

Screen Time – for Children and Parents

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Screen time no longer means just TV in the living room. We now have DVD players, computers and video games at home, and tablets and smart phones we carry all day everywhere we go. And kids get lots of screen time (average 2+ hours each day for kids 6 months to 8 years, more for older kids.)

Most parents have heard expert advice that warns of links between heavy media use and obesity, sleep issues, aggressive behaviors, ADHD, language delays, reduced creativity, and screen addiction. There is also a growing conversation about the effects of parents “checking out” by paying attention to their own devices at home and on the playground instead of interacting with their child.

But parents continue to use screens for good reasons. For the child, many parents feel that good quality educational media can be an effective learning tool. For the parent, screens offer company when they’re feeling lonely, mental stimulation in a Dr. Seuss day, and a venue for essential tasks like bill paying, phone calls, grocery shopping, etc. But, the most important factor may be that screens are remarkably effective at distracting children and keeping them quiet and out of trouble when the parent needs to make dinner, take a shower, work from home, run errands, attend meetings, etc.

So, rather than taking a “just say no” approach, many parents are trying to find a way to make screen time work well for their family. Here’s a wide variety of suggestions from parents and experts:

- You could opt out completely...
 - Educational videos, games and apps are not something you “have to do if you want your child to succeed in school.” The best way to prepare your child for school is you spending time with them, reading, talking, exploring hands-on, and exposing them to diverse life experiences.
- Choose developmentally appropriate content that teaches skills you want your child to learn and that 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 ones where the characters do everyday things children do. Children also respond well to when the characters talk directly to them 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.
 - A key staple of media storytelling is to spend most of the time setting up a big dramatic conflict, then quickly resolve it right at the end. Children tend to remember (and learn from) the emotionally-charged content at the beginning more than the “happy ending.” Instead of learning how to apologize for being mean, they learn how to be mean. Instead of remembering that things turned out OK in the end, they remember all the scary stuff that happened before then.
 - 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.
- 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.
 - Quiz them about what they saw. Or act the show out together after watching it.
 - 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

- Talk about real-life tie-ins: “the characters went to the store and bought apples – would you like to go to the store?” “Shall we go to the zoo to see bears in person?”
- 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.
- Eliminate (or reduce) background TV. In addition to their own media use, children are also exposed to background TV (average 4 hours a day) when the TV is on but no one is watching it, or when a parent is watching TV. This significantly reduces how much time they spend talking to the child (this can cause delays in language learning). 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 screens. Do be physically active while watching.
- Keep screens out of the bedroom: they’re linked to obesity, poor grades, sleep challenges, drugs
 - Don’t use TV to help your child fall asleep. Lots of parents do, but research shows TV actually increases resistance to bedtime, causes anxiety, delays sleep, and shortens sleep duration.
- Set limits.
 - Establish routines – when and at what places are screens an option? If you stick to these consistently, your child is less likely to ask for a screen when it’s not the right time or place.
 - Teach your child to ask you if it’s OK to turn on media. That makes both of you think first.
 - Some make media a privilege that must be earned (by doing chores, homework, etc.) Be careful not to imply that reading is the boring thing you have to do so you can do a 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 all the screens go off.
- 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.

Learn more: www.common sense media.org; Children, Adolescents and the Media – AAP policy statement: <http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/132/5/958.full.pdf>