Managing Screen Time

Key Vocabulary

screen time
The amount of time spent in front of a digital device, whether it's a computer, cellphone, tablet, or television.

Introduction

For parents raising kids a decade ago, managing screen time could be as simple as putting the television in the family room and clicking the power button when it was time to move on to another activity. Today, devices are increasingly used in school settings to support learning, and in many other places outside of the home. Plus, the sheer number of apps and devices — and the fact that many are completely mobile — can make managing kids' screen time seem like a nearly impossible feat.

"Ever since we got the Touch Pads, MY kids aren't glued to the Television!"

Although technology has a tremendous amount to offer, too much time in front of screens can interfere with kids getting enough sleep at night or may even cause them to struggle in school or in social situations. Monitoring screen time is especially important for parents of younger kids: The American Association of Pediatricians actually recommends a limit of 1 hour of screen time a day for kids aged 2-5, and suggests no screen time for kids under 2. Of course, these guidelines may or may not make sense for *your* family. So, what are the reasons for these guidelines, and how can you figure out how to adapt and adopt rules that make sense for your family?

Today's case focuses on how to effectively manage kids' screen time. In Part 1, you will read Dr. Mark Berin's article "Putting your kids on a healthy media diet." In the article, Dr. Berin highlights recent research studies on kids and screen time. In Part 2, you will take a critical look at one commercial that advertises a device with a built-in function for screen time limits. The commercial paves the way for a conversation about different approaches for parenting screen time.

The Case: Part 1

"Putting your kids on a Healthy Media Diet" Mark Berin, M.D. (October 29, 2014)[1]

There's an interesting article winding up in parent's e-mailboxes these days containing an unexpected implied message from late Apple founder Steve Jobs: Manage your child's use of technology. A stunned *New York Times* reporter remarked "So, your kids must love the iPad?" and apparently Jobs replied that this, well, was not quite the case. "They haven't used it," Jobs replied. "We limit how much technology our kids use at home."

Screen time seems to be taking over childhood. One estimate puts combined exposure at an incredible 7.5 hours a day for kids ages 8-18. **Surveys show that 72 percent of children go to bed at night in a room with at least one type of screen at their disposal.** Hopefully, Jobs' intuitive remark is helping get the message through to parents: For their own well-being, we must monitor and educate children about how to use technology well.

A Cascade of Negativity

Study after study suggests that excessive screen time is associated with various negative outcomes. Topping the list: obesity, poor academic performance, aggressive behaviors, attention problems, lack of social skills, and inadequate sleep. **Having electronics in the bedroom, including television or a cell phone, may rob a child of an hour of much-needed sleep a night.** Too much media time potentially displaces other healthy pursuits including physical, social, creative or academic activities.

Now, **a new study out of the University of California suggests that the amount of time kids devote to technology may inhibit their ability to recognize emotion.** The study, published in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*, found sixth-graders who went cold turkey on technology during a five-day camp trip became significantly better at reading facial expressions and with other nonverbal skills than a similar group who carried on life as usual, attached to smartphones, iPads, computers, and television.

This type of research is a wake-up call for parents as well as educators. The capacity to effectively process emotional cues is essential to personal, social, and educational success. As a species, we evolved to become productive social beings through face-to-face interaction. There is already plenty of research regarding what children do and do not learn about the social world through media, and evidence suggests that most kids learn better from live interaction than from screens.

Using Technology, or Used By It?

This is not to put the kibosh on technology. When used appropriately, it is wonderful. It's part of our lives and will continue to be. We just have to make sure our children (and parents, too) use it in a considered, sensible way. When we monitor both screen time and content, children develop healthy, productive relationships with this growing part of our modern lives.

Recent research, reported in JAMA Pediatrics, shows that **parental guidance around media does work. In fact, that one variable alone has a positive result on multiple aspects of child development.** The study, which involved more than 1,300 third- and fourth-graders, demonstrated that "parental monitoring of media has protective effects on a wide range of academic, social, and physical child outcomes."

While more and more technology makes achieving this end a big challenge, it can be done. **The American Academy of Pediatrics prescribes that total screen time for children 2 to 5 be limited to one hour a day. For children 6 and older, they suggest placing consistent limits on the time spent using media. It also recommends none at all for younger children.** Whatever works for an individual home, creating common-sense, firm boundaries around media is a concrete step parents can take to help children thrive. (…)
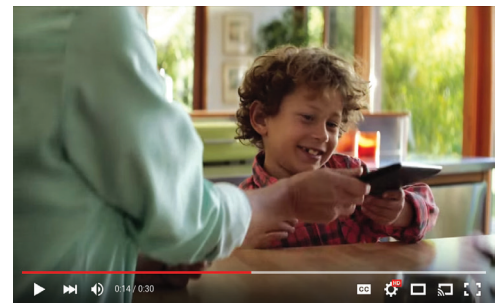
Consider

- Is any information in Dr. Berin's article new or surprising to you?

- What are the biggest challenges to monitoring your kids' screen time?

- What do you think about the American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines? Why do -- or why don't -- they seem appropriate?

- Does the quality of the content or the type of screen-time activity change the conversation? If so, how?

- How do you monitor screen time during play dates at your home? At others' homes?

- Do you think screen-time rules should be different for older versus younger kids? How might you change your parenting approach as your kids get older?

The Case: Part 2

Watch the commercial for the Kindle Fire HD. (We recommend you watch it twice, since it's only 30 seconds!)

▶ **https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eiw1npOWpW0**

Consider

- What is your immediate reaction to the commercial?

- What do you see as one positive and one negative outcome of this type of technology feature?

- What messages about parenting and technology are reflected in the commercial?

- The narrator says, "FreeTime … lets you set limits on how your kids watch and play, and lets them know when their time's up … so *you* don't have to." As a parent, does this idea make you feel comforted or unsettled?

- Screen time is an important part of the equation, but it's only one component of monitoring kids' media use. Do you have any rules in your house about media diets other than just screen time?

REFERENCES

[1] Read the full article at: http://www.huffingtonpost.com/mark-bertin-md/putting-your-kids-on-a-he_b_6053570.html

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- **Start by taking a pulse on your family's media use.**

  You shouldn't be afraid to make — and modify — rules that make sense for your family, but it's helpful to start by getting a realistic picture of what your kids' media use looks like. Lessening screen time effectively starts with becoming aware of when and how your kids are actually engaged with their screens. Take a 24-hour period and track kids' media use (feel free to use to our **media log** to help). What kinds of media are they engaging with? How does media use differ on weeknights versus weekends?

- **Not all screen time is created equal.**

  There's a huge difference between an hour spent shooting zombies and an hour spent learning vocabulary from a smartphone app or composing music online. Think about what kids are doing, in addition to *how long* they're doing it for. And, although there's nothing wrong with a little mindless entertainment, you can maximize your kid's screen time if you consider the 4 C's:

  - **Connection.** It's really important that kids connect on a personal level with what they're watching, playing, or reading. Are they engaged? Engrossed? Maybe even enlightened? Getting into a story line or identifying with characters primes kids for more learning.

  - **Critical thinking.** Look for media that takes a deep dive into a topic, subject, or skill. Maybe it's games in which kids wrestle with ethical dilemmas or strategize about bypassing obstacles. Rote quizzing and simple Q&A-style games may be fun and seem educational, but they may not help kids find deep or long-lasting meaning.

  - **Creativity.** An important feature of many great learning products is the ability for kids to create new content — a new level for a video game or a song, for instance. Kids can feel more ownership of their learning when they get to put their own spins on the experience.

  - **Context.** Help your kids understand how their media fits into the larger world. For younger kids in particular, the discussions and activities surrounding games or movies are key. Being with kids while they play or watch, asking questions about what they're taking away, and doing related offline activities can extend learning.

  Keep in mind that regular breaks from technology are also important — they not only make a difference in the amount of screen time, but also help kids get comfortable disengaging and putting devices away.

- **Get to the root of the problem.**

  If the issue you're most worried about is technology displacing other activities, consider not only limiting screen time, but also encouraging more active play during tech-free time. If you're concerned that social skills suffer when all of kids' interactions are digital, make a point to connect offline as a family (no technology during dinner is one way to practice this regularly). If the issue is that kids aren't getting enough sleep at night, consider keeping devices out of their bedrooms altogether or, at a minimum, at night when they're heading for bed. Whether it's because kids become engrossed in binge-watching YouTube videos or a TV show, or because the glow of the screen or the influx of text messages keeps their brains too stimulated to really relax, technology interferes with sleep for many, many kids.

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Digital Dilemmas are brief hypothetical situations and corresponding questions designed to foster cross-generational conversations about different aspects of adolescents' digital lives. Use this fictitious scenario, based on real-life stories, to spark a conversation at home with your children and open up the discussion about these very important topics.

"Put away your phone," "close the laptop," and "turn off the television" — Liana felt like she was constantly policing her kids' screen time. But her kids felt like they were constantly having to explain themselves: "I'm doing homework," "I'm trying to figure out my plans," "This is the first minute I've spent relaxing all day," or "My friend needs me." Everyone in the family was exhausted by negotiating tech time. Liana wanted to make sure she was doing her part to raise kids who could actually have a conversation and weren't totally addicted to their devices. Her kids kept telling her she was overreacting and that their screen time wasn't just fun and games; they needed technology for all their responsibilities.

? What seems realistic (or unrealistic) about this story?

? Do you think Liana is right to be wary about her kids' screen time, or is she just out of touch?

? How much screen time do you think is too much? Does the reason for using a device (homework, fun, social media, gaming) make a difference?

? What advice would you give to this family to try to make everyone feel more comfortable with how the kids use technology? Is this an inevitable source of conflict, or are there ways to alleviate some of the frustrations?

Are there any times of day when you think it's a good idea to unplug (before bed, first thing in the morning, during meals, after school)? Why, or why not?