

Banning Tablets Is Best For Children

by Christopher Mims

Latest guidelines recommend just one hour of screen time a day of ‘high quality programming’

A funny thing happened when I banned tablets in my house on weekdays and curtailed their use on weekends. My children, ages 6 and 4, became less cantankerous. They also became happier, more responsive and engaged in more imaginative play. They rediscovered their toys. Outside the home, they became less demanding and better at self-regulating.

Friday, the American Academy of Pediatrics validated my experiment, recommending that children younger than 18 months [get zero screen time](#), and those ages 2 to 5 be limited to one hour a day—half of its prior recommendation. The group recommended that the hour be “high quality programming” that parents watch *with* their children.

The academy doesn’t set limits for older children, but suggests curtailing screen time before bedtime and when it conflicts with healthy activities.

Most parents haven’t been listening. Mobile devices—tablets, smartphones and the like—in the hands of children are a big business. Time spent in apps from the “family” category on the Google Play store doubled in the past year, according to app-tracker App Annie. Children ages 2 to 11 watch an average of 4 ½ hours a day of recorded programming. And more than 50% of [Netflix](#) Inc. accounts world-wide watch some form of children’s content, a spokeswoman says.

We have been conducting a social experiment on our children since the arrival of the smartphone a decade ago and the tablet soon after. A rich library links too much television for children to [ill effects](#) ranging from obesity to attention disorders. But there are few studies examining children using tablets and smartphones.

Such research is “in its infancy,” says Dr. Dimitri Christakis, director of the Center for Child Health, Behavior and Development at Seattle Children’s Hospital and a co-author of the American Academy of Pediatrics guidelines. But we know that

screens' effects on young children depend on what they are looking at and how they are used.

For those who, like me, often resort to screens to distract children long enough to get dinner ready or siblings dressed, the news isn't good: As with television, too much passive consumption is detrimental.

To make such time more enriching, Dr. Christakis said an adult should watch and collaborate with children. Experts call this "structured joint attention."

"Passive media just reduces those opportunities for joint attention," says Dr. Christakis. Every hour of entertainment programming a child watches in the first three years of life increases his odds of exhibiting attention issues at school at age 7 by 10%, according to Dr. Christakis's research.

The calculus changes when the content is educational, however, says Dr. Christakis. Actor LeVar Burton, who was executive producer of the children's series "Reading Rainbow," last year launched a tablet-based children's app called Skybrary to capitalize on this. "I always say, all media is educational. The question is, what are we teaching?" Mr. Burton said.

As children age, things get more complicated, especially as content becomes more interactive. Research suggests screen time, especially videogames, often [interfere with sleep](#), leading to problems in school and weaker performance on memory tests.

But is "Minecraft," a social game that rewards players for construction and problem solving, worse than playing with Legos? That is a question asked by Paul Bettner, father of three children under age 9, co-creator of the hit mobile game "Words With Friends" and founder of Playful Corp.

"I've seen from my own life and my children that there's great social interaction, great hand-eye coordination stuff, lots of storytelling and getting involved in the narrative, a lot of learning and skill building when children play videogames alone or together," says Mr. Bettner. He limits his children to two to three hours a day, and encourages them to play videogames rather than watch shows.

The issue, it seems, is less about the amount of time spent with screens and more about what children do with those screens. One study of first-graders who used an

app called “Bedtime Math” to practice math before bed found they gained on average [a three-month advantage](#) over peers in a single school year.

Limiting children’s screen time may also require sacrifices by caretakers, says Teresa Belton, a researcher at Britain’s University of East Anglia who examines the importance of boredom to the development of imagination and creativity. “Modeling good behavior for children is very important,” she says. “If parents want to limit their children’s screen time, then they have to limit their own as well.”

Avoiding social media and email on my phone has certainly made me more available to my children, and has helped shape their behavior. I saw how screens affected my children’s lives, and had to think about how to reintroduce screens. I continue to be surprised by what I’m learning from the exercise, and if you’re a parent of young children, you might be too.

“One of the more troubling things I see as a pediatrician is a child getting an immunization and being handed an iPad or an iPhone to try to comfort them afterward,” says Dr. Christakis. “It often works, but think about what’s being displaced there—what they need is a hug, not an iPhone.”

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