

I Scream, You Scream, No Need to Scream Over the Screen (Time That Is...)

4/17/2020

Sarah here. True confession: I love watching TV. I don't understand watching endless Youtube videos for entertainment. But I love me some syndicated TV on cable or on a streaming service. I love watching comedies, enjoy ridiculously bad "reality TV" and occasionally get into more serious shows. As a kid, I spent countless hours playing video games and even now, I spend downtime playing Animal Crossing. I love being able to learn new skills and look up random facts online. I frequently go down the Google search rabbit hole. So, at the front end, I want to make it clear that I'm *not* anti-screen time- TV, video games, podcasts, audiobooks, online tutorials, internet searching...I'm a fan.

I'm also a pediatric psychologist. In my work, I see firsthand the interpersonal, emotional and behavioral dysfunction that can arise due to youth technology-use. In 2016, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) released guidelines about children's screen time, recommending:

- No screen time under 18 months of age
- Minimal educational-only programming for 18-24-month-olds
- One hour per day for children 2 to 5 years of age
- A balance between electronics-use and other healthy behaviors for school-aged children and adolescents to ensure that technology does not hinder sleep or physical activity

Research suggests that technology exposure can impact social development, emotional and behavioral functioning and brain development. Yep- you read that right. There is some research that suggests microstructural differences can occur in the brains of young children with more than the recommended amounts of screen time. While there isn't a causal link and it's a complex issue, these neural differences could mean issues with language, literacy skills, and executive functioning (Hutton, Dudley, Horowitz-Kraus et al, 2020). Suffice it to say, screen time can be a major source of stress for families in the best of times.

Right now, millions of parents all over the country are trying desperately to work from home while simultaneously educating their children.



All jokes aside, just yesterday, I spoke with a *superstar* on-top-of-everything mom in my neighborhood who now wakes up at 5 AM to get work done before her kids are awake. She said she deserved the worst teacher award for the day because in a stressful day of back-to-back phone calls and non-stop work, her young kids were largely doing school on their own while both she and her husband worked. Did she feel great about it? Nope. Is she dropping the ball? Not by a long shot. What made it possible for this family to survive the day? What allowed both parents to work while their young kiddos were occupied with school (and undoubtedly a little entertainment)? That's right- technology. The very thing that can create so many problems is the thing that helped this family get through the day!

Right now, school relies heavily on videos and computer-based games, learning tools and lessons. Even for kindergarteners. Technology is the thing that helps give parents a sense of direction as we try to fumble our way towards the end of the school year. It's also the thing making it possible for so many adults to work from home. And, the thing that allows teachers to provide instruction, even to young students. Screen time is a vital part of work and school.

Screen time is also vital to our SANITY. Look up screen time and COVID-19 on Google and you'll see lots of articles about how screen time is essential. Right now, we are all in this bizarre, surreal situation riddled with anxiety, health and financial concerns, and physical and social isolation. Unanticipated stress and transitions have been thrown at people left and right. Everyone is stuck at home together and uncertain when this will be over. Kids, teens and adults are dealing with far more stress than usual. They need help coping. They need to have fun, normalcy and dare I say, escape.

Enter technology. It's the thing that allows us to stay connected with family and friends. It's the thing that gives our kids interaction with their friends and classmates. And, it's the thing that provides ENDLESS hours of entertainment in the form of movies, TV shows, videos, video games, podcasts, e-books, audiobooks, blogs...it's fun for all! So, it's okay that we are relying more heavily on it right now. Seriously. It's okay.



Don't want to take my word for it? No worries. It just so happens that I did a quick literature review about this topic...guess where? Online. Using technology. A review of a large body of research suggests lower well-being in kids and teens who don't use technology or who use too much technology (Kardefelt-Winther, 2017). Further, UNICEF's 2019 report (Livingstone, Kardefelt-Winther & Hussein) concluded that adverse consequences of child technology were more related to *what* children do online rather than the *amount of time* they spend online.

So...what does all of this mean? Here are a few things to consider as you navigate screen time:

1. School relies on technology, so school-related screen time doesn't "count" as "screen time."
2. Socializing responsibly may rely more heavily on use of screen time due to stay-at-home orders and social distancing.
3. Know your kids- if they can't handle extra screen time because it's already a problem area or a source of conflict, then do your best to maintain consistent minimal access.
4. More screen time doesn't mean anything goes! The rules don't change for what your kids are allowed to watch, what video games they're allowed to play and what social media platforms (if any) they're allowed to use.
5. More screen time doesn't mean *continuous* screen time. Have your kids alternate between electronic and non-electronic activities. They may not *want to*, but it'll make it easier to get them to unplug if they take breaks throughout the day!
6. More screen time doesn't mean becoming a couch potato! Running around outside, playing catch or soccer, going for a bike ride or having a dance party at home are great ways to burn off some energy. There are also plenty of video games, apps and websites that are free (for now or on an ongoing basis) and can support physical activity, including:
 - a. GoNoodle: Good Energy at Home
 - b. Hy-Vee KidsFit at Home
 - c. Cosmic Kids Yoga
7. You need to get stuff done! It's okay for your kids to use screen time and technology so you can do work, keep the house running or have a moment to yourself! Here are some free resources that could come in handy:
 - a. PBS Kids Video app and Games app has lots for your little ones to do
 - b. BrainPop/BrainPop, Jr: Educational lessons, games and videos, offering a free trial
 - c. Prime Video and Audible (audiobooks) have free kids' content available
 - d. AirConsole is offering free access to console-free video games
 - e. Apple Podcasts and other apps provide free access to kid-friendly series, like Stories

- f. Cards Against Humanity Family Edition is offering a free download, so your older kids can print and play the PG version of the game
8. Encourage your kids to do *other* things. There are many things that your kids can do at home that *don't* involve technology.



Remember that it's not necessarily the amount of screen time that's problematic- it's what your kids are doing while using technology. So, do you need to watch your kids (of any age) like a hawk and micromanage all of their access to technology? That would defeat the purpose, right? But there has to be some oversight- you need to know what your kids are watching and playing as well as who they're interacting with (and by what means of communication). Screen time can offer a great escape and it's okay if you and your family are relying more heavily technology as a distraction and coping strategy right now. Just make sure that you have other strategies and supports in your coping arsenal and hang in there!