NO PREP

Screen Time and Young Children

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

Screen Time and Young Children

What the Guidelines Actually Say

Few parenting questions generate more guilt and less clarity than screens, partly because the advice gets repeated in distorted form. The American Academy of Pediatrics' 2016 recommendations are more specific and more reasonable than the version that circulates. For children under about eighteen months, the guidance is to avoid screen media other than video chatting, which is treated as a separate case because it is live, two-way interaction with a real person rather than passive viewing. Between eighteen and twenty-four months, caregivers who want to introduce media should choose high-quality programming and watch it with the child rather than leaving them alone with it. For ages two to five, the recommendation is to limit use to

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Why Age Two Is the Dividing Line

The sharp line before roughly two years old is not arbitrary, and it rests on one of the more replicated findings in early childhood research. Studies going back decades have shown that toddlers under about thirty months learn substantially less from a video than from a live person doing exactly the same thing, a result called the video deficit or transfer deficit. Show a two-year-old a person on a screen demonstrating

where a toy is hidden and they often fail to find it, while the same demonstration from a person in the room works immediately. The likely explanation involves several factors at once. Very young children learn through responsive back-and-forth exchange, and a screen cannot respond. They struggle to transfer information between a flat two-dimensional image and the three-dimensional room they are standing in. And their attention systems are still developing, so fast cuts and rapid scene changes capture attention without supporting comprehension. This is also why video chat is carved out as an exception. A grandparent on a video call reacts, waits, answers, and repeats a child's name, which is the responsive exchange the child's brain is actually built to learn from. The finding does not mean screens damage a toddler. It means that for a child under two, screen time is close to zero-value time, and time is the resource in shortest supply. There is one more practical implication. Background television counts even when nobody is watching it, because studies find it reduces both the amount and the quality of adult-child talk in the room, which is the exact input a toddler needs most.

Content and Company

Once a child is past the video deficit stage, the conversation shifts from how long to what and with whom, and those two variables matter more than the clock. Content quality varies enormously, and the word educational on a thumbnail means nothing at all, since no agency verifies it. Programs that genuinely support learning tend to move at a moderate pace, use a coherent story, repeat and reinforce vocabulary, and often pause to ask the viewer a question and then leave a gap for an answer. Programs designed purely for attention capture tend to feature rapid cuts, constant sound effects, unpredictable rewards, and autoplay that removes any natural stopping point. Non-profit reviewers such as Common Sense Media rate children's media by age and content, which saves a caregiver a great deal of guessing. The second variable is company. Co-viewing means an adult watches alongside the child and talks about what is happening, asking what the character should do or connecting a scene to the child's own life. Research consistently finds that co-viewed media produces better vocabulary and comprehension outcomes than solo viewing of the same program, because the adult converts a one-way broadcast into a conversation. Co-viewing is also the only reliable way a caregiver knows what the child is actually watching, which becomes more important, not less, as the child gets older. Co-

viewing also gives a caregiver a natural way to teach media literacy early, by asking out loud why a character made a choice or why an advertisement wants the viewer to feel a certain way, a habit that transfers directly to adolescence.

The Real Question Is What Screens Replace

The most useful way to think about screen time is not as a hazard but as displacement, because every hour spent on a device is an hour not spent on something else, and it is the something else that matters. The first casualty is usually sleep, since screens in the hour before bed delay sleep onset and evening use is associated with less total sleep in children of every age. The second is unstructured play, which is where children practice problem solving, negotiation, imagination, and physical coordination, none of which have a screen substitute. The third is conversation, and this one is easy to miss. Language development depends heavily on the number of back-and-forth exchanges a child has with an adult, and a household where a show is always on has fewer of them. Physical activity is the fourth. There is also a category adults overlook entirely, which is the caregiver's own screen use. Studies of parent device use find that children work harder to get attention when a parent is absorbed in a phone, and that interrupted interactions leave both people frustrated. Children also model what they see, so a household rule that applies only to the child will be recognized as unfair almost immediately. The practical question at any age is therefore not how many minutes the screen got, but what it took those minutes from. Framed that way, the answer changes by household and by day. An hour that replaced a second hour of sitting still is not the same as an hour that replaced dinner conversation, and only the family in the room can tell which one happened.

Writing It Down Before You Need It

The most effective approach families use is a written family media plan, which is exactly what it sounds like: a short household agreement made in advance about when, where, and how screens are used. Writing it down matters, because a rule that exists only in a parent's head turns into a negotiation every single evening, and the parent loses those negotiations at the end of a long day. Most plans cover a few basics. They name media-free zones, commonly bedrooms and the dinner table. They name media-free times, usually meals, the hour before bed, and often the morning routine. They set expectations for what gets watched and how a child asks for

something new. They specify where devices charge overnight, and the single most effective rule most families adopt is that charging happens outside the bedroom. Good plans also address the adults, because a rule the parents ignore is not a rule. Finally, plans work better when the child helps write them, since a school-age child who helped set the limit argues with it far less than one who was handed it. Two habits make any plan easier to hold: turning off autoplay, which removes the automatic next episode, and giving a transition warning before a show ends, so the child is prepared instead of ambushed. The goal is not zero screens. It is screens that fit around sleep, play, food, and people rather than replacing them.

Key Information: Screen Time and Young Children

Detail	Information
Under 18 Months	Avoid screen media other than live video chatting
18 to 24 Months	High-quality programming only, with an adult watching along
Ages 2 to 5	About one hour per day of high-quality programming
Ages 6 and Up	Consistent limits that protect sleep, activity, meals, and people
Universal Rules	No screens during meals or in the hour before bedtime
Video Deficit	Toddlers under about 30 months learn far less from video than from people
Co-Viewing	An adult watching and talking about the show improves what a child learns
Family Media Plan	A written household agreement on when, where, and how screens are used

Case Study: The Tablet Nobody Agreed To

Trey has a two-year-old, Simone, and a tablet that started as a fifteen-minute solution during dinner prep. Six months later it is the whole evening. Simone asks for it the moment she is picked up from childcare, and taking it away produces a twenty-minute scene. Trey feels like the villain in his own house. At a parent night his daughter's teacher describes a family media plan and says the part most people skip is putting it in writing. Trey writes four lines on an index card and tapes it to the fridge: no tablet at the table, no tablet after dinner, it charges in the kitchen, and Dad's phone follows the same rules. Autoplay goes off. The first four days are loud. By the second week Simone brings him the tablet at the end of a show without being asked, because the show ends now instead of sliding into the next one. Trey says the hardest rule to keep was the one about his own phone.

1. Trey wrote the plan down and included himself in it. Using the reading, explain why each of those two choices mattered.

2. Turning off autoplay changed Simone's behavior at the end of a show. Explain why, using what the reading says about stopping points and transitions.

Multiple Choice

1. What screen use does the AAP's 2016 guidance allow for a child under eighteen months?

    a) Any program an adult watches alongside them

    b) No screen use of any kind for any reason

    c) Live video chatting with family members

    d) One hour a day of educational programming

2. What is the video deficit described in the reading?

a) The gap between what a program claims and what it teaches

b) Young toddlers learn far less from video than from a live person

c) The drop in vocabulary when a family stops reading aloud

d) The amount of sleep a child loses from watching screens in the evening

3. How much daily screen time does guidance suggest for a child aged two to five?

a) About three hours

b) About thirty minutes

c) About one hour

d) None at all

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ video deficit	A) An adult watching beside a child and talking about what is on the screen
2. ___ co-viewing	B) A written household agreement covering when, where, and how screens are used
3. ___ displacement	C) A place or time in the home where devices are simply not used at all
4. ___ media-free zone	D) The finding that a young toddler learns far more from a person than a screen
5. ___ family media plan	E) The problem that screen hours quietly replace sleep, play, and conversation

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Under 18 months, guidance allows live video _____ only.

2. Children aged two to five should get about one _____ a day.

3. An adult watching and talking during a show is called _____.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain the video deficit and why it makes video chat an exception to the under-two rule.

_____

_____

_____

2. Why does the reading focus on what screens displace rather than on screens themselves?

_____

_____

_____

3. Describe two rules a family might write into a media plan and explain what each protects.

_____

_____

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