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BLOGPOST

DISCONNECT FROM SCREENS: WHY LESS IS MORE FOR YOUR TODDLER'S DEVELOPMENT

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SCREEN MEDIA

Screen Media

Screen media has become omnipresent in modern times. As of 2023, 78% of the global population owned a mobile phone, and 67% had internet access. While there's no official figure for children's ownership of mobile phones and internet access, the 2023 data shows that 79% of the world's youth are using the internet. Screen media are integrated into our daily routines, shaping relationships and activities (Radesky & Christakis, 2016). Excess screen time can hinder achieving developmental milestones (McArthur et al., 2021), for instance, by reducing the amount and quality of interactions between children and their caregivers (Duch et al., 2013). More screen time leads to poorer development, especially in language, communication, and social interactions (Radesky & Christakis, 2016; Gastaud et al., 2023; Brauchli et al., 2024).



SCREEN TIME: FRIEND OR ENEMY?



Screen Time: Friend or Enemy?

McArthur et al. (2021) explored whether and how screen time duration affects a child's developmental outcomes. They asked a total of 1994 mothers of two-year-old children to complete questionnaires on their children's screen time, behavior, vocabulary and developmental milestones. These milestones encompassed cognitive, motor, social, and emotional domains, including age-appropriate language, fine and gross motor skills, mood, and social skills. Children were divided into three groups based on their screen time: less than an hour, two hours, and three or more hours per day. Children who spent more than an hour per day looking at a screen had lower developmental outcomes than their peers with less screen time. These outcomes include hyperactivity, inattention, physical aggression, and anxiety, as well as a risk for delayed developmental milestones. Furthermore, children who spent more than two hours on a screen had a delay in language development. However, the largest difference was seen in children who had more than three hours of daily screen time, particularly in the areas of language acquisition and behavior, such as emotional disorders, anxiety, and separation anxiety.

SCREEN TIME: FRIEND OR ENEMY?

In sum, and in line with other work (Radesky & Christakis, 2016; McArthur et al., 2021; Gastaud et al., 2023), the study by McArthur et al. (2021) suggests that higher screen time can lead to poorer development. Researchers assume that children who spend much time in front of screens interact less with their caregivers and friends (Gastaud et al., 2023). This limits their opportunities to practice social skills like asking questions or receiving feedback. Furthermore, it reduces time spent reading books, attending music or art classes, and so on (Duch et al., 2013; Radesky & Christakis, 2016). Hence, screen time may be considered an enemy of children's development. However, this does not seem to apply to all media content. Educational and prosocial content, for instance, can support preschoolers' social development (Christakis et al., 2013). Likewise, high-quality television programs like Sesame Street or Mister Roger's Neighborhood can help children learn about emotions, friendships and how to treat others (Radesky & Christakis, 2016).



KEEP IT SIMPLE

Keep it Simple

Many caregivers may still need clarification about the appropriate amount of time their children should spend on screens. According to the World Health Organization (2016), children under the age of five should use screens for a maximum of one hour per day (see Table 1). Keep it simple: Expose your child to age-appropriate content only, supervise their screen time, discuss the media content with your child and ensure sufficient physical activity and social interaction. That way, your child will learn how to use screens responsibly. Overall, the prevalence of screen media in our daily lives, especially among children, calls for a balanced approach. Parents should keep the WHO screen time recommendations in mind and prioritize real-world interactions, contributing to a healthier upbringing for children.

Age Group	Recommended Screen Time
Infants (less than 1 year)	Screen time is not recommended.
Children 1 year of age	Screen time is not recommended.
Children 2 years of age	Screen time should be no more than 1 hour; less is better.
Children 3 years of age	Screen time should be no more than 1 hour; less is better.
Children 4 years of age	Screen time should be no more than 1 hour; less is better.

Table 1. Recommended Screen Time for Children by Age According to WHO

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