



Creating Safe(r) Screen Time for Your Child

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How young are infants when they first see a screen? Younger than we might think! A study, presented on April 25, 2015, at the Pediatric Academic Society annual conference in San Diego showed that children as young as six months are being exposed to mobile media. Also, by one year of age at least one in seven children is using media devices for up to an hour a day. As children get older, the number of hours in front of smart phones, tablets and computer screens rises.

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no screen time before two years of age. They say that a child's brain develops rapidly during these first years, and young children learn best by interacting with people, not screens. This recommendation seems to be quite well-known, but it seems next to impossible to follow this guideline when babies are so interested in smart phones, tablets, computers and television screens.

Can a Child Learn from a Screen?

Personally, I always thought the answer was “no”, and I was surprised to find out that it is possible to learn from television and iPads – it just takes twice as long as it would if that child was learning something from another person in the real world.

Young children learn a lot from imitation. So, one way to see if a young child is learning is to see if they are able to imitate actions that they have seen. In the study “Transfer of learning between 2D and 3D sources during infancy: Informing theory and practice”, Rachel Barr wanted to see what children would remember if they saw a two dimensional (2D) demonstration (either by watching an action done first in a book, on a television, or on a touchscreen) compared to a group who got no demonstration at all. She found that

the children who got a (2D) demonstration did better than the control group, indicating that infants can learn from books, television and touchscreens.

However, the infants who saw a 2D demonstration imitated **50% fewer actions** than infants that got to see a live, three dimensional (3D) demonstration: that is, a demonstration done by a real person right in front of them. This indicates that while children *can* learn from 2D information (screens and books), it is a lot easier to learn from a live demonstration (Barr, 2013). This is because it is difficult for children to understand how the symbols that they see in books and on screens transfer to the real, 3D, world.

So, if we are going to help our children use screen time as a learning opportunity, we want to consider what researcher, Lisa Guernsey refers to as the “3 C’s”: **Content, Context, and the Individual Child** (Guernsey, 2012). Let’s take a look at these more closely.

Content

There is evidence that the quality of a television program is associated with better language outcomes from their viewers (Lerner and Barr, 2015). What is actually happening on the show makes a difference in how much your child will take away from watching it. If a show is difficult for your child to understand because the content is too complicated or fast paced, this can actually disrupt your child’s ability to pay attention, focus and problem solve (Common Sense Media, 2013).

Certain apps and television shows are created with children’s education in mind. These programs often have a curriculum, are thought out, and have been thoroughly researched.

Where can I find high quality content?

When I think of educational, child-directed content, “Sesame Street” is the first program that comes to mind. In fact, this television show leads the way for research-based programming. However, you may want a little variety.

An excellent resource for finding educational apps and television programming is:

- www.commonensemedia.org – This company reviews a wide variety of apps, shows and movies and lets you know which age group they are intended for, and ranks them based on their quality and their content.

Context

What's happening around your child while s/he is watching a screen matters a great deal. Just as we would not expect young children to learn as much from looking at a book on their own as they would from interacting with an adult during the reading, the same is true for television and touchscreens. Children will learn more from media when there are caring adults present who can support their learning (Lerner and Barr, 2015).

How can you create an appropriate context for screen time?

- **Try to engage with your child while s/he looks at a screen** – talk about what the child is seeing and seems interested in.
- **Relate the information in the app/book/show/film to your child's past experiences and knowledge** – if your child is looking at an airplane flying onscreen, talk about a plane you saw at the airport or one s/he flew in.
- **Bring information that from the screen into the real world** – if your child saw someone riding a bike onscreen, point out a bike on the street and remind your child about the person riding a bike on the TV, iPad.
- **Have children share a tablet and work on an app together.**

The Individual Child

There is no one-size-fits-all policy when it comes to choosing media. Think about your child's age, interests, skills, and abilities. It is important to set limits on screen time depending on what else is going on during the day.

Though studies show that children can learn something from screen time, it is not necessary for learning. Children learn most when they are able to explore the real world, interact with adults and peers during fun, enjoyable activities and conversations, and simply play. Make sure that screen time is limited so that your child has time to engage with the whole wide world, rather than just the world-wide web.

Take Away

By setting limits, exposing children to appropriate content, and putting yourself into the picture by talking to your child about what s/he is looking at and experiencing on a screen, you can help your child get the most out of screentime.

References

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About The Hanen Centre

Founded in 1975, The Hanen Centre is a Canadian not-for-profit charitable organization with a global reach. Its mission is to provide parents, caregivers, early childhood educators and speech-language pathologists with the knowledge and training they need to help young children develop the best possible language, social and literacy skills. This includes children who have or are at risk for language delays, those with developmental challenges such as autism, and those who are developing typically.

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