

The case for unlimited tablet time for toddlers

July 20 2015, by Beth Skwarecki



This sounds extreme, but first let me ask: how many parents do you think actually keep track of their kids' screen time? If the TV is on but one of the children wanders out of the room, does that count? What if they're following along to a yoga video? What if the kid borrows Mom's phone at dinner to ask Google what snails eat?

Guidelines abound that encourage limiting "screen time." The American Academy of Pediatrics, for example, recommends [two hours or less per](#)

[day](#), and says screens "should be avoided" for [kids](#) under 2. While I hate to see kids vegging out in front of the TV, I think these limits are based more on knee-jerk reactions (kids these days and their screens!) than on anything that's actually meaningful to kids' development.

Most of the research on screen time comes from studies of kids who watch TV compared to kids who don't, as [Emily Oster explains at Fivethirtyeight](#)—and the effects typically disappear when demographic differences like income, race, and education are taken into account.

Television probably isn't inherently bad for kids, and other tablet activities like video games shouldn't be lumped in with TV viewing anyway. I surveyed the research on this when [I wrote about tablet time for Lifehacker](#). To summarize the important differences:

Television is passive: stuff happens, and you get to watch. The stuff that happens isn't personalized to you, either: somebody's grandma might be on TV, but it's not your grandma.

One of the pediatricians who authored the AAP's recommendations [wrote in JAMA Pediatrics](#) (careful to note that he was speaking for himself and not the AAP) that play on an iPad is far more similar to playing with blocks, or reading a book with a caregiver, than it is to passive TV watching.

The [evidence-based recommendations](#) from nonprofit Zero to Three focus on finding appropriate content rather than setting blanket limitations on time, although their evidence for the importance of "appropriate" content is weak in places.

Maybe it just sounds better to say kids should be playing educational video games with Dad instead of flinging birds at asteroids over and over again. But I don't know about that. My toddler has no problem with his

letters and numbers, having figured them out through some combination of real life and, ok, maybe TV—but he understands orbital mechanics better from [Angry Birds Space](#) than I ever did from high school physics class.

(When I mentioned Angry Birds in my Lifehacker piece, I got commenters insisting that I was mistaken and my toddler couldn't possibly be doing more than aimless swiping. Here's news: if you don't think a one-year-old can clear levels on Angry Birds, then you haven't spent much time with one-year-olds lately.)

My kids each have a tablet (a Nook HD+, bought on a very good sale, and rooted to run cyanogenmod's version of Android), and they decide their own age-appropriate uses for it. The five-year-old uses his to build elaborate things in Minecraft (a sort of lego-block world) and to research whatever is on his mind ("OK Google, show me pictures of narwhal skeletons.") The two-year-old explores the physics of Angry Birds and Monument Valley. Both children play problem-solving games like Cut the Rope and Bad Piggies, sometimes for hours. And, to be fair, they also watch a lot of Youtube.

Imagine, for the moment, that you wanted a kid to spend hours on a tablet. What problems do you foresee? They'd get bored with it. They'd find new and different things to do with it than whatever you proposed. They'd leave it at the bottom of the toybox for days if some newer, more interesting toy came into their life. Guess what? That's exactly what happens when you allow unlimited screen time and the novelty wears off.

I don't think a forbidden fruit policy is the best. If my kids only got an hour of screen time a day, I promise you they would only use it to watch cartoons. But sometimes they send texts to their dad or their grandparents, or they sit down with me to puzzle out an adventure game,

or the older boy will teach his little brother how to install and play something new.

Today, Google and touchscreens and online communication are just part of the background of everyday life. My kids know how to skip ads on videos and how to navigate a website even if they can't read the words on it. They know what information you can get from a phone, and will pipe up to recommend I text Daddy or ask Google or punch something into the GPS. Keeping kids away from screens is as nonsensical as if parents of the past kept their kids away from the radio, or the telephone, or pencils and paper.

For the Lifehacker piece, I asked Clare Smith, a language development researcher who has written about screen time, whether she agrees with my view on this. Here's what she said:

We now live in a world where this technology opens up opportunities for extended social engagement, learning, work and leisure. In fact, it is becoming the norm, and our children will be expected to be proficient in this technology. It is just another form of media that can and should be used in whichever way an individual chooses. Choosing devices and apps is just the same as choosing toys or books, and each choice should be made on its own merits. My own children are embracing social networking and gaming and we are trying our best to guide them through the associated risks and benefits. Just as a conscientious parent teaches a child road safety, stranger danger, eating a healthy balanced diet and a disciplined approach to learning, so this may extend to learning about modern technology and the online world.

Screen time isn't something to protect kids from; it's just part of our world. Let's stop pretending that it's some kind of tragedy to hand a toddler an iPad.

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