Screen Sense

Making Smart Decisions About Media Use for Young Children

Claire Lerner

TWO CHILDREN UNDER 2 ARE ENROLLED IN Geraldine's family child care home. She has been a provider for 20 years, but has noticed a big change since the use of smartphones and tablets became widespread. Even 2-year-olds ask for their parents' phones and know how to work them. Geraldine worries about how much screen time children experience, especially when it comes to the youngest children in her care.

Many other early education professionals and parents are also wondering about the impact of screen media on young children's development. It turns out, the answer is not as simple or straightforward as most would imagine. Let's take a look.

To begin, there is no research showing that when children younger than 2 years old use screen media independently it enhances their development. In fact, a large number of studies on the impact of television viewing strongly suggest that viewing at this age has the potential for harmful effects on children's attention, learning, sleep, and even weight.

In addition, while children do learn from TV and touchscreens—starting as early as 6 months—it is easier for young children to learn from real-life experiences. However, research also suggests that screen media can be learning tools if three critical factors are considered: content, context, and the child.

Content

When children are exposed to content that is specifically designed for their age group, and, even better, content that is interactive, learning can take place. Content should reflect children's experiences in the real world. For example, babies are very interested in seeing other babies, and enjoy watching others engaged in familiar experiences, such as visiting the playground or going through daily routines like bath time or nap time. Therefore, media content for younger children should include engaging interactions between the characters and lots of familiar, everyday scenes.

Toddlers begin to understand short and simple stories, so programming that includes brief, clear story lines is a good fit for them. Older toddlers and preschoolers are learning specific concepts, such as counting and identifying colors, so programs and apps that incorporate these kinds of skills are appropriate for the 18 months to 2 years age group. Common Sense Media (www.commonsensemedia.org) provides information on the content quality and appropriateness of apps and television shows for different age groups.

Content also matters for language development. Research shows that programs that encourage children's participation, such as Dora the Explorer, have a positive impact on expressive language and vocabulary (Linebarger & Walker 2005). This is also true for programs that have a strong story line; introduce, define, and provide a picture for new vocabulary words; and model positive interactions between characters (Linebarger & Walker 2005). However, watching programming that lacks quality interactions or language-promoting strategies have been shown to negatively impact young children's language development (Fenstermacher et al. 2010).

Context

Context refers to how content is used. The research on this is loud and clear: Learning can be enhanced when adults participate with children, making screen use a social, interactive experience. When adults actively engage children during screen use—talking about what they are seeing and doing—toddlers are 22 times more likely to apply what they learn from the screen to the real world, as compared with children whose caregivers do not provide an interactive learning experience (Zack 2010).

Talking and interacting with children during screen time also has a positive impact on language development. While research has shown that TV viewing can negatively affect language development (when the content is not appropriate or educational, and children watch alone), research also finds that when parents participate and make television viewing a social, language-rich experience, language learning takes place (Mendelsohn et al. 2010).

And when it comes to using increasingly popular ebooks, context is also important. Studies show that focusing on the technology, like clicking on the different features, distracts children from the story line, interfering with their understanding of the story (Parish-Morris et al. 2013). Instead, it's best to read the whole story and wait to explore the additional features until after the story is done.

The child

When using screens with young children, it is important to consider both the age and temperament of the individual. Children under 3, and especially those under 2, are only awake on average 10 hours a day. Limit screen time to ensure they spend most of their waking time exploring and interacting with caring adults in the "real" world.

It is also important to consider the individual child's characteristics. Some children are naturally drawn to screens and are more prone to becoming dependent on them. Often these are children who have a harder time with social interaction and find screens safer, as they can control the entire experience. They may find interacting with adults and other children to be unpredictable and more challenging. It is particularly important to limit screen use for these children and to make screen time an interactive, social experience. This ensures that they don't learn to rely on screens for soothing, and that they get many opportunities to develop the social skills necessary to forge healthy relationships in the real world.

Strategies to share with families

- Remember the importance of content when selecting screen media. Chose a program or app that is developmentally appropriate—specifically designed for a child's age and stage of development.

- Watch with children. Participate in the screen experience, making it a language-rich, interactive activity.

- Help children make the connection between what they see on the screen and their experiences in the real world.

Like it or not, screens are everywhere and are here to stay. Being mindful of the content you choose and the context in which you use it is critical: What you expose children to and how you share it with them makes the difference in whether learning takes place . . . or doesn't. Being a screen-savvy professional maximizes the likelihood that the young children in your early childhood setting are learning not just from screens but—most importantly—from the great wide world all around them.

Think about it

- How do you make decisions about when to allow screen use with children?

- How can you make screen time more interactive? How can screen media be a more useful teaching tool in your program?

- What about your own screen usage? How do you think adult screen time habits affect the children in your care?

Try it

- Help children bridge the gap between content they are exposed to on screens—new words and concepts—and their real-life experiences. If children watch a show about a family of bears making a cake, plan a baking activity for the children after viewing.

- When using ebooks, be sure to focus on the story and not get distracted by all the technological features. Save those bells and whistles for later readings, when children have come to fully understand the story line.

- Be mindful of and limit your own screen media use when children are present.

- Hold a workshop for the families in your program to discuss screen use and provide guidance on making the most of screen time for young children.

> This column is adapted from *Screen Sense: Setting the Record Straight–Research-Based Guidelines for Screen Use for Children Under 3 Years Old.* www.zerotothree.org/screensense.

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