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DEVELOPMENTALLY
APPROPRIATE
PRACTICE
(DAP) BRIEF

SCREEN TIME

*Screen Use in
the Early Years:*

BIRTH THROUGH FIVE YEARS



Council on Children
and Families

Introduction

Creating awareness around screen time and its effects on young children

A child's early years are a time of rapid growth. It's when they form the foundation for healthy brain development, social skills, and emotional resilience that they'll build upon for the rest of their lives.

Smartphones, tablets, and streaming media affect how people learn, play, connect with others, and build relationships. This is especially true for children. Many scholars and child advocates agree that too much screen time, especially when adults are not present, can interrupt early development.

Still, technology can provide invaluable resources—and in our ever-changing media landscape, it's important to teach children digital and media literacy skills that will impact how they interact with technology throughout their lives.



In this brief, we'll offer science-based guidance and balanced strategies to help early childhood professionals, in addition to parents and caregivers, figure out how digital media and devices (**screen time**) fit into opportunities for development.

Our goal is to support young New Yorkers by keeping real-life experiences and relationships at the center of their lives, while helping parents, caregivers, educators, and leaders like you make decisions about screen time for growing brains.

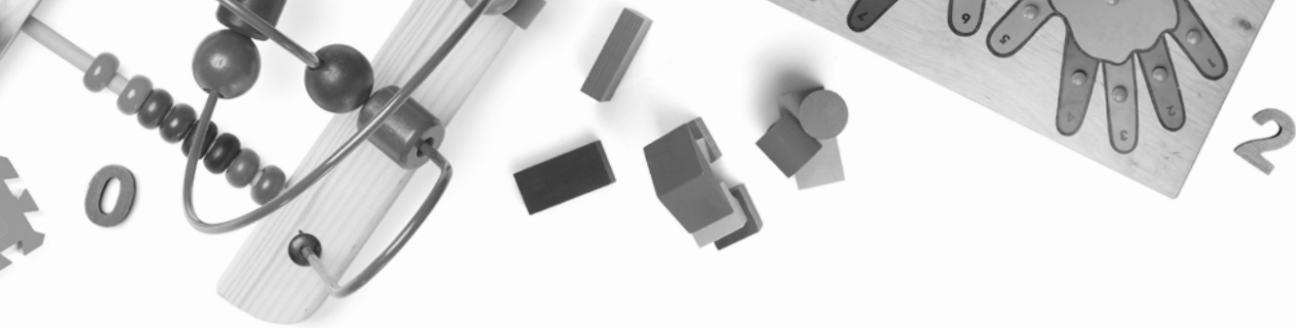


KEY CONCEPTS

Screen time:

Time spent using devices with screens, like smartphones, tablets, TVs, laptops, and smart watches.





Research

Understanding how screen time changes developing brains

As young children learn how to interact with the world around them, their brains are becoming wired for life. Their relationships, experiences, and surroundings help their brains form and reinforce **neural connections** (*links between brain cells that grow stronger with use and help children learn new skills*). It's important that caregivers teach thinking skills and provide positive social and emotional examples because these critical years will influence how children learn, grow, and connect.

Scientists who study children's brain activity have learned that when children spend more time on screens, the areas of their brain responsible for certain skills become weaker. It affects their ability to:

- **Be empathetic.**
- **Pay attention.**
- **Remember information.**
- **Read well.**
- *Make sense of what they see (visual processing).*²

In other words, screen time is changing the ways brains develop in big ways.³ Digital platforms like YouTube, Instagram, and TikTok, which use algorithms designed to increase the amount of time users spend on them, have an especially big impact on young brains.

[The New York State Early Learning Guidelines](#) (ELG) are meant to help you understand how children typically develop and what adults can do to support their development.⁴ The guidelines are divided into the following areas:

- 1 Approaches to learning
- 2 Physical well-being, health, and motor development
- 3 Social and emotional development
- 4 Communication, language, and literacy
- 5 Cognitive development



KEY CONCEPTS

Media literacy (digital literacy):

Having the skills to understand and think carefully about the media you see and use every day, like videos, TV shows, apps, games, and social media.

1

Approaches to learning

How children learn as their brains are developing

Many digital media platforms are designed to distract users and make it harder to remember information. Adults experience this, too: For example, you know how a “ding” on your phone can interrupt a train of thought or a conversation.

But notifications, videos that play automatically, and content that changes quickly can be especially harmful for brain activity in young children. One study showed that kids have more trouble paying attention and problems with **executive functioning**—*using thinking skills that help them plan, focus, and control their behavior*—when they spend more time with screens.⁵

Another study found that two-year-olds with higher amounts of screen time—often more than the one-hour daily recommendation—had weaker executive functioning into their toddler years, including struggles with attention, memory, and **behavior self-regulation** (*controlling impulses, being able to calm themselves down, and adapting to change*).⁶ The study also showed when parents got involved and stayed present, children had better executive functioning skills and used screens less during the preschool years.

2

Physical health, well-being, and motor development

How children learn to take care and control of their minds and bodies

Infants, toddlers, and preschoolers make sense of their world through movement. Their physical, social, and emotional development is intertwined. Children learn to control their muscles, use and understand their senses, and take care of their health and well-being by eating, sleeping, and soothing themselves.

Too much screen use during the early years can significantly affect how children develop. Research shows that young children who use screens can lose sleep or sleep poorly.^{7,8} Using screens for longer and not getting their bodies active can contribute to obesity.⁹ Plus, the time children spend on screens can take time away from active play, so they lose opportunities to develop their muscles.

3

Social and emotional development

How children navigate relationships, sense of self, belonging, and cooperation

How young children trust—and develop relationships with—their caregivers form the foundation of their social and emotional development. Research shows that when children overuse media, it's harder for them to develop empathy and self-regulation skills.



I have been teaching toddlers at an Early Head Start program for over 20 years. At the start of the year children typically cry for their parents for the first few days. We know how to comfort the children, and the parents, to make that transition as easy as possible. Now, the kids cry for their iPads.

— A NEW YORK EDUCATOR



One study found that toddlers who stayed within recommended screen time limits—about an hour or less per day—had stronger self-regulation skills at age four, while children who relied on digital media to calm down often had worse emotional regulation as they got older.¹⁰

Other research shows that the more addicted to media a child is, the more likely they are to show aggressive behaviors later in childhood.¹¹ Studies also show that when parents and caregivers set screen time limits and make sure children are engaging with age-appropriate content, children are less likely to develop addictive or problem relationships with media in the future.¹²

4

**Communication,
language, and literacy**

How children speak, listen, communicate, comprehend, and understand narratives

Researchers found that screen use can limit language and literacy development, while real-world conversations help strengthen them.¹³ Language skills grow when children have back-and-forth interactions—so when children engage with screens alone, or when caregivers are distracted, their vocabulary and general language skills suffer.¹⁴

One study made connections between 30-minute increases in handheld screen time to as much as 49-percent increases in **expressive speech delays**, making it harder for children to *communicate thoughts, use words, or form sentences*.¹⁵

Research also shows that more social interactions can balance or cancel some of the negative impacts screen time has on young children's vocabulary development.¹⁶

While recreational media can involve passive viewing, Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) is interactive, purposeful, and relationship-based.

AAC means *all of the ways that someone communicates besides talking*—so for children with speech- or language-related disabilities, that might mean using picture boards, drawings, iPad apps, or speech-generating devices. AAC devices provide many children with ways to communicate their needs, share ideas, connect with others, and engage more fully in everyday life.

5

Cognitive development

How children develop reasoning, problem solving, and memory

Brain imaging and research show that more screen time is related to weaker connections in brain areas that are responsible for visual processing, empathy, and early reading.¹⁷

Scientists studied children's brain activity using **electroencephalography (EEG)**, *a sensitive tool that tracks changes in brain activity*, to determine the relationship between the time 18-month-olds spend on screens and their **cognition**—*thinking, learning, and understanding*. As hours of screen time increased, children had greater cognitive problems, showing how important it is to limit screen exposure in early months and years.¹⁸

Analysis

Making connections between screen time and development across age groups

From birth through kindergarten entry, children experience significant growth and learning. They move from **concrete thinking**, which involves *the physical world and things happening around them (the “what”)*, to more **abstract ways of thinking**, which includes *problem-solving and complex concepts (the “why”)*. That’s why many studies have shown that the later children use digital media, the better.



As adults, we go back and forth between two dimensions and three dimensions. ... For kids, that’s actually a really difficult task, and it takes them a long time until they’re able to really go back and forth and match what’s in two dimensions on a screen with what’s actually in three dimensions in the real world.¹⁹

– DR. SARAH LYTLE, CHILD AND ADOLESCENT PSYCHIATRIST



Here's how to better understand screen use and its impact on infants, toddlers, and preschoolers.

	Infants (birth-12 months)	Toddlers (12-36 months)	Preschoolers (36 months- kindergarten entry)
TYPICAL MILESTONES	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Babbling • Bonding with caregivers • Beginning back-and-forth communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Becoming more mobile • Developing language • Interacting with caregivers and peers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Symbolic thought • Collaborative play
HOW THEY LEARN BEST	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responsive, serve-and-return interactions with caregivers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Taking turns • Pushing against boundaries • Interacting with other children 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play-based, hands-on activities • Active exploring • Talking and listening
WHAT THEIR BRAINS ARE DOING	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Making sense of the world • Building brain architecture (the structural development of the brain) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Learning resilience, persistence, and self-efficacy (belief in their ability to finish a task or achieve a goal) • Tolerating emotional discomfort 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Developing social-emotional skills • Asserting independence • Making friends • Following routines
HOW SCREEN USE AFFECTS THEIR DEVELOPMENT	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Interrupts critical exchanges and communication with caregivers • Results in poorer large motor, problem-solving, and overall development²⁰ 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Distracts from play-based learning and peer interaction 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Overstimulates* • Delays language <p><i>*Carefully chosen, developmentally appropriate digital media can supplement (but not replace) real-world experiences</i></p>

Recommendations

Making choices about screen time

Here are six recommendations to help parents and caregivers make healthier decisions about digital media and screen use with young children.

- 1 Put screens down and turn the TV off when you're focusing on direct, meaningful interactions with children.**

Young children are wired to want positive, caring interactions with adults. Interactive, safe, and stable relationships help support their learning and development and build healthy brains.



I often say that young children need laps, not apps.

...There's no substitute for human interaction.²¹



– DR. DIMITRI CHRISTAKIS, PEDIATRICIAN
AND CHILD HEALTH ADVOCATE

When adults are distracted by phones or other devices around children, it interrupts important moments of connection and deep learning that comes from interacting face-to-face. It happens so often that researchers have a name for it: “**technoferece**.”²²



KEY CONCEPTS

Technoferece:

When adults focus on their screens instead of the children they are with, interrupting engagement, supervision, and learning.

2 Use screens carefully and in ways that support interactions.

Phones and tablets are part of our everyday lives, including caregiving. Many people use devices to add meaning to their lives—they listen to music, keep in touch with friends and family, and read on their phones, for example.

When you're using devices around young children, be mindful and ask yourself whether screen time is strengthening or expanding interaction and learning.

Using screens, of course, has also had positive impacts and introduced new worlds of opportunities. In educational settings, screens can help educators and leaders with administrative tasks like taking attendance or communicating with parents. For children with developmental differences, assistive tools and communication devices have transformed learning experiences.

3 Choose age-appropriate content that encourages play, movement, conversation, reading, and learning.

Young children learn best through play and interaction. Media can support learning when it's designed for children, used with adult guidance, and backed by research.

For example, some educational television programs, many of which are broadcast on the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS), can support literacy, math skills, and social development.²³ This is especially true when children watch with caregivers who can help them make sense of what they're seeing and inspire them to engage with the content in different ways, like modeling behavior, pretend playing, and using new ideas and words.

However, some forms of content are designed simply to keep children watching as long as possible, overstimulating their brains and limiting deep thinking. For this reason and many others, media literacy is an important part of consuming digital media. Before introducing content to children, find the answers to questions like:

- Who made this content?
- Why did they make this content?
- How might it make a child feel?
- If it's a game or app, does it have chat features, in-game purchases, or ads?
- Is there an end goal for the content?



KEY CONCEPTS

Developmentally appropriate content

- Designed for child's age and developmental stage
- Simple
- Interactive
- Supports cognitive, social, or emotional development
- Teaches language, math, or life-based skills

Developmentally inappropriate content

- Violent
- Sexual
- Mature or adult-oriented
- Designed to keep children scrolling, tuned in, or engaged with seemingly endless content without educational goals

Additionally, the Zero to Three guide, "[Choosing Media Content for Young Children Using the E-AIMS Model](#)," gives advice about how to choose programming that is "Engaging, Actively Involved, Meaningful, and Social."²⁴ When choosing content, ask:

- Is a learning goal or story part of the experience?
- Is there a lot of extra activity that doesn't relate to learning?
- Is my child actively involved or participating in the content?
- Is the program, app, or game so familiar that the child is on "autopilot"?
- Does the content reflect an everyday activity?
- Does the experience encourage the child to interact with the content and/or the caregiver?



4 Plan screen time and set time limits in advance.

Unlike many short-form TV shows designed for children, digital content often has no clear stopping point. Children who spend long periods passively watching screens have less time for activities that build thinking, movement, and social skills. They also might engage less with what's happening around them.²⁵

Because digital devices often make it easy to keep watching or scrolling, set limits ahead of time based on the child's age and developmental understanding, and follow the rules consistently.

5 Choose content carefully and communicate limits.

Adults who have children in their care are often juggling responsibilities and tasks. If you let a child watch TV or engage with digital content while you're making food, getting work done, or helping another child, make sure you:

- **Choose the content ahead of time.**
- **Keep track of how long children are using screens.**
- **Set expectations and tell children the plan.**
 - » For example, tell your child, "You can watch one episode of your show while I get dressed for work."

6 Protect children's privacy and serve their best interests first, every time.

Technologies—and the risks they pose for young children—change quickly. Tools like artificial intelligence, or AI, bring up questions about data privacy, digital footprints, and targeted advertising.

“ AI interactions are humanoid, not human, but we have reason to believe that baby brains might not be able to tell the difference.²⁶ ”

Be sure to stay vigilant about each digital platform's unique risks to children. Many times, parents, educators, or leaders put children's privacy and safety at risk by sharing photos and information about themselves and their children.

“ Sharing is a dangerous practice that exposes children to multiple risks, including violation of their privacy, sexual exploitation, emotional harm, unlawful access to metadata, online persistence, and digital kidnapping. As soon as images or videos are posted online, any effective control over them is lost.²⁷ ”



Schools, programs, and organizations should take the lead by creating and communicating clear privacy policies. They should never post or share children's photos without parental consent.

In the absence of clear consent forms or policies, **parents and caregivers** should share their preferences and boundaries about posting children's photos and information with schools, programs, and organizations. They should also communicate these expectations with families and friends. While sharing on social media might come from a well-intentioned place, *not* posting is the safest option.

If you still want to post photos of your child online, cybersecurity experts advise that you:²⁸

- Ask yourself first why you are sharing and what purpose it serves.
- Adjust sharing and location settings before posting.
- Consider where you're posting and who will see it.
- Make your accounts private.
- Hide your child's face and other key details.
- Think about how your child might feel about the post now or in the future.



More of this, less of that

Tips for families, educators, and leaders

Let's put our research into practice. Here are some suggestions for families, educators, and leaders or administrators as you make choices and decisions around screen time.

MORE OF THIS

- ✔ Focus on free play with traditional toys and open spaces, allowing children to find creativity and stimulation in the real world.
- ✔ For children under 18 months old, avoid or limit screen time and digital media (like TV and tablets); for older children, limit screens to one hour a day of educational media.²⁹
- ✔ Watch digital media with children and talk about it.
- ✔ Leave the tablet at home. Everyday activities (like driving, riding in the stroller, and grocery shopping) are full of learning opportunities and language development.
- ✔ Create screen-free family routines. For example, meals and travel time are safe and predictable spaces to talk, observe, and think.

LESS OF THAT

- ✘ Install apps or give young children access to content that you haven't reviewed for safety and developmental appropriateness.
- ✘ Provide young children with smartphones or tablets without time limits.



MORE OF THIS

- ✔ Use digital content interactively. Listen to music to promote movement, watch videos that promote conversation and learning, and more. For example, when children show interest in a topic, like penguins, watch a live feed and talk about what you're watching.
- ✔ For school-aged children, use [New York State's media literacy toolkit](#) to help you evaluate digital media and find resources.

LESS OF THAT

- ✘ Use screens as a replacement for real-world experiences that children need to build language, literacy, social skills, and emotional well-being.
- ✘ Get distracted by using screens around young children, missing opportunities for interacting with them, observing them, and encouraging their development.



MORE OF THIS

- ✓ Maintain screen-free early learning spaces as much as possible.
- ✓ Involve families as partners in using digital media only to enhance interactions at school and at home.
- ✓ Encourage using screens in healthy, appropriate ways.
- ✓ Give teachers and families information about the how screen time can affect early development and learning. Many adults don't know about the negative impact screens can have on children.

LESS OF THAT

- ✗ Give preschoolers laptops or tablets in classrooms.
- ✗ Shame families and caregivers for using their smartphones and tablets with children. Screens are part of our lives, and helping families build healthy habits is important.



Resources

Learn more about screen time, childhood development, and media literacy

Organization	Website	How it can help
American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)	Family Media Plan	Provides an interactive tool to build a family media plan so you can set guidelines that matter most to your household.
American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP)	Helping Kids Thrive in a Digital World	Gives guidance and resources to help families with media literacy, appropriate media use, and developing healthy screen time habits.
Boston Children's Digital Wellness Lab	Family Digital Wellness Guide	Includes age-specific, research-based recommendations and strategies for challenges like cyberbullying, screen time management, and media literacy.
Common Sense Media	Common Sense Media	Offers a large, trusted library of independent age-based ratings and reviews of movies, TV shows, podcasts, books, and more to help families make healthy media choices.
Common Sense Media and Day of AI	AI Literacy Family Toolkit	Shares short videos, conversation cards, and hands-on activities for families and schools to learn more about artificial intelligence (AI) and how to talk to children about it.
Education Development Center	Integrating Technology Into Early Learning	Helps early childhood educators choose technology for their classrooms.
Institute for Digital Media and Child Development	Children and Screens	Delivers the latest research, news, and resources on digital media and child development.
Institute for Digital Media and Child Development	The Children and Screens Guide for Early Childhood Development and Media Use	Helps parents and caregivers choose which content to include in their children's lives and when it's developmentally appropriate (<i>when children can regulate their emotions and understand what they see</i>).
National Association for Media Literacy Education (NAMLE)	A Parent's Guide to Media Literacy	Gives families the tools to start media literacy conversations at home and ways to encourage critical thinking about media.
New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services (DHSES)	Media Literacy: A Toolkit for Educators	Provides a series of resources for educators incorporating media literacy into their schools and classrooms, including lesson plans and activities for all grade levels.
Public Broadcasting Service (PBS)	PBS Kids	Offers ad-free, high-quality educational shows and games developed by early childhood psychologists and experts.
Zero to Three	Screen Sense: Research & Resources	Helps adults learn ways to use and not use digital media, plus figure out what's right for their children.

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