Thinking through children's screen time



How much screen time is okay for kids? It's a question many of us are asking. Here are two answers to it.

The Brief Answer

At the time of this being published, the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends:

- No screen time at all for children from newborn until 18 to 24 months (except for video chatting),
- One hour or less of screen time per day for children 2 to 5 years of age, and
- Developing a Family Media Plan for children 6 and older.

This Family Media Plan is designed to help put limits on screen usage, have media use discussions as a family, and consider media use and broader aspects of a balanced life, including sleep and physical activity.

The Long Answer

The question of how much screen time is okay for kids is about more than just numbers. For that, let's consider a second, longer way to answer this question. In doing so, here are five observations.

There's still a lot we don't know

Even within the research community, there remain differences of opinion about the benefits and harms of screen time for children. But one point of agreement from individuals on both sides is how much still isn't known. The technological changes that have occurred in the last two decades are unprecedented in human history. Corresponding longitudinal research investigating these changes and their effect on the development of children and families, however, is still in the very early stages.

Not all screen time is the same

This may seem obvious, but this fact – that not all screen time is the same – has some important implications. As a parent (or other caring adult), do you know how "screen time" is being spent – what videos your child is watching, what sites your child is visiting, and what online conversations your child is having (and with whom)...both within the home and outside of it? And are there open lines of communication such that your child will share this information with you? This does not imply being a police officer to your child, but children need a parent's nurturing and guidance. Children will have to manage their own digital life one day. We want to set them up with the ability to do this effectively.

Screens are not going away, and all of us (children and parents) can work to ensure we are intentional about our use, and our non-use, of screens for the good of our children and our families.



Not all kids are the same

Technology affects children in different ways. Here's a clear example – prolonged time on social media, specifically Instagram, appears to be particularly harmful for teenage girls and their mental health. Think about your child. In what ways is your child susceptible to negative influences of technology, and what can be done in response?

Your child is unique in many wonderful ways, including unique tendencies that can be negatively influenced depending how screen time is spent. How is screen time shaping your child's proclivities, whether it's inclinations to be aggressive, sedentary, withdrawn, or easily distracted?

Time spent watching screens replaces time spent in other ways

Researchers who study development and learning commonly discuss the importance of active (versus passive) learning. Suffice to say, a lot of screen time involves passive learning or passive entertainment.

In the process of incorporating more and more screen time into daily life (and thereby more passive learning), what opportunities and experiences have been replaced or lost? Are there times and spaces to actively learn – to create, play, think, explore, build, pretend, and engage in a host of other activities that have characterized childhood throughout history? Have any experiences you want for your child been unintentionally lost or replaced that you would like to bring back?

Supportive parenting matters, a lot

This point, although not directly about screen time, is worth emphasizing. There is a lot we don't know about child development, but one finding is clear across cultures, time, education, and pretty much every other factor – having a supportive parent or caregiver is powerful! And for youth encountering adversity or hardship, supportive parenting helps to make children more resilient.

So, regardless of how much (or how little) screen time your child has, make sure you are spending quality and quantity time with your child, demonstrating through words and actions your unwavering love and support for them, their ideas, their activities and hobbies, and who they are becoming.

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Additional Resources

Family Media Plan (American Academy of Pediatrics) | bit.ly/3Fi1bmO

Common Sense Media | commonsensemedia.org

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