

# Does 'screen time' negatively affect my child's language development?

Growing evidence suggests that screen time may in fact have some negative consequences for young children's development.

In a new study of nearly 900 children between six months and two years, researchers found that those who spent more time using handheld devices were more likely to have delays in expressive speech, compared to children who didn't use the devices as much.

For every 30 minutes of screen time, there was a 49% increased risk of expressive speech delay. The research, which was led by pediatricians at the Hospital for Sick Children in Canada, was presented at the annual meeting of the Pediatric Academic Societies

The researchers say they did not find any effect of screen time on other communication skills, such as gesturing, body language or social interactions.

In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends against handheld devices or computers for children under 18 months, and instead encourages parents to take advantage of this critical time by engaging directly with their infants.

For one, the latest studies suggest children that young aren't able to understand the connection between the two-dimensional world on the screen and the three-dimensional world around them. "Even if they can mimic what they see on the screen, they can't always transfer that to the real world and the rest of their lives," (Paediatrician Ms Radesky). "Symbolic thinking and memory flexibility is something that apps haven't been able to overcome, no matter how interactive they are."

Ms Radesky went on to say that- "What's important is creating unplugged spaces and time so families can create boundaries for screen time. Making space for live, face-to-face interactions with children might not be easy, but it appears to be important".

So, is screen time ok for older children? The good news is that the American Academy of Pediatrics updated its recommendations in November 2016 on how much time kids should spend on screens to reflect the new role that digital devices play in family lives. In a nutshell, the recommendations were:

- **0-18 months**– No media use at all is recommended for children under 18 months. The only exception to this recommendation is if families use Skype or FaceTime (video-chat technologies) to stay connected with one another, so long as parental support is included as part of this screen-time activity.
- **WHY NO SCREEN-TIME?** We know that infants' brains are undergoing rapid neurological development in the first three years of life especially (85% of brain architecture is believed to be formed in the first three years). Given infants have such limited waking hours, we have to ensure that screens aren't eroding their key developmental priorities such as sleep, play, physical movement,

language and nutrition. The premature introduction of screens has not, at this point in time, been shown to have benefits to an infant.

- **1.5 - 2 year olds**– Parental co-viewing, otherwise referred to as ‘shared media use’ is strongly encouraged at this age. Where possible, children should be using and viewing media *with* an adult and should be using quality, educational media (and limited entertainment at this age). There are some distinctions between educational and entertainment media. The AAP specifically recommended children’s media producers, PBS kids and Sesame Street Workshop because they design media based on kids’ learning needs and adhere to developmental guidelines. The ABC would also meet this criteria.
- Research has still yet to demonstrate the benefits of media use for children under the age of two. However, there appears to be learning benefits, as long as a parent is actively engaged in the co-viewing experience with young children as it’s an opportunity to hear and use language and build relationships.
- **2 - 5 year olds**– Limit media use to no more than one hour per day for pre-schoolers. This is despite studies that show most pre-schoolers are consuming 2 hours/day of screen media. Again, parents should be seeking high-quality educational and pro-social media content, and should continue to co-view the media experience with their child.
- **WHY CO-VIEWING?** There’s ample research that tells us that co-viewing enhances children’s learning when using screens. Co-viewing helps young children make meaning from the screen and connect the 2D situation to a real-life, 3D experience (research also tells us that a ‘video deficit’ persists until kids are about 30 months, meaning that they find it hard to make meaning from a screen, as compared to a real-life, hands-on experience).
- **6 years +**– For children aged 6 years and older parents, educators and health professionals must ensure that media use does not supersede essential developmental activities like play, relationships (i.e. time with friends and family), and sleep. The document states, “...make sure media does not take the place of adequate sleep, physical activity and other behaviours essential to health.”
- Parents are also encouraged to take time away from screens and engage in other (off-screen) activities with their child. The AAP suggested that children really need active media mentors that are alert, aware and involved in their children’s online activities.
- Parents should also consider establishing tech-free zones and times. The AAP now specifically state no media use one hour before bedtime and during meals (screen dinners) and in the car.
- A **great online tool** that was released by the AAP is via the HealthyChildren.org website which provides a simple online tool to calculate healthy screen-time limits. Parents can enter details that will enable them to

calculate healthy screen-time limits, based on their child's chronological age and other developmental details. You can create a media plan there as well.

- It was also good to see that the AAP are encouraging parents, educators and health professionals to look beyond simply quantifying 'how much' screen-time children accrue each day. In particular, they propose that parents consider *when* kids use screens (use before or during sleep time can impede the quality and quantity of sleep) and *where* they use screens (and equally as important- where are the tech-free zones).

Some other key recommendations that were released in the document include:

- Turn off all devices when not in use.
- Keep an eye on what they're watching or using, try it yourself, talk to them about it.
- No screens in bedroom, at the meal table or while you're playing with them. Just go ahead and use the do not disturb option on your own phone.
- Because screens interfere with sleep, no screens for an hour before bedtime, and keep them somewhere other than the bedroom overnight.

There are some important questions to consider, which the AAP did not touch on.

- *what* kids are doing with screens. Is it leisure or learning? Is it active or passive? Are they creating, communicating, collaborating or consuming?  
And
- *how* kids use screens. There are potential risks to children's physical health and development if screens are used prematurely, excessively or inappropriately. In particular, there are potential risks to their vision, hearing and posture, as well as their social and emotional development if screens are used in the wrong ways.

By no means should we avoid 'screens'- but let's not allow them to take over and dictate life. I've seen teenagers text each other a question / answer- when they are sitting in the same room as each other! Let's not lose the power and skill of verbal communication. Instead, let's find ways to make clever use of screens and incorporate them appropriately and safely into our lives.

Acknowledgement for information sourced through -

- Dr. Kristy Goodwin (<http://drkristygoodwin.com>)
- Time Health (<http://time.com/4769571/smartphone-speech-delays/>)