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The New Screen Time: Computers, Tablets, and Smartphones Enter the Equation

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Abstract

Emerging technologies attract children and push parents' and caregivers' abilities to attend to their families. This article presents recommendations related to the new version of screen time, which includes time with computers, tablets, and smartphones. Recommendations are provided for screen time for very young children and those in middle and late childhood. Recommendations for screen time for adults—particularly important when adults are around their children—are included as well. In addition, the article provides information about integrating the recommendations into practice with Extension and other community audiences.

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Introduction

The emergence of smartphone and tablet technology has brought the notion of screen time, once applied only to television, to virtually every aspect of modern life. Smartphones and tablets have become part of our culture, and people need to make decisions about when and how much screen time for their families is appropriate. Limiting children's screen time is paramount; however, adults' limiting of their own screen time during family activities also requires attention. Studies have shown that excessive media consumption, including consumption of Internet media, can lead to attention difficulties, school problems, sleeping and eating disorders, depression, and overweight and/or obesity, including in children (Hale & Guan, 2015). Moreover, family life educators recognize intrusive screen time as a detriment to family development (Lanigan & Power, 2008).

Recommendations

Extension professionals can share with clientele important recommendations about screen time for children, adults, and families. Such recommendations include those presented here, which are from the American Academy of Pediatrics, Mayo Clinic, and the National Institutes of Health, among other entities.

Families with Very Young Children

Very young children should be severely limited in their amounts of screen time and ideally should have none before the age of 2. Young children's brains are developing rapidly, and they benefit most from interpersonal communication with others. Screen time, regardless of whether it is from a television, a tablet, or a smartphone, is not nearly as stimulating as interaction with other humans. Human interaction is much more important in early childhood than during any other stage of life-span development.

Families with Children Aged 6 to 17

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that parents create "screen-free" zones at home for all their children (American Academy of Pediatrics, n.d.). Most important, children's bedrooms should have no screen-based devices, including tablets, computers, and televisions. About half of children aged 6 to 17 have televisions in their bedrooms (Gingold, Simon, & Schoendorf, 2014). Although eliminating screens from a child's bedroom might at first seem like a punishment, the reality is that children of all ages can benefit from alternative activities. Working crossword puzzles, reading books, engaging in hobbies such as model building or learning to play a musical instrument, and playing outdoors are all tremendously beneficial alternatives to spending time in front of a screen. These activities stimulate a child's brain in ways that no screen technology can come close to mimicking.

Use of Screens for Family Fun

Beyond the AAP recommendations, Kansas State Research and Extension further recommends that *if* adults decide to allow screens to be more fully incorporated into their children's lives, they should do everything in their power to engage in screen time with their children in active ways. Sitting together and watching a TV show is very passive. However, parents can use the TV to interact, creating opportunities to engage with their children. For example, if people on the TV are dancing, parents can dance with their children. Additionally, tablets and smartphones can be used to find performances of favorite music, and families can sing and dance to these while watching.

Tablets and smartphones offer the opportunity to play interactive games as well. The problem-solving skills associated with these kinds of puzzles and games are important; however, decades of research have demonstrated that having a more skilled person assisting a child provides a much richer and more valuable learning experience than that which occurs when a child merely acts alone (Rogoff, 2003). Although a parent should not just solve any puzzle or game for a child, the parent can help the child by asking questions, offering some instruction, providing feedback, suggesting different ways of thinking about the puzzle or game, and serving as a model for how to act when feeling frustrated, elated, or somewhere in between.

Adult Screen Time with Children

Recommendations for children's screen time account for only half of the equation. Adults are just as

drawn to screens as children and do not have the benefit of an authority figure watching out for them. A good rule for phone and tablet use is that parents should put these devices away whenever they are with their children. If an adult is unable or unwilling to take such action, it is best to restrict device use so that engaging with others while around the device is possible.

Although intermittent screen time is tempting for adults, quick looks "just to check email" often turn into longer periods of time on a device. The cost of paying attention to email, then, is that the adult is not paying attention to his or her children. Children deserve the attention of the adults in their lives, whereas email, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, BuzzFeed, texts, and phone calls can wait.

Whole-Family Screen Time at Home

Limiting all children to 1 to 2 hr of screen time is recommended by the National Institutes of Health (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, National Institutes of Health, National Heart, Lung, and Blood Institute, 2013). Beyond removing screens from children's rooms, families can be encouraged to adhere to the following guidelines to limit children's screen time:

- Do not watch TV during meals (Gunter, Rice, & Trost, 2012; Helfrich, Fetsch, & Jefferson, 2011; Lanigan & Power, 2008).
- Do not text or talk on the phone during meals or when outside with your family. The phone is for your convenience and nobody else's.
- Do not leave a TV on for background noise. Using a radio, streaming audio, or even listening to white noise is a much more healthful choice. You can even talk about the songs you are hearing and/or let each family member choose a station on a rotating basis.
- If you must watch TV or use the computer, decide *in advance* what you will view. To make sure time does not slip away, set a timer on your watch, phone, computer, or other device. For TV, you can use the sleep timer to make sure the TV turns off.
- Remember that you are the model for your children. If *you* do not control your screen time, you send a strong message that they need not control theirs.

Conclusion

The bottom line is that most screen time is not developmentally appropriate for children or families. Although screens are ubiquitous in today's society, applied developmental professionals (e.g., Extension agents) can serve a powerful role in helping families develop sound screen time profiles, thus making meaningful differences in children's lives and family members' positive involvement and engagement with one another. There is no escaping the new screen time, but we can navigate this new reality with sound research-based practices.

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