

K-State Research and Extension News

Parenting and the Struggle with Screen Time

The emergence of smartphone and tablet technology has brought the notion of screen time, once only applied to television, to virtually every aspect of modern life. Smartphones and tablets have become part of the culture, and parents need to make decisions about appropriate screen time for their families. While limiting children's screen time is important, adults also should limit their screen time during family activities. Children and adults can benefit from being conscious of the amount of time they spend watching screens. Studies have shown that excessive media consumption, including Internet media, can lead to attention difficulties, school problems, sleeping and eating disorders, depression, and weight problems in both adults and children. In addition, family life educators recognize intrusive screen time as a detriment to family development.

Recommendations: Families with very young children

Screen time should be severely limited for very young children. Ideally they should have none before age 2. Young children's brains are developing rapidly, and they benefit most from interpersonal communication with others. Research shows that screen time, regardless of whether it is from a television, a tablet, or smartphone, is not nearly as stimulating as interaction with other humans. Moreover, this is not just an early childhood phenomenon — adults are likewise more stimulated by interacting with others. However, adults' brains are not developing the number of connections, nor at the rate that young children are, and thus human interaction in early childhood is much more important. The number of neural connections dictates the amount of cognitive capacity we have, so building more connections early is crucial.

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. Most importantly, children's bedrooms should have no screens, including tablets, computers, and televisions. About half of children from age 6 to 17 have televisions in their bedrooms. While at first this might seem like a punishment, the reality is that children of all ages can benefit from alternate activities to screen time. Crossword puzzles, reading books, hobbies such as model building or learning to play a musical instrument, and playing outdoors are all tremendously beneficial alternatives. These activities stimulate the child's brain in ways that no screen technology can come close to mimicking. With the AAP recommendations, K-State Research and Extension further recommends that if adults decide to have screens more incorporated into their children's lives, that they do everything in their power to use screen time together in an active way. Sitting together and watching a TV show is very passive. However, if you can use the TV to interact, then you have a chance to play with your child. For example, if people on the TV are dancing, then you can dance with your child. Additionally, tablets and smartphones can be used to find performances of your favorite music, and you can sing and dance to these while watching.

Whole family screen time at home

Limiting all children to one to two hours of screen time is recommended by the National Institutes of Health. Important ways to limit screen time beyond removing them from a child's room are:

- Do not watch TV during meals.
- 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 white noise is a much healthier 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, you can set a timer on your watch, phone, computer, or other device. For TV, you can use the sleep timer to make sure it turns off. Remember that you are the model for your children. If you do not control your screen time, it sends a strong message that they need not control theirs. While intermittent screen time is tempting for adults, things such as "I am just going to check my email" often turn into more time on your devices. This, in and of itself is not so terrible, but when you factor in that the cost of paying attention to email means that you are not paying attention to your children, the impact is clear. Your children deserve your attention, and your email, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, BuzzFeed, texts, and phone calls can wait.

The New Screen Time: Beyond Television and Into the Future, Bradford B. Wiles and Ph.D., Laura Schachtner. K-State Research and Extension, <http://www.ksre.k-state.edu/>

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