Focus On An Issue

Beyond 'turn it off': How to advise families on media use

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When families seek our professional advice on managing technology in their children's lives, we turn to research-based AAP guidelines that promote positive media use and discourage potentially harmful use.

The most well-known of these guidelines discourage "screen time" for children under age 2 and limit "screen time" to two hours a day for children over age 2 (*Pediatrics*. 2013;132:958-961; *Pediatrics*. 2011;128:1040-1045). As we know, however, scientific research and policy statements lag behind the pace of digital innovation.

Case in point: The 2011 AAP policy statement *Media Use by Children Younger Than Two Years* was drafted prior to the first generation iPad and explosion of apps aimed at young children.

Today, more than 30% of U.S. children first play with a mobile device when they still are in diapers, according to Common Sense Media. Furthermore, almost 75% of 13- to 17-year-olds have smartphones, and 24% admit using their phones almost constantly, according to the Pew Research Center.

In a world where "screen time" is becoming simply "time," our policies must evolve or become obsolete. The public needs to know that the Academy's advice is science-driven, not based merely on the precautionary principle.

Toward this goal, the Academy convened the invitation-only Growing Up Digital: Media Research Symposium in May. Supported by the AAP Friends of Children Fund, this two-day event brought together leading social science, neuroscience and media researchers, educators, pediatricians, and representatives from key partner organizations. The goals: evaluate available data, identify research gaps, and consider how to provide thoughtful, practical advice to parents based on the evidence.

Given the breadth of the topic, the symposium limited its focus to early learning, game-based learning, social/emotional and developmental concerns, and strategies to foster digital citizenship.

The following key messages for parents emerged:

- **Media is just another environment.** Children do the same things they have always done, only virtually. Like any environment, media can have positive and negative effects.

- **Parenting has not changed.** The same parenting rules apply to your children's real and virtual environments. Play with them. Set limits; kids need and expect them. Teach kindness. Be involved. Know their friends and where they are going with them.

A number of key messages for parents emerged from the AAP Growing Up Digital: Media Research Symposium. Among them is that family participation with media facilitates social interactions and learning. Parents should play a video game with their kids, and always co-view with infants and toddlers.

- **Role modeling is critical.** Limit your own media use, and model online etiquette. Attentive parenting requires face time away from screens.

- **We learn from each other.** Neuroscience research shows that very young children learn best via two-way communication. "Talk time" between caregiver and child remains critical for language development. Passive video presentations do not lead to language learning in infants and young toddlers. The more media engender live interactions, the more educational value they may hold (e.g., a toddler chatting by video with a parent who is traveling). Optimal educational media opportunities begin after age 2, when media may play a role in bridging the learning achievement gap.

- **Content matters.** The quality of content is more important than the platform or time spent with media. Prioritize how your child spends his time rather than just setting a timer.

- **Curation helps.** More than 80,000 apps are labeled as educational, but little research validates their quality (Hirsh-Pasek K, *Psych Science*. 2015;16:3-34). An interactive product requires more than "pushing and swiping" to teach. Look to organizations like Common Sense Media (www.commonsensemedia.org) that review age-appropriate apps, games and programs.

- **Co-engagement counts.** Family participation with media facilitates social interactions and learning. Play a video game with your kids. Your perspective influences how your children understand their media experience. For infants and toddlers, co-viewing is essential.

- **Playtime is important.** Unstructured playtime stimulates creativity. Prioritize daily unplugged playtime, especially for the very young.

- **Set limits.** Tech use, like all other activities, should have reasonable limits. Does your child's technology use help or hinder participation in other activities?

- **It's OK for your teen to be online.** Online relationships are integral to adolescent development. Social media can support identity formation. Teach your teen appropriate behaviors that apply in both the real and online worlds. Ask teens to demonstrate what they are doing online to help you understand both content and context.

- **Create tech-free zones.** Preserve family mealtime. Recharge devices overnight outside your child's bedroom. These actions encourage family time, healthier eating habits and healthier sleep.

- **Kids will be kids.** Kids will make mistakes using media. These can be teachable moments if handled with empathy. Certain aberrations, however, such as sexting or posting self-harm images, signal a need to assess youths for other risk-taking behaviors.

Digital life begins at a young age, and so must parental guidance. Children who are "growing up digital" should learn healthy concepts of digital citizenship.

The Academy and pediatricians have a crucial role in translating ongoing media research into practical, evidence-based advice. As such, formal recommendations are forthcoming, and the role of media in children's lives will be the focus of the Pediatrics for the 21st Century (Peds21) program prior to the 2016 AAP National Conference & Exhibition. Until then, we can use these key messages to inform and empower families.

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Dr. Brown was chair of the AAP Children, Adolescents and Media Leadership Work Group. Dr. Shifrin was chair of the Growing Up Digital: Media Research Symposium Planning Group. Dr. Hill is chair of the AAP Council on Communications and Media Executive Committee.

RESOURCE

A document detailing the proceedings of the Growing Up Digital: Media Research Symposium is available at https://www.aap.org/en-us/Documents/digital_media_symposium_proceedings.pdf.