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Developmental Psychology

Tips for parents – from research to everyday life

#3: (How) is a sensible use of screen media possible for children?



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Mobile phones, televisions, computers, video games... screens are omnipresent in our modern everyday life. Therefore, it is not surprising that the use of screen media by children is increasing ¹⁾. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, where many other activities are limited and children spend more time at home, parents want to know: How much screen time is OK? Is it possible to arrange screen time with children in a sensible way? We have summarised current research results on this topic – here are our recommendations:

Screens are not harmful per se – if used sensibly, they can even support children's learning.

- Several studies pointed out that even small children are able to learn with the help of digital media. For example, one study, found that two-year-old children can learn new words through a live video chat just as well as in a real direct interaction ²⁾. However, if the children were only shown a video, they did not learn as much. In addition, there is evidence that even children under the age of two can build positive relationships with other people through interactive video chats, but not through videos that are only shown to them ³⁾. This is good news for grandparents who live farther away or have less direct contact with their grandchildren due to the pandemic.

- **Why is that?** Young children learn primarily through social interaction and especially when others respond to them. Toddlers notice it when adults respond to them sensitively and engage in a mutual exchange with them – even when the interaction takes place via video chat.

Parents should set clear boundaries and know which media contents their children are consuming.

- Digital media are not principally harmful, but it does matter how media is used and what content is consumed. Parents should, therefore, be well-informed about the contents their children are watching and interfere if, for example, they see advertisements that are not appropriate for the age of their children. Furthermore, it is helpful to ask yourself: What experience is my child missing out on while playing on the mobile phone? During a long car ride or when sick in bed, child-friendly screen

media can provide meaningful entertainment and distraction for the child. However, long-term negative consequences can arise, if a child spends hours every day playing with screen media and, thus, plays less with other children.

- **Why is that?** Children, who get to decide their screen time on their own, tend to use screen media more than recommended ⁴⁾. Simultaneously, they need time to curiously explore the world and the exchange with other people to acquire social skills. Spending too much time in front of a screen on a regular basis means having less time to gain other experiences that would be important for the development of a child ⁵⁾.

Better switch off before going to bed.

- The excessive use of screen media can have a negative impact on children's sleep. For example, the use of touch screens has been associated with babies and toddlers sleeping less and falling asleep later in the evening ⁶⁾. However, the use of screen media can also affect the sleep of school children, especially if the media are also used in the child's bedroom before bedtime ⁷⁾.

- **Why is that?** Enough sleep is important for a healthy brain development in children. The use of electronic screen media affects the release of melatonin, a hormone necessary for sleep. In addition, the mere presence of screen media in the bedroom can distract from going to sleep. Especially with older children, incoming messages in the evening can disturb their night's rest that is so important.

Find out more at:

www.kinderstudien.at/en

¹⁾ www.bps.org.uk/news-and-policy/changing-behaviour-children-adolescents-and-screen-use

²⁾ Roseberry, S., Hirsh-Pasek, K., & Golinkoff, R. M. (2014). DOI: 10.1111/cdev.12166

³⁾ Myers, L. J., LeWitt, R. B., Gallo, R. E., & Maselli, N. M. (2017). DOI: 10.1111/desc.12430

⁴⁾ Huber, B., Highfield, K., & Kaufman, J. (2018). DOI: 10.1111/bjet.12667

⁵⁾ Skalická, V., Hygen, B. W., Stenseng, F., Kårstad, S. B., & Wichstrøm, L. (2019). DOI: 10.1111/bjdp.12283

⁶⁾ Cheung, C. H. M., Bedford, R., Saez De Urabain, I. R., Karmiloff-Smith, A., & Smith, T. J. (2017). DOI: 10.1038/srep46104

⁷⁾ Cain, N., & Gradisar, M. (2010). DOI: 10.1016/j.sleep.2010.02.006

