

PRINT-Screen Time for Kids: How Much is Too Much?

As adults, most of us are tethered to our phones. In fact, we often feel something is missing if we don't have it.

Children are now modeling that behavior and so it begs the question, how much is too much when it comes to screen time for kids? The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) says more study is needed to determine the cognitive and behavioral risks of too much screen time, particularly with babies, toddlers and pre-school age children.

However, a small study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association (JAMA) showed significant impact on brain development when children between ages three to five years were exposed, unsupervised, to more than the amount of recommended screen time.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reports that children ages eight to 10 spend an average of six hours per day in front of a screen, kids ages 11 to 14 spend an average of nine hours per day in front of a screen, and youth ages 15 to 18 spend an average of seven-and-a-half hours per day in front of a screen.

OSF Healthcare Pediatrician Dr. Ameera Nauman said the brain's neural networks are developing most rapidly in the first five years and under age two, language and emergent literacy skills are better learned through personal contact.

Infants

Dr. Nauman of OSF Medical Group – Pediatrics in Alton, Illinois has a pretty hard and fast rule -- no screens for her youngest patients who are under the age of two.

"Their minds should be nourished with books, singing, playing, you know, getting them to move, making a playroom for them ... really just engaging with them on a more personal, social level," she advised.

She also recommends NOT having a TV on, even in the background, particularly with babies or toddlers because it can interfere with their ability to play and interact. For older children, it can be a distraction.

“We want to teach our children they can focus on one thing at a time and sometimes if there’s a lot of stimulation, it can take away from the book they’re trying to read or the picture they’re trying to draw so it might be nice to just shut that TV off,” she suggested.

Toddlers

By the time a baby turns two they can learn words from a person on a live video chat and some interactive touch screens but Dr. Nauman says studies show, they can learn that way *only* when parents watch with them and re-teach the content.

By ages three to five, Dr. Nauman agrees with American Academy of Pediatrics that no more than an hour of screen time is a good guideline. But, pediatricians warn not all smart phone apps are developed with input from developmental specialists and can do more harm than good when they take a child away from playtime with caregivers and other children.

School Age Children and Adolescents

Pediatricians, including Dr. Nauman, say it’s important for parents of school age children to watch TV with them and monitor any computer or screen use. It’s important to balance screen time with other healthy behaviors. Dr. Nauman encourages teens to be active 15 minutes for every hour of screen time and she stresses limiting overall screen time to two hours a day, excluding homework.

Evidence suggests that media use can negatively affect sleep. Dr. Nauman says the blue light affects the ability to fall asleep.

“Screens are very stimulating. They can really awaken the mind of a child and instead of a book, that kind of helps lull them to sleep or cuddling sometimes or talking to parents or siblings that can kind of help wind down a child, it (the screen) can help wind up a child.”

So does that mean teenagers shouldn’t be using a smart phone as an alarm? Dr. Nauman says it depends on the child.

“You have a 16 year-old child that’s doing well in school, that’s doing their best, that’s you know thriving socially and academically and doing what they need to do at home and you trust them and you’re monitoring what they’re doing online, then that’s fine. They can keep their phone on a dresser plugged in as an alarm and get out of bed in the morning and get it.”

However, Dr. Nauman says if you have a child who has trouble sleeping or is easily distracted or too caught up with friends and social media, you might want to prohibit them from having a phone in the bedroom.

The study in the Journal of the American Medical Association referenced earlier was a small sample but it shows growing use of media and that use is by children at the youngest ages. Almost all (96.6%) of zero to four year-olds recruited from a low-income pediatric clinic had used mobile devices, and 75% owned their own device.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends using its tool to develop a healthy media plan that can be customized to a child or the entire family. The tool, [accessible here](#), has time calculators to help regulate time spent on screens versus other activities important to health including sleep, exercise, and family engagement.

Pediatricians are a great resource for information about factors influencing child development and benchmarks as your child grows. Looking for a pediatrician in your area? [Use our physician directory](#).

Screen Time Recommendations Summarized

- Under 2 years old – ZERO screen time (including watching television, electronic media, DVDs, computers and electronic games).
- 2-5 years – No more than 1 hour per day.
- 5-17 years – No more than two hours per day (homework not included)