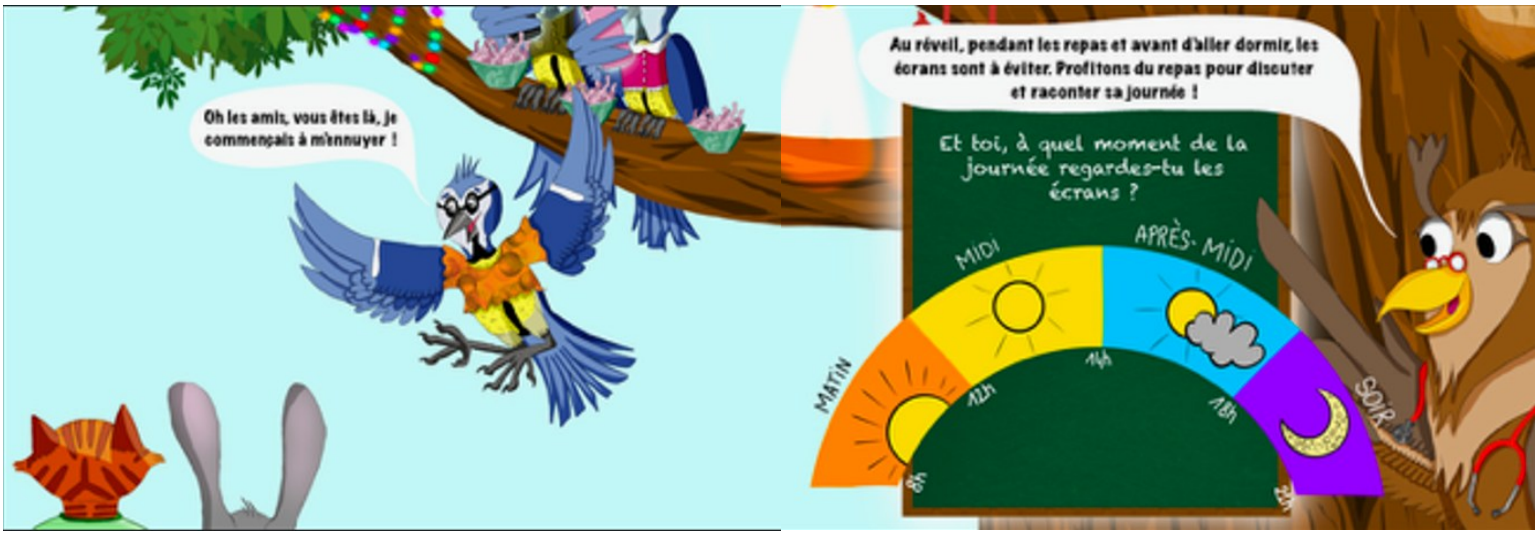
Sabine Duflo - Il ne décroche pas des écrans !

Dr Anne-Lise Ducanda - Les tout-petits face aux écrans

https://www.declic-ecrans.com

https://e-enfance.org

https://surexpositionsecrans.fr

https://www.mon-enfant-et-les-ecrans.fr

APPENDIX VI - Book cover and example of an inside page