

Pediatricians to tweak 'outdated' screen time recommendations for kids

By Kelly Wallace, CNN Posted Oct 7th

ATLANTA (CNN) — There are plenty of I-know-this-is-probably-not-a-good-idea moments as a parent — those times when you let your child do something or eat something or play something that you think might not be the healthiest way to go.

Letting my then 19-month-old toddler watch television was one of those moments for me. As a reporter, I had done stories on kids and screen time and was well aware that the American Academy of Pediatrics discouraged screen time for babies under 2. But trying to nurse an infant while keeping a toddler entertained proved to be too much of a challenge at times. So while I tried my hardest to wait until my daughter was 2 before she met "Dora the Explorer" and "Doc McStuffins," I gave in and felt guilty about it, I might add. But now comes word that I, and other parents, no longer should carry around such guilt about screen time because pediatricians are tweaking their long-standing recommendation for children younger than 2, as well as the recommendation that older children and teens get no more than two hours of recreational screen time a day.

"Look at our world. It has changed ... and so we have to approach the world as it is and figure out ways to make it work," said Dr. Ari Brown, chairman of the American Academy of Pediatrics' group investigating media use and children and co-author of a recent piece published by the American Academy of Pediatrics titled "Beyond 'turn it off': How to advise families on media use."

The statistics show just how different things are, even from back in 2007 when my daughter was a toddler and iPhones were brand new and iPads didn't exist.

More than 30 percent of children in the United States play with mobile devices while still in diapers, said Brown, citing numbers from the children's advocacy group Common Sense Media. As for older kids, the disconnect between the doctors' recommendation and reality is even more striking: Nearly 75 percent of 13- to 17-year-olds have or have access to smartphones, according to the Pew Research Center, with 24 percent of teens saying they go online "almost constantly."

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Alan Stephenson wants his child to go to sleep easily at night. And that means his son, age 11, can't take his Kindle or other electronic devices upstairs, where their bedrooms are located.

That two-hour daily screen time recommendation "is just not the reality of what's happening and so we really need to kind of address our world as these kids are growing up as digital natives," said Brown, who said the pediatricians' group is working on updating what it considers its "outdated" policies.

The recommendation of discouraging screen time until age 2 was issued in 1999, "prior to the first generation iPad and explosion of apps aimed at young children," wrote Brown and her fellow co-authors in their report. An announcement of the new policies is expected in fall 2016, but before then, the group wanted parents to be aware that new recommendations are coming.

"What we're looking at is creating more evergreen rules and guidelines so that parents can go, 'Oh, I can do this,'" said Brown, who is also author of the books "Expecting 411," "Baby 411," and "Toddler 411."

Technology's impact on children's brains

Doctors still don't want kids watching hours of mindless television or YouTube videos. The latest neuroscience research shows that the more a digital experience approximates live two-way communication, the more a child younger than 2 will understand and process it, Brown said. For instance, when a child is sitting and watching a TV program or a video on an iPhone, there's not a great deal of activity in the brain. But when the toddler is watching someone they know or even someone they don't know on a webcam during a video chat, "there's a whole lot of brain activity going on," Brown said.

"What we learn is that we as humans are very much social beasts and we are really learning by engaging with other humans and so the more that a digital technology can approximate that, the more a young child can get out of it," Brown said.

What that means is engaging with them at the same time they're using a screen won't have the same impact as just plopping your toddler in front of the TV or giving them a video to watch on your iPad.

"Media is just another environment and parents just need to know that they're going to use the same rules in this different environment," said Brown. "And so you would sit down in the real world and play with your child, you would pretend and have a tea party. Well the same rules apply. You don't just park your kid in front of a screen and make them go play by themselves. If you sit down and play with them on that screen, on that technology, they're going to get more out of it."

That said, parents shouldn't freak out or feel as if they're damaging their young children's brains if they let them watch "Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood" while they get in a shower and make lunch.

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"No parent should feel guilty about their choices, we just want them to make educated and informed choices," Brown said. "The casual interactions talking to their kids really make a difference in the word gap. And, so does doing any activity with their kids — on or off screen."

Brown also said parents need to do their homework when it comes to finding apps for their children. There are more than 80,000 apps that are listed as educational, but there is little research validating their quality, she wrote in her paper. "There's a lot more to education than swiping and pointing and that does not make an educational app," she said. The doctors' group recommends parents look to other organizations that focus on curating and rating content for children, including Common Sense Media.

For older kids, setting recreational screen time limits

As for kids age 2 and older, pediatricians are moving away from the recommendation of no more than two hours of entertainment screen time per day and instead suggest setting limits on recreational screen time.

"What we're really wanting to put out there is that life balance is important and everything in moderation and so yeah, you do want to keep an eye on how much time your child is spending in front of a screen, just as you want to keep an eye on how much they're doing something else," Brown said. "You want to make sure that they have a balance to their life."

It's also important to know when to turn the screens off. "There's a time and place that's appropriate and you want to have tech-free zones," she said, which could include the family dinner table and moving laptops, iPads and iPhones out of children's bedrooms overnight.

The quality of content your child engages in is also more important than the platform or the time they spend with it, writes Brown and her co-authors, so parents are advised to prioritize how their children spend their time rather than just setting a time limit.

"There's a creative space that they can utilize in the digital world, and that's fantastic, but there's also a big time suck, too, of content that is not so useful, so I think it's important for parents to really keep an eye on content, which I don't think has been emphasized so much."

The overall message, said Brown, is that while technology keeps changing, parenting has not: The importance of setting limits, teaching kindness and being involved won't change based on the latest app our kids are using. That is a message we parents probably can't hear enough.

"I think that parents really feel like, 'Oh there's some different toolbox or some new rules for technology. I don't even know what Tumblr is so how could I monitor my child's Tumblr use?' " said Brown. "Well, that's not what it is. What it is is you always want to know who are your kids' friends, who are they hanging out with. So the same rules apply in the digital world. ... It's not any different and I think that it kind of can empower parents to really realize, 'Oh, I know how to do this. I got this. I can deal with whatever technology shows up tomorrow.' "