Screen Time – for Children and Parents

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For decades now, doctors, teachers, and developmental psychologists have been warning about the perils of TV viewing for children. Parents often feel guilty about letting their kids watch, but nevertheless continue to do so. 58% of kids under 8 watch TV at least once a day. 14% of children 6 – 23 months old watch two or more hours of media a day. A third (36%) of all kids have a TV in their bedroom. Over the past few decades, we have added many more screens into the mix. Children 8 and under now average 2 hours a day actively using a screen: 50% of that time is watching TV, 19% watching DVD's, 13% using mobile devices (tablets or smart phones), 10% on computers, and 9% on video game players. Children 8 – 18 average 6. 5 hours of screen time a day (more time than they spend in school) and much of that is media multi-tasking – texting while watching TV, listening to an IPod while working on a computer, etc. The biggest change in recent years has been mobile devices. In 2011, half of children had access to one. By 2013, three quarters did. 72% of children under 8 have used a mobile device for playing games, watching videos, or using apps. 17% use them on a daily basis. Even amongst children under 2, 38% have used a mobile device.

So, screen time is no longer just time spent in front of 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, in restaurants, doctor's offices, etc. And we use them in all those places! Not only do parents use mobile devices to distract kids (16% of parents use screens for their child when they need to go to a meeting or take a class, and 44% use device-distraction when they're running errands) but parents also use them to distract *themselves* while hanging out with kids (32% use them while their child plays in the playground.)

Given that screens are such a huge part of modern life, it doesn't make sense for educators to preach a "just say no" attitude toward screen use for children. Instead, we need to think about using screens consciously, aware of the benefits and risks, and keeping in mind our long-term goals for our kids.

Benefits of Screen Time for Kids

For young children (8 and under), the majority of the time they are spending with screens is spent with "educational content." Ever since the early days of Sesame Street in the late 60's, there has been a huge growth in educational media: television, computer games, and now apps. *High quality* educational media can have benefits for children age 2 to 8:

- High quality TV can lead to improved social skills, language skills, and school readiness. (AAP)
- 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.
- Story-telling, whether in books or video, allows children to experience social interaction and emotional challenges vicariously. Watching characters interact positively can teach manners and social graces. Watching a character deal with grief can help a child learn to manage it.
- Media can teach concrete skills, if the skill is demonstrated slowly and repeatedly. In one research study, children were shown a 20 second long video of an adult playing with a toy by taking it apart. 90% of 24 month olds, and 65% of 14 month olds were able to copy those actions. www.parentingcounts.org/information/documents/copycats-100-710-200907.pdf
- Media can also teach basic academic skills like ABC's and counting, and help children memorize basic facts, like the order of the planets or the order of the colors in the rainbow. The kinds of skills that can be learned by drilling with flash cards can typically be learned in a more engaging way with media.

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. One good source is Common Sense Media (see resource list.)

Also, the majority of the research has been done on children age 2 to 8, focusing on television viewing. There is very little research showing benefits of media for children under age 2.

There is also very little research on the modern experience of highly interactive touch-screen apps, though some theorize that these will be more effective "educators" than a passive screen experience.

It's also important to note that there is very little information that children can *only* learn from the screen. Parents who believe that educational media is very important for healthy development are likely to use media twice as much as other parents. But the AAP reminds us that "Unstructured playtime is more valuable for the developing brain than any electronic media exposure. If a parent is not able to actively play with a child, that child should have solo playtime with an adult nearby... solo play allows a child to think creatively, problem-solve, and accomplish tasks."

Benefits of Screen Time for Parents

Experts frown upon parents 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 and out of trouble while they make dinner, take a shower, do household chores, or work from home. Screens are one of the quickest ways to distract a kid. (Single parent families report more media use in their households, probably because they don't have a second parent available to entertain the kids while they get jobs done.)

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 in the background 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.

Mobile devices have added a new benefit. Parents have learned that they are remarkably effective at keeping a child quiet in environments such as doctor's offices, restaurants, and churches. (Of course, parents have also learned that trying to *take away* a mobile device in one of those areas, or having the battery die on a mobile device, can lead to a huge eruption of noise and disruption!)

Problems with Screen Time

Again, the majority of the research is on kids 2 to 8 years old, 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 (i.e. doesn't necessarily cause, but is related to) deficits in executive functioning – attention, memory, problem solving, impulse control, self-regulation and delayed gratification. Children younger than 2 who watch more television show delays in learning language.

Research may not show this specifically, but anecdotally, teachers report that children who use media often become passive, lose creativity, and forget how to entertain themselves without a screen.

Amongst 8 to 18 year olds surveyed, heavy users of media and moderate users when compared to light users (less than 3 hours a day) were: less likely to get good grades, more likely to say they have a lot of friends, less likely to get along well with parents, less likely to be happy at school, are more often bored, more often sad or unhappy, and report that they get into trouble a lot.

Media can be addictive. The more toddlers watch, the more they want to watch, and the more upset they are when it is taken away. Many parents report that it is 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, 40% feel lonely when unable to go online (www.dailymail.co.uk/sciencetech/article-2017543/Britons-deprived-internet-feel-upset-lonely.html#ixzz1T7IEFW00)

It may not be that media itself is harmful – some of the issues may be what kids miss out on when they spend time on screens. One study showed that for young kids, every hour of TV time meant 50 minutes less per day of interaction with parents and siblings and ten minutes less of play. (cited in AAP report) We know hands-on play, human connection, eye contact, and interactive conversation are essential for learning many skills. When children are on screens, they simply get less of that.

When parents are also engaged in their own screen use, this further limits interaction. There are plenty of articles and opinion pieces bemoaning the sight of parents looking away from their child's eyes and into their IPads. There are also plenty of blog posts from parents defending their right to take a sanity break now and then, and defending their need to distract their child while they tend to the business of the day. Both sides have good points – and both sides may be more strident than they need be. As with many things in the life of a parent, we need to find our own way, thinking intentionally about our priorities, and striking a balance that works for our family.

Making Screen Time Work

- Plan what your child views; preview what they use: Choose developmentally appropriate programs and tools that teach skills you want your child to learn and demonstrate values that align with your family's values.
    - For babies and toddlers especially, choose slow-paced shows and games, with calm backgrounds and without loud, jarring sounds and actions. Choose shows where the characters do everyday things that children do, like go to the park, take a bath, or spend time with friends at preschool. These shows may seem boring or goofy to you, but they engage young children without overwhelming them.
        - Shows that focus on fantasy / unrealistic experiences (a trip to the moon or a superhero battle) do not engage the brain as well as those that involve everyday experiences familiar to your child.
        - Fast-paced TV grabs the attention of the sensory / motor parts of the brain, but doesn't engage the pre-frontal lobes which relate to attention, and decision-making. In an experiment, children were assigned to a 9 minute activity: drawing, watching a slow-paced educational TV show, or watching a fast-paced entertainment show. Afterwards, children were given four tests that looked at executive function. Kids who had been drawing performed the best on these tasks, those who watched educational TV performed less well; those who watched fast-paced TV performed poorly on all four tasks. (Source: The Immediate Impact of Different Types of Television on Young Children's Executive Function – Lillard and Peterson - http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/early/2011/09/08/peds.2010-1919.full.pdf.)
        - Children this age also respond well to shows where the television characters occasionally speak directly to the child, or ask the child to participate in some way – "can you help me find Blue's paw print?"
    - Pay attention to the way social / emotional issues are presented in the stories. Research found that some shows that aim to teach good behavior instead model negative interaction. They may 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, etc.) Young children remember the emotionally-charged content at the beginning of the show more than they remember the pleasant resolution at the end. They may then practice bad behavior for the next few days…

- o Pay attention to what academic skills 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 such as Common Sense media to learn more before letting your child use a product.
- o Choose the right tools: infants may respond best to touchscreen devices that let them learn hands-on. School age children may learn hand-eye coordination and decision making through video games, and can learn important school/work skills by using a computer. Tweens can practice communication skills with a cell phone. Facebook and other social networking are appropriate for teens, with guidance.
- o It's important to know what sites our children are using online, and what they're doing there. Limit access to the Internet, use systems to block inappropriate content, know how to check the browser history (but don't tell your child how to clear it!). Consider limiting internet use to public spaces of house, where parents can see / listen in.
  - You may need to learn new tech skills to keep up with your child's abilities.
- o 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 devices have systems which 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
  - o Although 40% of parents say they always watch TV with their child, many others report that they do not, because the whole reason they're letting their child use media is so they can get other things done while the child watches! (AAP) But, when possible, watch with your child, play games with your child, or watch while they use an app.
  - o 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 – children often don't understand everything they see on the screen
    - Quiz them about what they saw: "What's the closest planet to the sun?"
    - Practice skills they used with the media – if they were practicing tracing letters on a touchscreen, give them fingerpaints or a pencil and let them practice more
    - Act out a show together, or use puppets to re-tell the story you just viewed, or make up new stories with the same characters
    - 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 with me now?"
  - o Co-watching give you opportunities to share your values with them.
    - 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.

- o Co-watching or playing games together helps us to connect with our kids. It's another way to have fun playing together with something that captures their interest.

- Don't feel like media is an essential tool in the education of your child.
  - o The best preparation for school and life involves you spending time with them, reading, talking, exploring things hands-on, and exposing them to diverse experiences.
  - o Children who live in households with heavy media use are read to less, and read less. Make a conscious commitment to read to your children more often. Even after they can read themselves, you can continue to read to them – choosing books that are a little above their reading level – or you can read a book together.
  - o When you are using media, tie it into real life. For example, if they see a TV show about an animal, go to the zoo to see that animal in person, paint a mask of the animal at home, go on the internet to learn more, and then pretend to be that animal.

- Eliminate background TV – or be conscious about your use. In addition to the times that children are actively using media (cited above), they are also exposed to background television – when the TV is on but no one is really watching it, or when a parent is watching TV while the child is theoretically engaged in other activities. Children between 8 months and 8 years are exposed to an average of 232 minutes a day of background TV. (http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/130/5/839.full) This media distracts the parent's attention and significantly reduces how much time the parent spends talking to the child (and since a child's vocabulary growth depends on interaction, this can cause language delays). It also distracts the child: 1 – 3 year old children have shorter attention spans when the TV is on, moving from one task to another quickly.

- Avoid couch potato behavior:
  - o Don't eat in front of the TV. This unconscious eating may well lead to obesity increases seen in those with heavy media use.
  - o 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.
  - o Do other physical activities while watching TV. Exercise? Stretch? Fold laundry?

- Keep screens out of the bedroom.
  - o Internet access in the bedroom increases the chances of children accessing inappropriate content of all sorts.
  - o 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.
  - o 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. (AAP)

- 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:
  - o 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…
  - o 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 children to ask you whether it's OK to turn on media.
    - 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 than that for kids under 2
        - Count total screen time: TV + DVD + video games + computer time + mobile device. Make sure that tablet time is replacing TV or other screen time, not displacing physical play, reading or other essential activities.
        - Consider a screen curfew for the whole family – a time at night when the screens go off. We know that screen use (especially blue light from screens) too close to bedtime can disrupt sleep (see above).

- Encourage balanced activities
    - Environment: Set up your house so that the screens are off in a corner, or in rarely used rooms, versus 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.
    - Model good behavior. Turn off your screens or set them aside for a portion of each day. Model a balanced life of social time, physical activity, time outdoors, reading, etc.
    - 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 in a meeting (like say, reading to them) then you may want to consider setting aside the device for now…
    - 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.

Reviews of kid's media and other tips at: www.commonsensemedia.org
Major sources (others cited in text):
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