

Screen Sense: Setting the Record Straight

Research-Based Guidelines for Screen Use for Children Under 3 Years Old

The research is clear: Children learn better and more efficiently from play and interaction in the “real,” three-dimensional (3-D) world with parents, caregivers, and peers. The fact is, however, that young children now grow up in a world of technology—screens are everywhere. Not only are they enticing, children see their parents and teachers using screens, so naturally they are drawn to them. While there is no research showing that when children younger than 2 years old use these devices independently it enhances their development, research also shows that when parents and other trusted adults make screen use an interactive, shared experience, it can become a tool for learning, and the potential negative effects can be reduced. This resource provides guidelines for parents and caregivers of children younger than 3 years on how to use screens in ways that minimize the potential negative effects and maximize learning.

Quantity of Screen Time

Limit viewing time to ensure lots of time for interactive play and exploration of the real, 3-D world. Young children learn more quickly through interactions that take place during exploration of their actual, physical world. Setting limits is especially important because babies and toddlers are awake only so many hours a day, and most should be spent exploring their “real” world with you, their caregivers, and peers.

Parent Participation

Participate in the screen experience and make it a language-rich, interactive activity. Ask questions and talk about what you are watching together. Your support helps your child understand the content better and expands his learning.

Help your child make the connection between what she sees on a screen and the real world. Play games with her afterward using objects similar to what she has seen on the device, such as blocks or a ball. Point out and label objects in real life that she has seen on TV or on touchscreens, such as animals and flowers.

Create ways to extend your child’s learning from media.

If a program focuses on animals—such as an armadillo—when it’s over, make up a pretend story about armadillos that you and your child can act out. Apply the colors your child has learned from an app by labeling the colors of the family’s clothes as you sort laundry together.



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Background TV

Limit background TV when your child is playing or when you and your child are in a room together. There is a large body of research showing that background TV is detrimental to children's learning.

Turn the TV off when no one is watching.

Reserve time to watch adult-directed programming when children are asleep.

Content

Choose content very carefully. Be sure that the content reflects your child's experiences in the real world. Programming should provide a context that your child can relate to, that is organized around everyday themes, and that depicts positive interactions between people and characters that serve as models for your child.

Choose programs and apps with interactive components that engage your child's participation, that use strong story lines, and that model positive interactions between characters.

Avoid fast-paced programs, as research has shown they may (temporarily) impair young children's executive functioning—their ability to plan and organize information to reach a goal. For example, figuring out which blocks will work best to form a base for a tower so it won't fall down.



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Interactivity of the Screen

When using TV, apps, and touchscreens with your child, focus on the story and less on the technological features.

Ask her to point to pictures on the screen. Wonder together what might happen next. Spending too much time on the technology (the sounds and movement features of the e-book) can make it harder for your child to understand the storyline.

Screen Use and Sleep

Avoid screen media (televisions, mobile phones, computers, tablets) in children's bedrooms. Research shows a connection between screen devices in bedrooms and children having difficulty falling asleep. If your child's bedroom doubles as a common room, carefully monitor your child's viewing.

Avoid media before bedtime, as it can be very stimulating, making it hard for children to calm themselves to go to sleep.

Do not expose your child to violent screen content as it can interfere in children's sleep.

Screen Use and Obesity

Avoid snacking or having meals while watching TV to prevent excess calorie intake.

Remove screens (TV, mobile phones, computers, tablets) from your child's bedroom. Children who have a TV set in their bedroom are more likely to be overweight and to have viewed more TV (more than 4½ hours more per week) than children without a TV in their bedroom.

Effects of Parental Screen Use

Limit your own technology use—including mobile phones—when you are with your child. Research suggests that when parents are distracted by screens, it can lead to negative, attention-seeking child behaviors, resulting in angry and punitive responses from parents.

Use everyday moments, such as mealtime, as important opportunities to connect with your child through conversation and by creating positive experiences and associations around food. Turn off the TV, make a "no technology at the table" rule, and talk together as a family.

Conclusion

Although the body of research on the effect of screen media (beyond TV viewing) is still relatively limited, it clearly points to the following implications for parents and other caregivers:

- Be thoughtful about how you use media with young children.
- Set limits on screen time to be sure that children have plenty of time exploring the real, 3-D world with family and friends.
- Participate and make screen use interactive, talking about what children are seeing and encouraging them to use their minds and bodies as much as possible to maximize learning.
- Help children bridge the gap between content they are exposed to on screens—new words and concepts—and their real-life experiences.
- Be sure that the content is designed to promote learning for the children’s age. Ideally, the program or game should engage children interactively. The more children have to use their minds and bodies to use the media, the more they learn.
- Avoid having the TV on in the background. Turn the TV off when no one is watching.
- Avoid using screens as part of the bedtime routine.
- Ensure quality sleep by not allowing TVs and other screens in children’s bedrooms.
- Be mindful of and limit your own screen media use when children are present.

Finally, establish a healthy “media diet” from the start, as research shows that early programming choices predict later choices, and set future patterns of media viewing. While parents generally start out with limits on screen usage for young children—1 to 2 hours a day—with the vast majority of the programming being educational, media use tends to increase significantly as children get closer to 5 years old and to include fewer educational media choices.



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Key Research Findings Screen Sense: Setting the Record Straight

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