

Children and Electronic Media April 2017

Probably the single greatest change in our individual and family life over the past 20 years is the increasing influence of the internet and availability of digital devices. There are wonderful advantages to being digitally connected, but there are also risks to both parents and children if we go from being consumers to being totally consumed by these devices. Researchers are just beginning to study the effects of this constant media diet on our children and families. **As Pediatricians and Nurse Practitioners, we have seen first hand some of these negative effects including:**

- Internet Gaming addiction that has resulted in aggression and violence toward parents when they tried to put restrictions on their adolescents' gaming.
- Episodes of internet bullying, sexting and arranging of meeting with strangers met through internet chat sites.
- Increasing rates of anxiety and depression thought to be related to heavy social media site use.
- Increasing rates of sleep disorders, obesity and body image disorders linked to media use.
- A possible linkage of attentional difficulties for young children with high media use.
- Extortion of teens for money or participation in pornography.
- An adolescent pedestrian was killed/struck by a car while crossing the street distracted by her phone.
- Car accidents, including our own children, when the driver is distracted by their cell phone.

Our professional society, the **American Academy of Pediatrics** has issued recommendations for families as they try to properly use these powerful new devices. We agree with the following recommendations and would welcome discussing these issues with you.

Recommendations For:

Babies (<18 months)

- **Children less than two should not be watching or using media unless they are skyping with their parents.**

Research has shown that when media is on in a room- TV, movies, games etc., the child is spoken to approximately 700 words less an hour than when no media is used. A child's vocabulary at age 2 is proportionate to the number of words children hear from their parents and caregivers. And a child's vocabulary at age 2 correlates very well with their academic performance in first grade. Babies and infants learn best in an interactive, hands-on, unstructured, and social play manner with their caregivers, to build language, cognitive, and social-emotional skills. That's why pediatricians say, "Babies need laps, not apps!"

- **This would be a very good age, from the very beginning of your child's life, that parents evaluate their own consumption of media.**

No matter what you tell your children, they are more likely to do what they see their parents doing. This applies to smoking, how we treat one another, the words and tone of voice we use and how frequently we are on social media or are playing video games. There is an app called Moment, "Put down your phone and get back to your life", which gives you a daily summary of how often you pick up your phone and breaks down the time you spend within each app. Users have been surprised how many times they turn to their phone and the amount of time spent in non-purposeful activity. Become a purposeful parent devoted to developing your child to their fullest potential by giving them the undivided attention they deserve!

Toddlers (18-24 months)

- **For parents of children 18 to 24 months of age who want to introduce digital media, it is advised to choose high-quality programming/apps and use them together with children, because this is how toddlers learn best.**

Letting children use media by themselves should be avoided. There are lists of quality programs and shows at Common Sense Media, PBS Kids, and Sesame Workshop not only for little ones, but for older children as well.

At this age, often parents get into the habit of having children use their phone or other devices to distract them, but because of the highly engaging nature of these devices the children will soon prefer using devices over doing almost anything else. To see a list of both indoor and outdoor activities that you could use instead go to our website at www.harborped.net for an updated list from parents on our staff.

Preschoolers (2-5 Years)

- **In children 2 -5 years, limit media to 1 hour or less per day of high-quality programming.**

We would recommend shared use between parent and child to promote enhanced learning, greater interaction, and limit setting. Some child developmental researchers suggest no solo viewing. No screens during meals and none for 1 hour before bedtime. Problem-solve with your spouse or pediatrician challenges, such as setting limits, finding alternate activities, and calming children without the use of media. All parents use screens at times to distract or entertain their children. For alternative activity suggestions, go to our web page at www.harborped.net and see “**Skipping the Screen Time**” for a list of alternative activities to teach and entertain your Preschooler.

- **This would be a good age to first introduce the American Academy of Pediatrics Family Media Use Plan, available at: www.healthychildren.org/MediaUsePlan.**

This helps parents construct individual plans that are appropriate for children 2-18. When updated regularly, it can help to remind and teach your children the importance of screen free zones and times, safety, manners, privacy, device curfews and balancing online and off-time activities. You can customize it for weekends and holidays and it is easily printed out to be able to be posted in a prominent place to be referred to.

School Aged Children

- **For children entering school there are important digital habits that are important to establish. Continue to have limits for total entertainment screen time to < 2 hours/ day.**

No entertainment screen time until homework gets done. No competing entertainment- TVs or computers when doing homework. Studies conclusively show that kids do not learn well when distracted by phones or other devices. Make sure kids get outside and run around every day. Physical activity is essential for both physical health and mental wellbeing. At all costs avoid children having a TV or an internet connected device in their own room. Studies show these children spend much more time using media, have a higher rate of obesity and become less social and less involved in the family. Revise or develop a Family Media Use Plan at:

www.healthychildren.org/MediaUsePlan

Or use the Media Time Calculator to visually show your child the appropriate amount of time to be using screens at:

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx#wizard>

High Schoolers

We would suggest that parents not purchase a smart phone for their child until they enter high school or begin driving.

Phones are a major issue for adults and children. Many parents might view phones as necessary for safety. If that is a concern, we would suggest an old fashioned flip phone or a smart phone without connection to the internet. Once a child gets a smart phone it becomes increasingly difficult to monitor media use. Others suggest that once children do get a smart phone, they should help pay for their data plans. Children should be made aware at the very beginning of their use that phones or any device is a link to a public space and as such the parents have every right to know which sites and what conversations are taking place. If a child needs a private place to express their feelings we would suggest a diary, but parents should know where on the internet their child has been. All phones and devices that connect to the internet should be placed in the parent's room for the night an hour before bedtime. Parents have every right to link the privilege of device ownership to appropriate use. Parents should establish and apply consequences for screen media misuse.

Again, sitting down with your growing child and jointly developing a Family Media Use Plan in a calm non-confrontational manner is an excellent way to discuss many of the important issues surrounding safe and healthy media use. We all know the many benefits of our connected digital world, but there are increasingly recognized dangers to inappropriate and unhealthy media habits.