

Screen Time – Connection, Context, Content

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As a parent, you've likely seen countless cautions about the potential dangers of screen time for young children, and you're exposed to continuous marketing of screen content for children. You know the American Academy of Pediatrics says children 18 – 24 months can begin exploring screen content *with* their parent, and children 2 – 5 should be limited to 1 hour a day, but you know 10 month olds who are proficient at swiping through photos of themselves on a phone. It can be hard to make sense of it all. Instead of the "just say no" approach to screens, let's try a more nuanced approach:

We argue that this long-held focus on the quantity of digital media use is now obsolete, and that parents should instead ask themselves and their children questions about screen context (where, when and how digital media are accessed), content (what is being watched or used), and connections (whether and how relationships are facilitated or impeded). - The Media Policy Project

Connection – Are Relationships Facilitated or Impeded?

Screens can disconnect us from each other. In natural communication, we have a series of "serve and returns" – you say something, I respond. I ask a question, you answer. Screens can interrupt that. We've all experienced a time when someone glancing at their phone, or the TV that is on "in the background", pulls our attention away from a conversation we're in the middle of.

If parents are using a screen, we may not notice a child's bids for our attention, which can lead to attention seeking behavior, risk-taking, and potentially injury. When a child is using a screen, they can seem zoned out and a parent may get very frustrated, feeling like they're not being listened to. For all of us, we can get very irritable when someone else interrupts our screen use, and there can be a "withdrawal period" where it's hard for us to disconnect from the screen and re-connect to others.

On the other hand, screens can help us to connect. Long-distance, video chats have been a key way for kids to connect to family and friends who are distanced, whether geographically or due to COVID. There are ways we can enhance the connection – peekaboo, puppet shows, guessing games, reading stories, show and tell, drawing together... And screens can connect us with others right at home if we use them together. Co-watching shows and co-playing games can be fun for both participants, can be an enjoyable shared experience to talk about later, can lead us into great conversations about complex topics that might not come up otherwise, or extend the screen experience into real world experiences (like watching a show about science, then doing a hands-on experiment together).

Goal: Decrease times when screens disconnect your family, increase connection during screen use.

Context – Where, When, How?

Co-watching with our child any time they're watching would be optimal. But let's be realistic. One of the biggest reasons parents use screen time is to keep kids busy while we do something else! Screens are the easiest way to take a demanding child and keep them passive, stationary, and entertained. And sometimes, we just need that break. Just be intentional and don't overuse it. Be mindful about unconscious screen time – the TV that's on all the time, continuous social media check-ins, the Candy Crush... A question to ask yourself... if I didn't have the screen option, what would we do otherwise?

Consider screen time limits and curfews. Consider screen-free times (like mealtime, family time).

Some families have screen free time one hour per day, one full day each week, one week each year.

Set rules for where screens can be used – many experts recommend children only use screens where parents can overhear / see what the child is watching. Consider screen free places (like dining table, bedrooms). Some families have screens in low traffic areas of the house – out of sight, out of mind.

Some families say screen time has to be earned – the child has to complete chores to earn it. Some offer a standard amount each day, but it's a privilege that the child can lose as a punishment. These can both be viable strategies, but be careful not to make screens *too* special – a forbidden fruit.

Goal: Whatever rules you set for where, when, how and how much, be sure they are rules you can stick to and enforce consistently. If you let them cheat it some days, they'll ask to cheat it every day!

Content – What is Being Watched?

All screen use is not equal. For example, social time on screens, like Skype/Facetime calls to family aren't really "screen time" – they're social time where the screen is the mechanism that connects us, and don't need to be limited as other screen use does. (Although you should still practice good screen hygiene – keep screens 18 – 24" from face, use blue shade in the evening, use good posture during calls, take breaks to rest your body and your eyes, and spend time outside in nature each day.)

There's lots of great educational content for kids. Don't feel like your kids *have to* use screens to learn what they need to learn in life. If there are other things they could be doing in the moment – like finger painting or playing in a playground – do that! But, if there are times they'll be using a screen anyway, choose content that helps them to learn new ideas (like science shows), or experience things they can't experience at home (like wildlife shows), or drill them in things that are best learned by rote practice (like learning the alphabet or basic math skills).

When choosing content for entertainment time – whether that's social entertainment for the whole family, or solo entertainment for the child – there's a wide range in quality, developmental appropriateness and questionable content in children's media. Read reviews and seek out recommendations for the best content. A fabulous resource is www.commonsemmedia.org.

Try to minimize addictive content. Many screen time activities have lots of reward moments, where your brain is flooded with dopamines, and you want to keep using to get more of the feel-good chemicals. For example, many apps and video games are designed to keep you playing forever: every time you clear one level, another presents itself and you want to keep on playing. Many video apps will auto-play one video after another. Choose slower-paced, calmer items that you "consume" one at a time, without that same addictive reward process, and without ads that make a child crave more.

Goal: choose age appropriate, educational content that matches your family's values and priorities.

Tips for Reducing Screen Time Battles

Plan screen time – agree ahead of time on when it will start, when it will end, and what you will do together after screen time. Then stick to the plan!

When you're nearing the end of screen time, instead of giving warnings that you're about to take the screen away, give reminders that "when you end screen time well, then we get to..."

Instead of just yanking the screen away in the middle of whatever they're doing, try "joining them" on screen – watching what they're watching and talking about it, and seeing when a good endpoint is coming (the end of an episode, the completion of a level). Then gradually transition them off.

Resources

- Media and Young Minds – AAP policy statement:
<http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/138/5/e20162591>.
- Families and Screen Time from the Media Policy Project -
<http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/66927/1/Policy%20Brief%2017-%20Families%20%20Screen%20Time.pdf>