

BALANCING DIGITAL MEDIA EXPOSURE WITH LANGUAGE AND SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

Although there is an understanding that excessive screen time can be harmful, the potential benefits of high-quality, interactive and educational content are often overlooked.

Research indicates that excessive or inappropriate use of digital media can impede language development. These studies highlight that excessive or inappropriate use may have detrimental effects on language development, decreased parent-child interaction, reduced attention spans and poor executive functioning in young children.

Conversely, high quality educational content, when used appropriately, can support language acquisition and vocabulary growth. Therefore, in an age of inevitable screen use, parents should focus on the quality of screen time rather than solely on the quantity. High quality, age-appropriate digital media, particularly when co-viewing (with parent) is involved, can positively impact behavior (with exposure to prosocial media), support sustained attention and deeper cognitive engagement (with stable, slow-paced visuals), broaden young children's knowledge and imaginativeness as well as improve higher expressive language and vocabulary.

Co-viewing can improve the quality of screen use. Parents can enhance the development of new skills by using gestures, providing verbal cues or prompts, repeating or expanding the child's language to facilitate learning.

E-AIMS (engaging, actively involved, meaningful and social.)

Educational programs and apps designed with developmental principles in mind can support language skills; whereas, passive consumption of entertainment-oriented content may not provide the same benefits. How and with whom the screen time is used significantly affects children's cognitive and psychosocial development. For example, excessive screen use during child routines (mealtimes, bedtimes) is linked to negative psychosocial development.

1. Children's programs and apps should use subdued color schemes and natural tones and audio with clear cadence and softer tones to help maintain a calm environment fostering attention in young children.

2. Presenting content with stable, slow-paced visuals supports sustained attention and deeper cognitive engagement. Fast-paced, frequently changing scenes promote shorter attention spans.
3. Rich storylines boost vocabulary and language comprehension and provide immersive experiences that aid cognitive development.
4. Inclusion of prosocial themes - such as kindness, empathy and friendship - plays a vital role in influencing children's social and emotional growth by imparting lessons on social norms and the importance of community
5. Co-viewing sessions offer a guided viewing experience that helps relate the content to real-world scenarios. It also offers the opportunity for singing, labeling, playing games, asking questions or reading together.

Managing screen time for Children

For infants under 18 months of age, media should be avoided, except for video chatting, to prevent potential negative impacts on attention span and developmental milestones. When introducing screen time for children aged 18 to 24 months, one should choose high-quality educational content and engage in co-viewing to enhance understanding and interaction. Common Sense Media is a nonprofit that reviews media including TV, apps, YouTube channels and more for children ages 2 to 18 years of age. It offers detailed reviews and ratings based on age appropriateness and educational value.

The AAP recommends limiting screen time to 1 hour per day for children ages 2 to 10 years, with a focus on content that supports learning and development. Establishing a personalized family media plan can help balance screen use with physical activities and unstructured play. This allows families to set goals and rules for media use, including:

- designated media-free times, such as during family meals and, at least, one hour prior to bedtime, to promote better sleep.
- media-free zones, particularly bedrooms to help encourage other activities
- choosing appropriate media content that supports learning and development
- ensuring that media does not displace sleep, physical activity or face-to-face interactions