

Teens with more screen time have lower-quality relationships

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Teens who spend more time watching television or using computers appear to have poorer relationships with their parents and peers, according to a report in the March issue of *Archives of Pediatrics & Adolescent Medicine*.

Over the past 20 years, [teens](#) have used an ever-expanding array of screen-based tools for communication and entertainment, according to background information in the article. "The availability and attractiveness of screen time activities has provoked excitement about the opportunities afforded by these options, as well as concern about whether these displace other activities that are important for health and development," the authors write. "One area of interest is how screen time may affect the quality of relationships with family and friends."

Rosalina Richards, Ph.D., of the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand, and colleagues studied 3,043 adolescents age 14 to 15 in 2004. The teens completed a confidential questionnaire about their free-time habits, as well as an assessment of their attachment to [parents](#) and peers.

Overall, the more time teens spent [watching television](#) or playing on a computer, the more likely they were to report low attachment to parents (in other words, difficulty forming a [relationship](#) or emotional bond). The risk of having low attachment to parents increased 4 percent for every hour spent viewing television and 5 percent for every hour spent playing on a computer. Conversely, teens who spend more time reading and doing homework reported a higher level of attachment to parents.

The researchers also assessed interview responses from 976 individuals who were age 15 years in 1987 to 1988. Among these teens, more time spent viewing television was associated with lower attachment to both parents and peers. For every additional hour of television, teens had a 13 percent increased risk of low attachment to their parents and a 24 percent increased risk of low attachment to peers. "Recommendations that children watch less television are sometimes met with the concern that being unable to discuss popular shows or characters may inhibit peer relationships," the authors write. "The findings herein do not suggest that less television viewing is detrimental to adolescent friendships."

There are several potential mechanisms underlying the relationship between increased screen time and poorer relationships, they note. For instance, teens who have televisions in their bedroom not only spent more time watching but also may share fewer meals with family members. "However, it is also possible that adolescents with poor attachment relationships with immediate friends and family use screen-based activities to facilitate new attachment figures such as online friendships or parasocial relationships with [television](#) characters or personalities," the authors write.

"Given the importance of attachment to parents and peers in adolescent health and development, concern about high levels of [screen time](#) among adolescents is warranted," they conclude. "With the rapid advance of screen-based options for entertainment, communication and education, ongoing research is needed to monitor the effect that these technologies have on social development and psychological and physical well-being among adolescents."

More information: Arch Pediatr Adolesc Med. 2010;164[3]:258-262.

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