

## Screen Time for Babies and Children

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Millions of babies and children enjoy screen time every day, but is it bad or good for them? Some research suggests that watching TV, a DVD, PC, mobile or tablet can slow down speech and language development, and lead to attention disorders in later life. Some researchers recommend no screen time for very young children while others suggest that moderate screen time can be beneficial. Most arguments centre on the potential harm that it might bring to babies under two-years-old, and their developing eyesight.

There is evidence to suggest that, if used judiciously, screen time can be a useful educational tool, and that programme content and the length of time spent in front of a screen are what really matters.

### Statistics

- About 90% of babies under two-years-old watch TV every day for up to two hours
- One in four two-year-olds have a TV in their room
- About 65% of three-year-olds watch TV for three hours a day
- About 76% of three to five-year-olds watch between 4 and 5 hours of television daily
- A third of all households have the TV on constantly
- *EastEnders* is currently the most watched show among British four-year-olds

### What the experts say

The notion that children can learn by watching television or a screen is widely dismissed by scientists who study the developing brain. The first three years of life are the most important in terms of learning and development. During this period, the neural pathways and connections that facilitate skills such as language, thinking, memory and problem-solving skills form. The best conditions for learning are provided through active play, exploration, movement activities, and interaction with people. All these things are crucial to development.

Many researchers argue that screen time can have a negative effect on young children's learning and development. The main conclusions drawn suggest that screen time promotes:

- Passivity
- Slow language acquisition
- Overstimulation
- Sleep disorders
- Reduced concentration
- Hyperactivity and attention deficit disorders
- Obesity
- Solitary play
- Inactive play
- Short-sightedness
- Screen dependence.



## **Visual development**

Some studies have concluded that passive screen time can damage the baby's developing eyesight, depth perception, and long-range vision. Most health professionals agree that viewing time for babies should be limited to no more than one hour of passive viewing per day.

Carefully crafted programmes that encourage singing, signing, music-making and dance make screen time interactive rather than passive, and can be hugely beneficial in stimulating fun parent-baby interactions, two-way communication and bonding. However, a rest or play break is important after about 25 minutes to prevent overstimulation, and before returning to the screen.

## **Language development**

More screen time and less time spent talking to children has been blamed for the downward trend in communication skills. A report by the American Association of Pediatrics implied that screen time adversely affected language development by reducing the amount of conversation between the parent and the child. However, critics argue that language learning can be delayed for a number of different reasons and that more convincing evidence is needed before any conclusions can be drawn.

Quality programmes can have a beneficial effect on word recognition and memory in three and four-year-olds. A study by the University of Chicago found that pre-schoolers who watched TV fared better in their knowledge of letter sounds, storytelling and reading when they went to school than children who had no screen time. Other studies have found that screen characters such as Spiderman and Batman can stimulate the interest of boys in literacy activities and improve attention, comprehension, and recall.

## **Cognitive skills**

A study by the University of Washington found that screen viewing by the under-threes harmed the ability to focus on a task and undermined problem-solving skills. The study concluded that toddlers learned far better when they actively took part in hands-on activities and through one-to-one interactions with an adult. However, moderate viewing was not deemed to be harmful.

## **Developmental skills**

Several studies have found possible links between early television exposure and delayed learning and developmental skills. Research from France claimed that TV viewing in the under-threes posed a number of risks such as delayed language learning, reduced concentration, overstimulation, and sleep disorders. While psychologists argue that some programmes may have a negative influence on behaviour, they also agree that there are also plenty of programmes that can educate young children informally.

## **Attention disorders**

Some studies have linked the flickering lights and frenetically changing pace of some programmes viewed by the under-threes to Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD) later on. Recent research has failed to find a connection between ADHD and screen time in older children.



## Behaviour

Some research suggests that violent television programmes, including cartoons, may increase the trend towards aggressive behaviour in later life. This is because young children have great difficulty in distinguishing between fantasy and reality and are therefore at an increased risk of imitating the behaviour. American psychologist Dr. Leonard David Eron concluded that children who watched violent television shows became insensitive to the pain and suffering of others. Other studies have shown that children who regularly watch violent television are more likely to become bullies at school or aggressive adults. The impact of TV violence is still strongly debated. We know that children are strongly influenced by what they see, but as they grow and mature, they also develop the capacity for reflection and empathy. They are also strongly influenced by praise.

## Pros and cons of screen time

### *Pros*

- Short periods of screen time can help very babies to focus on pictures, lights and colours a short distance away.
- Programmes that encourage singing, clapping or dancing make TV watching interactive rather than passive.
- Programmes that include singing and signing activities can promote language development.
- The repetitive content of many children's programmes can make it easier for children to learn words and phrases.
- Screen time can benefit children with English as a second language and may offer comfort to a child who has just started school.
- Children benefit from snuggling up and watching a DVD or film with an adult. The physical contact is good for them and parents can talk about the programme that they have watched together.
- Programmes that feature kind behaviour and people from all walks of life can help children to explore a wide range of issues such as sharing and behaviour, and raise cultural awareness.
- High quality educational programmes can provide a window on the world for young children and help them to make sense of it.
- Programmes that provide ideas for parents can inspire them to play with their child. For example, a nature or craft programme can be a starting point for an outing or a messy play activity.



## Cons

- Very young children may be unable to watch age-appropriate programmes if older siblings command the remote control. This means that they could watch scenes that are unsuitable for them or pictures that are too fast-paced for them to understand.
- Screen time in bed can prevent children from getting an adequate amount of sleep, which can have a negative effect on their performance and behaviour. It is also associated with the viewing of unsuitable or adult programmes.
- Leaving children unsupervised in front of a screen for a long time can leave them feeling 'glazed' and emotionally insecure.
- Screen time can displace other important activities, such as reading, talking, singing and play.

## A balanced approach

In an ideal world, children would happily be entertained with activities other than screen time. However, TV, DVDs, PCs and tablets play a big role in today's society and preventing children from watching it is an unrealistic goal for most parents. The key is to provide good quality viewing as part of a balanced schedule and to be observant of content.

As a precaution, it is suggested that passive screen time for babies is restricted to one hour with provision for a rest-break.

For two and three-years-old, it is recommended that screen time is limited to no more than one hour a day. For three year-olds, the general advice is to limit screen time to no more than two hours a day.

It is especially important that the under-threes watch programmes designed for their age group. Parents are also advised to share the viewing with them.

If the screen is turned off when the programme has ended, children are more likely to play games inspired by the characters and they may sing the songs as well. Giving children a five or ten minute warning and then a one-minute warning before switching off the screen can help to avoid a tantrum when viewing time has ended.

Avoid leaving the TV on in the background as this can be detrimental to language development and listening skills. Parents are also less likely to talk and play with their child if the TV is left on.

TV programmes or DVDs that have slow editing speeds, continuous narrative, and a single gentle voice are much better for young children than fast-paced programmes with lots of zooms and cuts and multiple voices.

## Conclusion

There is no getting away from the fact that screen time is a big part of everyday life and that it is here to stay. If used responsibly, the risks of harm are very low.



For many children, screen time can give them a valuable glimpse of life outside the home, but it shouldn't take the place of outdoor play, social interaction, talk, physical exercise, sunshine and fresh air, or other interests such as reading, art and music.

### **Bibliography**

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