

Can Toddler Screen Time Be Educational?

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The American Academy of Pediatrics is known to guilty parents everywhere for advising against any screen time for children under 18 months, and very cautious usage after that, with no more than an hour of “high quality programming” for kids age 2-5. But in this day and age, when media is everywhere, the pediatricians group now recognizes that it’s time to go beyond “turn it off.”

It’s important, they note, for parents to recognize that not all screen time is created equal. Some TV shows, games and apps are more developmentally appropriate for preschool children than others. And just as important as the choice of media itself is the role you play in *how* your child consumes it.

What’s the big deal about toddler screen time?

While many apps and television shows are marketed as being educational for young children, countless studies have shown that even the best of them cannot compete with real life activities and human interaction.

A seminal study from the University of Washington a decade ago compared the results of a group of seven-month-olds who interacted in real life with a Mandarin Chinese speaker and comparable groups who watched a DVD or just listened to audio. The group who listened to the live tutor were quickly able to distinguish Mandarin sounds from English, while the other groups acquired no recognition of the language (watch a video of Dr. Kimberly Noble describing the experiment here).

“What that tells us,” says Sarah Lytle, Director of Outreach and Education at the University of Washington Institute for Brain Sciences, “is at least in the very early age children need that live human experience and the technology is not an adequate substitute.”

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Dr. Lytle highlights several factors that make social interaction far more effective for small children. “If you’re looking at the screen,” she says, “you don’t get the speaker’s eye gaze in the same way you would if the person was sitting right in front of you. People on the screen can’t be responsive to you and do that back-and-forth exchange like a live human.”

Just as important as the choice of media itself is how your child consumes it.

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She also notes that whatever is on the screen is in two dimensions. “As adults we go back and forth between two dimensions and three dimensions very fluently. For kids that’s actually a really difficult task and it takes them a long time until they’re able to really go back and forth and match what’s in two dimensions on a screen with what’s actually in three dimensions in the real world.”

Body learning

Another thing parents should keep in mind about toddler development, explains Matthew Cruger, the director of the Learning and Development Center at the Child Mind Institute, is that gross motor skills come before fine motor skills. “Using apps and TV viewing tend to be sedentary activities,” he notes, “so it’s not an opportunity for them to use their bodies to explore and to integrate thinking as much as something that involves some physical movement.”

Susan Schwartz, a learning specialist at Friends Seminary and the Child Mind Institute, elaborates. “When children manipulate objects — real life, whole body movement with 3D objects — there is more visual and tactile input to their brain so that they are interacting in a more holistic way. So while they are learning the motions to swipe on a phone or match a picture on an app, they’re not developing that whole body understanding of where they are in space, how they’re interacting with materials.” For parents who are looking for educational activities for toddlers, playing with blocks actually teaches a more valuable and developmentally appropriate lesson.

Toddler screen time should be interactive

Experts say that parents looking for educational value in programming and apps should preference ones that have some sort of interactive element. When it comes to young children, Schwartz explains that for something to be truly interactive, the child must be “able to understand the rules and directions fairly easily, depending on the child’s developmental level.”

Dr. Cruger notes that toddlers tend to do better with slower-paced programming. “They need more time, more practice and more opportunities for learning, so things that are fast and quick or brief really don’t match their style of engagement. Or their style of cognition.”

Schwartz also recommends multi-sensory experiences: “There should be multiple inputs of stimulation — they’re looking, they’re listening and then they’re swiping. Or they’re taking a picture of something that’s real and they’re doing something with it.”

Parents are the interactive element

But perhaps the most important form of interactivity is what happens with parents as they participate in toddler screen time. “Simple screen time just with the child watching the show or playing with the app,” notes Dr. Cruger, “is far less valuable than when it also involves direct interaction with the parents.”

“The new buzz term,” says Dr. Lytle, “is *joint media engagement*, which means you’re going to interact with your child around screens just like you would interact with your child around any kind of media, whether it’s a book, or art material.”

Parents needn’t feel guilty about every moment of screen time, she adds. “If you need to take a shower and the kid is going to watch TV for 20 minutes, totally fine. There’s no evidence that’s going to in any way harm their development. But I think if you want that to be an educational experience, understand that you need to be with the child, watching the screen with them and asking those kinds of deeper scaffolding questions and really engaging in that media experience with the child.”

And of course screens can be used for young children to interact with real people. “One of the great uses of iPads or iPhones is communicating with friends and relatives who do not live nearby,” says Schwartz. “This is a *great* use of technology.”

Apps should be open-ended

An open-ended, responsive, choose your own adventure-style app is more likely to have educational benefits than one that is linear, experts agree. The play should be child-led, rather than app-led.

Dr. Lytle cites the classic saying that any toy that your child is playing with should be 10 percent toy, 90 percent child. “As with toys, that’s something we would suggest in an app. Things that are more open-ended allow a child to really create and be creative and interact with the app.”

[Any toy that your child is playing with should be 10 percent toy, 90 percent child.](#)

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She recommends that parents check out [Common Sense Media’s](#) rating system for TV shows, movies and apps. Independent reviewers evaluate whether they are age-appropriate, if there are any caveats in terms of content, and how educational they are. “I think that it demystifies things a little bit,” she says, “and gives parents a clearer picture of what’s going on.”

Detailed reviews on the site discuss the learning activities an app offers, the quality of content, the pacing, and the level of difficulty. They even offer topics for family discussion about the programming.

Entertainment for entertainment's sake

So much pressure has been put on parents to find educational apps and TV shows for their kids that it's easy to lose sight of the fact that it can also be simply a form of entertainment.

"I think that it's completely fine if media is entertainment," says Dr. Lytle. "We just need to understand and manage expectations around which circumstances are which. Certainly media that's entertainment is fine for kids as long as the amount of time is moderate and the content is appropriate. Just like many adults like to watch TV to unwind at the end of the day, it can be a fun treat for kids too, and that's okay."

Dr. Cruger notes that the social stories in children's programming can be very interesting to kids, and worth reinforcing by parents in conversation. "*Daniel Tiger* might be a good example of that, with messages about sharing, about working together, that are really great."

Don't be afraid of quiet time

There's a lot of pressure on parents to fill every minute of their child's day with engaging, educational activities, and apps and TV seem like an easy way to fill that quota. But "I don't think kids need to be busy all day long," says Schwartz.

"I think that quiet time is important. A child can sit with a book and there's something to be said for learning to turn the page, deciding if the book is right side up or upside down, they're making their own stimulation as opposed to the phone being on and stimulating." There's developmental value in kids having to figure out their own entertainment once in a while, rather than having it all fed to them.

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