

The New **SCREEN TIME:** Beyond Television and into the Future



The emergence of smartphone and tablet technology has brought the notion of screen time, once only applied to television, to virtually every aspect of modern life. Smartphones and tablets have become part of the culture, and parents need to make decisions about appropriate screen time for their families. While limiting children's screen time is important, adults also should limit their screen time during family activities. Children and adults can benefit from being conscious of the amount of time they spend watching screens. Studies have shown that excessive media consumption, including Internet media, can lead to attention difficulties, school problems, sleeping and eating disorders, depression, and weight problems in both adults and children. In addition, family life educators recognize intrusive screen time as a detriment to family development.

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Recommendations

Families with very young children

Screen time should be severely limited for very young children. Ideally they should have none before age 2. Young children's brains are developing rapidly, and they benefit most from interpersonal communication with others. Research shows that screen time, regardless of whether it is from a television, a tablet, or smartphone, is not nearly as stimulating as interaction with other humans. Moreover, this is not just an early childhood phenomenon — adults are likewise more stimulated by interacting with others. However, adults' brains are not developing the number of connections, nor at the rate that young children are, and thus human interaction in early childhood is much more important. The number of neural connections



dictates the amount of cognitive capacity we have, so building more connections early is crucial.

Families with children aged 6 to 17

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that parents create “screen-free” zones at home for all their children. Most importantly, children’s bedrooms should have no screens, including tablets, computers, and televisions. About half of children from age 6 to 17 have televisions in their bedrooms. While at first this might seem like a punishment, the reality is that children of all ages can benefit from alternate activities to screen time. Crossword puzzles, reading books, hobbies such as model building or learning to play a musical instrument, and playing outdoors are all tremendously beneficial alternatives. These activities stimulate the child’s brain in ways that no screen technology can come close to mimicking.

With the AAP recommendations, K-State Research and Extension further recommends that *if* adults decide to have screens more incorporated into their children’s lives, that they do everything in their power to use screen time together in an active way. Sitting together and watching a TV show is very passive. However, if you can use the TV to interact, then you have a chance to play with your child. For example, if people on the TV are dancing, then you can dance with your child. Additionally, tablets and smartphones can be used to find performances of your favorite music, and you can sing and dance to these while watching.

Leveraging the screens for family fun

Additionally, tablets and smartphones offer the opportunity to play interactive games. While the problem-solving skills associated with these kinds of puzzles and games are important, decades of research demonstrate that having a more-skilled person assisting a child provides a much richer and valuable learning experience than a child merely acting alone. While you do not want to just solve any puzzle or game for your child, you can help by asking questions, offering some instruction, providing feedback, providing different ways of thinking about the puzzle or game, and always serving as a model for how to act when you are frustrated, elated, or somewhere in between.

Adult screen time with children

Recommendations for children’s screen time only account for half the equation. Adults are just as drawn to screens as children, and do not have the benefit of an authority figure watching out for them. A good rule for phone and tablet use is to put them away whenever you are with your children. If you are unable or unwilling to do so, please do your best to encourage parents to restrict their use, or to engage with their children around their devices.

There are always alternatives for screen time. Family board games can be a fun, engaging, and entertaining way to spend time together. When the days are long, and there is lots of daylight in the evenings, few activities can compare to playing outside as a family. These activities can be as simple as kicking a soccer ball or playing in the yard with the family pet (if you have one). If it is safe for you and your family, walking around your neighborhood can be a fun way to spend time. Making sure you talk about what you are seeing and experiencing is a crucial aspect of this time together.

Whole family screen time at home

Limiting all children to one to two hours of screen time is recommended by the National Institutes of Health. Important ways to limit screen time beyond removing them from a child’s room, are:

- Do not watch TV during meals.
- Do not text or talk on the phone during meals or when outside with your family. The phone is for your convenience and nobody else’s.
- Do not leave a TV on for background noise. Using a radio, streaming audio, or even white noise is a much healthier choice. You can even talk about the songs you are hearing and/or let each family member choose a station on a rotating basis.

If you must watch TV or use the computer, decide *in advance* what you will view. To make sure time does not slip away, you can set a timer on your watch, phone, computer, or other device. For TV, you can use the sleep timer to make sure it turns off.

Remember that you are the model for your children. If *you* do not control your screen time, it sends a strong message that they need not control theirs.

While intermittent screen time is tempting for adults, things such as “I am just going to check my email” often turn into more time on your devices. This, in and of itself is not so terrible, but when you factor in that the cost of paying attention to email means that you are not paying attention to your children, the impact is clear. Your children deserve your attention, and your email, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, BuzzFeed, texts, and phone calls can wait.

Conclusion

Most screen time is not developmentally appropriate for children or families. While screens are ubiquitous in today’s society, applied developmental professionals (e.g. extension agents) can serve a powerful role in helping families develop sound screen-time profiles. This can make meaningful differences in children’s lives and help families be involved and engaged with one another in positive ways. While there is no escaping the new screen time, you can navigate this new reality with sound research-based practices.

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Authors

Bradford B. Wiles, Ph.D.

Assistant Professor and Extension Specialist, Early Childhood Development

Laura Schachtner

*Graduate Research Assistant, Marriage and Family Therapy Program
School of Family Studies and Human Services, Kansas State University*

Reviewed by

Lisa Newman, Charlotte Olsen, and Roberta Riportella



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