

Turn It Off, Parents!

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Parents, teachers, employers, and members of the media clicked their tongues and shook their heads in January when a Kaiser Family Foundation study revealed that children ages 8-18 now spend an average of 7½ hours a day using electronic media, and nearly 11 hours a day when including multitasking, or using more than one media at a time.

But why should we be surprised? Many parents and caregivers have been putting their kids in front of the TV, the computer and the video-game screen soon after they came home from the maternity ward.

You don't need statistics to see what's been happening. Drive behind a minivan at night and you can see one or two video screens glaring at the car seat-strapped children inside. Go to a family restaurant and watch the four-year old playing video games on a hand-held device while dad is checking email on his Blackberry and mom is chatting on her cell phone.

Our children are being indoctrinated to the world of electronic entertainment at an extraordinarily young age. A 2007 report in the Archives of Pediatric and Adolescent Medicine noted that by the age of 3 months, four out of 10 infants are watching TV regularly. By the time children are 2, the number jumps to nine out of 10. One in five babies less than a year old has a TV in the bedroom. Fast forward to age 6: Children spend three to four times longer with screen media than they spend reading or having someone read to them.

Our entertainment-soaked society is conditioning our children from the time they are born to tune in to pass the time. The "electronic babysitter" of the baby boom generation has morphed into the hand-held babysitter of the new millennials, at a much greater intensity and more profound risk to brain development and human interaction.

What we often forget is that almost 90 percent of a child's brain is developed before he or she is 5 years old. These foundation years set the stage for competence and confidence throughout life. That's why the child should spend as much time as possible in a stimulating and safe environment, with adults who are a source of comfort and strength and with activities that nurture curiosity and imagination. Today's technologies inhibit all of these necessities, which is why the American Academy of Pediatrics actually recommends no screen time at all for babies under 2.

But there's money to be made out there and for some, the sooner our children can be exposed to the addictive qualities of screen time, the better.

One example of the conflict between the science and entrepreneurship is Baby Einstein, a line of "developmentally appropriate products for babies and toddlers," as its marketing suggests. Baby Einstein sells products to parents of new babies, many who believe the claim that these videos have a positive effect on child development. When, under pressure from the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, Disney offered refunds to anyone who purchased Baby Einstein DVDs because they falsely

claimed their products were educational, few parents took the offer. The rationale was that their children enjoyed it.

There are countless websites that move very young children into the world of screen-based “education.” And some of these games and programs may help children learn. Some do. But most just entertain.

Studies have consistently shown correlations between aggressive behavior in adolescents and violent TV programs and video games. Now, a 2009 study conducted at SUNY Albany’s School of Public Health concluded that 3-year-olds, “exposed to more TV, both directly and indirectly, are at increased risk for exhibiting aggressive behavior,” -- and the programs were not necessarily those with violent content.

Beyond aggression, increased screen time has been strongly linked to another devastating childhood issue: obesity. First Lady Michelle Obama’s drive to eliminate obesity in children is aimed not just at food choices but at the importance of physical activity. “My kids have to get up and move,” she noted at her press conference last week. “They can’t sit in front of the TV.”

It’s worth noting that if a baby is sitting on a parent’s lap and the parent makes eye contact and engages in conversation, many TV shows and videos can become learning experiences. But too many busy parents need a respite from the stresses of work and family and use technology to get relief. So the baby watches alone.

While that seems innocent enough for a few hours each week, what the new research suggests is that the few hours that a toddler spends glued to a screen are enough to begin a teen addiction with truly harmful effects. The more screen-time hours school-age children spend, the poorer are their grades in school and the lower their graduation rates.

Parents can have an impact on the lives of their future students by starting from the beginning, knowing that what they do during the first five years will be the foundation of their success in school and in life. But they can’t do it alone. Preschools and caregivers who often use the same screen-based babysitter must discourage the use of screen media. Communities can help by providing alternatives to families in recreational parks and vibrant downtowns. While we have to be realistic and accept that technology is here to stay, we need help in controlling its negative influences, particularly in preying upon the youngest children and their busy parents.

If business keeps spending \$40 billion a year advertising to children and won’t take the steps necessary to protect them, then government must. Until there is public outcry, parents must start by setting aside some time every day for real interaction with their kids. Play with them. Talk . Take a walk, ride a bike, build a Lego castle, play Go Fish. Do it as it early and often as you can. Very early. Before we get to the point where our children can’t experience anything unless it’s on a screen.

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