

Screen Time – for Children and Parents

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For decades, doctors, teachers, and psychologists have warned about the perils of letting children spend time glued to the TV screen. Now we've added many more "screens" to the list of media devices: DVD players, computers, video games, tablets, mobile phones... And we're no longer tied to a TV in the family living room. Instead, screens are with us 24 hours a day, everywhere we go: in the car, at the playground, restaurants, doctor's offices, etc. And we use them in all those places!

Given that screens are such a huge part of modern life, it's hard to take a "just say no" attitude. Instead we need to make intentional choices about the, conscious of the benefits and the challenges.

Benefits of Screen Time for Kids 8 and under

Since Sesame Street began in 1969, there's been huge growth in educational media: TV / videos, games, and mobile apps. *High quality* educational media can have benefits for kids age 2 to 8:

- Video can teach concrete skills, if the skill is demonstrated slowly and repeatedly.
- Media can teach basic academic skills like ABC's and counting and help children memorize basic facts. The kinds of skills that can be learned by drilling with flash cards may be possible to learn in a more engaging way with video games or touch screen apps.
- Story-telling, in books and in media, allows children to vicariously experience social interaction and emotional challenges. Watching characters interact positively can teach manners and social graces. Watching a character deal with grief can help a child learn to manage sadness.
- Educational media can expose children to the broader world far beyond their community: they can learn about exotic animals, historical events, a wide range of musical and artistic styles, diverse cultures and lifestyles, and scientific concepts like interplanetary space.

It's important to note that these benefits are from high quality, developmentally appropriate programming. Not all media is created equal! Don't choose games, videos or apps based on the company's marketing. Instead look for independent reviews and ratings of a product's learning value.

Also important: most research is on children age 2 - 8, focusing on TV. There's little research showing benefits of media for children under 2. There's also little research on modern interactive touch-screen apps, which might be more "educational" due to the interaction, but might also be more addictive.

Benefits of Screen Time for Parents

Experts frown upon using media as "a babysitter", but we need to be honest that media is very good at this job! Parents often need a way to keep kids busy while they make dinner, take a shower, do household chores, or work from home. Screens are a quick, effective distraction. (Single parents report more media use, probably because there's not a second parent available to help distract.)

Parents also use screen time as "company" for themselves. Spending all day at home with a small child can be very isolating, and having the TV on or checking Facebook can reduce the parent's loneliness. Listening to a podcast or reading an e-book can provide some much needed mental stimulation in the midst of a day filled with finger painting and Dr. Seuss. Parents also, of course, have many tasks they use screens for: phone calls, grocery shopping, looking up directions, etc.

Mobile devices have a new benefit. Parents have learned that they're remarkably effective at keeping a child quiet in places like doctor's offices, restaurants, and churches. (On the flip side, parents have also learned that trying to *take away* a device in these places can cause a huge disruption!)

Problems with Screen Time

Again, the majority of the research is on kids 2 to 8 years olds, and on television viewing, but much of it may also apply to younger children and/or other media.

Television has been linked to obesity, sleep issues, aggressive behaviors, and ADHD. Early TV viewing is correlated with deficits in executive functioning – attention, memory, problem solving, impulse control, self-regulation and delayed gratification. Toddlers who watch more television show delays in learning language. Anecdotally, teachers report that children who use media often become passive, lose creativity, and forget how to entertain themselves without a screen.

Also, media can be addictive. The more children watch, the more they want to watch, and the more upset they are when it's taken away. Parents find it's much more challenging to transition a child from a media device to another activity than it is to move from one unplugged activity to another. Parents can also be addicted: one survey showed 53% of adults feel upset when denied internet access.

It may be that media itself isn't harmful. The issue may be what kids miss out on while using screens. One study showed that every hour of TV time meant 50 minutes less of interaction with family and ten minutes less of play. We know that hands-on play, human connection, eye contact, and interaction are essential for learning. When children are on screens, they simply get less of that.

When parents are engaged in their own screen use, this further limits interaction. When using media, parents look at their children less, talk to them less, and engage them in play less often.

Making Screen Time Work for Your Family – Some suggestions to try...

- You could opt out completely... Don't feel like media is essential to your child's education. Educational videos, games and apps are not something you "have to do."
 - The best way to prepare your child for school and life involves you spending time with them, reading, talking, exploring things hands-on, and exposing them to diverse experiences.
- Choose developmentally appropriate content that teaches skills you want your child to learn and demonstrates values that align with yours.
 - Research your choices in advance when possible, preview the media before your child uses it when possible, and don't be afraid to take away something you discover is inappropriate.
 - For babies and toddlers, choose slow-paced shows and games, with calm backgrounds and without loud, jarring sounds and actions. Instead of fantasy-based programs, choose shows where the characters do everyday things children do, like go to the park, take a bath, or spend time at preschool. Young children also respond well to shows where the characters talk directly to them at times or ask the child to participate in some way. These shows may seem boring or goofy to you, but they engage young children without overwhelming them.
 - Pay attention to how social / emotional issues are presented in the stories.
 - Social interactions: Some media that claim to teach good behavior instead model negative interaction. They spend the first 20 minutes setting up the conflict by showing kids behaving badly, then resolve it in the last ten minutes by kids behaving well (apologizing, confessing to a lie) Children remember (and learn from) the emotionally-charged content at the beginning more than the pleasant resolution at the end.
 - Emotional issues: When previewing something, imagine seeing it through your child's eyes, with their experience of the world. What would frighten or upset them? A key staple of media storytelling is to set up a big dramatic conflict of some sort, then resolve it. Again, your child may only remember the scary or upsetting or tense moments, and forget the show's "happy ending."
 - Pay attention to what academic and life skills are being taught and whether they are taught effectively. "Educational programming" ranges a great deal in how educational it really is. Use independent reviews and ratings to learn more before letting your child use a product.
 - Choose the right tools: infants may respond best to touchscreens that let them learn hands-on. School age children may learn hand-eye coordination and decision making through video games, and learn school/work skills by using a computer. Tweens can practice communication skills with a cell phone. Social networking is appropriate for teens, with guidance.

- Many parents limit access to the Internet, use systems to block inappropriate content, know how to check the browser history (but don't tell children how to clear it!). Many limit internet use to public spaces of house, where parents can see / listen in.
 - The older your child gets, the more media they may have access to, both in your line of sight, and away from home with their peers. Teaching reasonable limits and safe behavior when they're young may help them make better decisions as they get older.
 - Use technology to your benefit: use DVR, on-demand or streaming TV to choose the best programming (rather than just watching what's on at the moment), to skip over commercials, mute parts you don't want your child to hear, or pause things to discuss.
 - Watch out for apps with in-game purchasing! Some systems can block your child from spending money at least. But these games tend to cause addictive behavior and can lead to children who are very upset when you won't let them purchase the next level.
- Watch / Play with your child and Discuss
 - Co-watching enables us to maximize the educational benefit of the media. Examples:
 - Point out and name things they see on the screen
 - Answer questions as they come up: kids often don't understand everything they see
 - Quiz them about what they saw: "What's the closest planet to the sun?"
 - Practice skills they used with the media – if they were tracing letters on a touchscreen, give them finger-paints or a pencil and let them practice more
 - Act out a show together, or use puppets to re-tell the story you just viewed
 - Talk about real-life tie-ins to media: "in the show, they went to the grocery store and bought apples – would you like to go to the store now?" Or if they see a TV show about an animal, go to the zoo to see animals in person, paint a picture of the animal at home, sing songs about it, go on the web to learn more, or pretend to be an animal.
 - Co-watching give you opportunities to share and explore values with your children.
 - Talk about programs. Ask them what it was about, what characters they liked or disliked, how it made them feel, what choices the characters made, what they would have done in the same situation. Pause movies when there's something to discuss.
 - Co-watching or playing games together helps us to connect with our kids. It's another venue for having fun playing together with something that captures their interest.
 - It's not always possible to co-watch. After all, once of the big times parents use media is when they need to put their attention elsewhere to get a job done! But do it when possible.
 - Eliminate (or reduce) background TV. In addition to the times that children are actively using media (average of 2+ hours a day for kids 6 months – 8 years), they are also exposed to background television (almost 4 hours per day) – when the TV is on but no one is watching it, or when a parent is watching TV while the child is theoretically engaged in other activities. This media distracts the parent and significantly reduces how much time they spend talking to the child (this can cause delays in language learning for the child). It also distracts the child: children have shorter attention spans when the TV is on, moving from one task to another quickly.
 - Don't be couch potatoes.
 - Don't eat in front of the TV. Unconscious eating may relate to obesity.
 - Do activities that you see on the screen: dance to the music, jump on the floor like the monkeys jumping on the bed, and so on. Some children's shows actively encourage this.
 - Do other physical activities while watching TV. Exercise? Stretch? Fold laundry?
 - Keep screens out of the bedroom.
 - Internet access in the bedroom increases the chances of kids accessing inappropriate content.
 - The presence of a TV in a child's bedroom has been linked to obesity, poor performance in school, difficulty with sleep, and substance use.

- 30% of parents report using TV to help their child fall asleep, but TV actually increases resistance to bedtime, causes anxiety, delays sleep, and shortens sleep duration.
- Set limits: Some experts recommend against having an outright ban on screen use – saying it can become the forbidden fruit your child craves – but it is fair to set limits. Some examples:
 - Establish routines – when in the day are screens an option and when are they not? If your child knows they can never use a screen in the morning before school, then they know not to bother asking in the morning. But, if one day you change that rule...
 - Teach that some times and places are OK for mobile device use, and others are not.
 - Note: your children pay very close attention to what you do! If you tell them that they're not allowed to use screens during dinner, but then you check your email or take a phone call during a meal, they won't take your limit seriously.
 - Teach your child that some devices are off limits. If you need to be able to use your computer or phone to complete tasks, you don't want to have to wrestle it away from your child. You may want to establish from the very start that they can use some devices and not others.
 - Teach your child to ask you if it's OK to turn on media. That makes both of you think first.
 - Privilege? Some parents find it works well to have media be a privilege that a child has to earn. For example, if they read for 30 minutes, they earn 10 minutes of screen time. Other parents are against this, fearing that then we're setting up a value judgment that says reading is the boring thing you have to do so you can do the fun thing.
 - Place limits on screen time. AAP recommends <1 – 2 hours daily for kids 2 – 8, less for kids under 2. Count total screen time: TV + DVD + video games + computer time + mobile device.
 - Consider a screen curfew for the whole family – a time at night when the screens go off. Screen use too close to bedtime can disrupt sleep.
- Encourage balanced activities.
 - Environment: Set up your house so that the screens are off in a corner, or in rarely used rooms, versus keeping lots of other options in plain view, easily accessible and ready to use. Have available: board games, art supplies, books, sports equipment, etc. Spend time outdoors with no screens in sight!
 - Activities: Build into your routine plenty of other activities: sports and exercise, creative projects, household chores, social time with friends, and so on. Spend more time in unstructured play, which helps children learn to problem-solve and think creatively.
 - Read: In households with heavy media use, children are read to less, and read less. Make a commitment to reading. Even after they can read themselves, you can continue to read to them – choosing books that are a little above their reading level – or read a book together.
 - Before turning on a device yourself or handing one to your child, ask yourself: "if I didn't have my [device] with me right now, how would my behavior be different?" If your answer is that you'd be talking to your child, or singing to avoid boredom, or coming up with other ways to distract them while you shop then consider setting aside the device for now...
 - Model good screen behavior. Turn off your screens for a portion of each day. Resist the urge to check your email or Facebook whenever your child is occupied for a moment.
 - Model a balanced life of social time, physical activity, time outdoors, reading, etc.
 - Have unplugged time. One author advocates setting aside "one hour per day, one day per week, and one week per year" when the whole family sets aside their screens.

Major sources:

Common Sense Media, Children's Media Use in America, 2013. www.commonsensemedia.org/research/zero-to-eight-childrens-media-use-in-america-2013; Children, Adolescents and the Media – AAP policy statement: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/132/5/958.full.pdf>; Media Use by Children Younger than 2 years old – AAP policy statement. <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/128/5/1040.full.pdf>