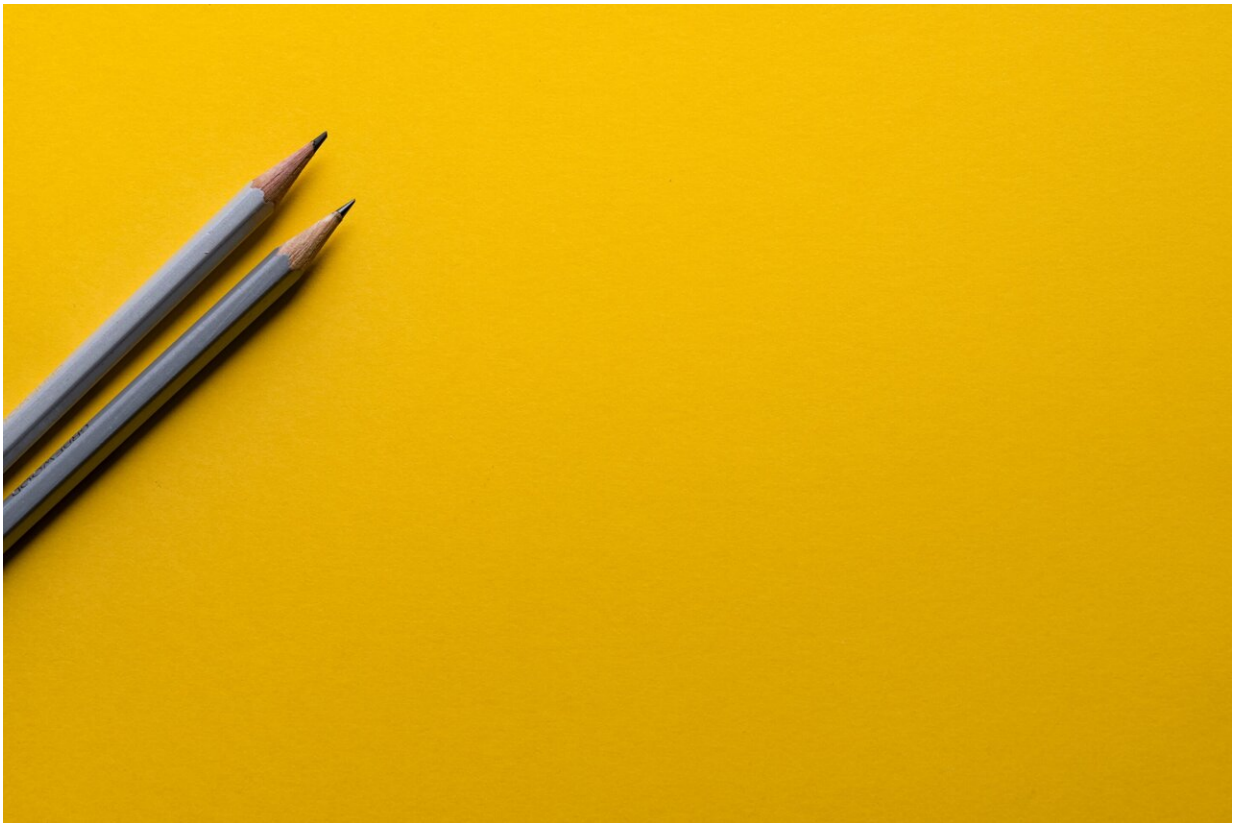


Tablets at the table can influence child development, not always in a good way

March 30 2016, by Joanne Orlando, Western Sydney University



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Do you "i-Pad your child" when you go to a restaurant?

I couldn't help but notice the one-year-old at the restaurant table next to

me who had been iPad-ed. That is, an iPad loaded with his favourite animation had been propped up on the table to act as a surrogate babysitter.

While screens can solve short-term issues of keeping children quiet, consistently using them to anaesthetise [kids](#) does us all a disservice in the long term.

[Research](#) shows that 75% to 80% of parents now use technology to [placate or distract children](#), for example on a long car trip, waiting for a doctor's appointment, when mum or dad is cooking dinner, or when it's nap time.

Take a tablet and keep quiet

While this strategy works, it raises important questions about how children will develop all the social skills they need for our world. Screens may ward off kids' complaints (or complaints from adults around us) but we're doing children a disservice if our go-to strategy is always to use technology to keep them quiet.

How can we grumble about kids not knowing how to act in public, or how to manage boredom when they haven't had the chance to learn those skills?

Technology has enormous potential to support children's learning. But how adults guide that use is key.

Research published in the journal [Psychology](#) consistently shows that television has for many years been effectively used as a strategy to calm children with identified difficult behaviour, but mobile devices takes this one big step further.

Parents can now calm down – or digitally sedate – wherever and whenever they feel they are (or may) lose control over a child's behaviour. It's unlikely that a child will say no to the device being handed to them, therefore it's a parent's responsibility to give this strategy some careful thought, especially in terms of how often to use technology as a pacifier.

Early adopter

Most children start using mobile devices in their [first year of life](#) and from day one the context around when and why that device is given to them is crucial.

Is a mobile automatically handed to a child when waiting in line? Is the family iPad or other tablet device mostly used to reward or punish behaviour? Are your devices loaded with apps to keep your child quiet? Is a parent always angry or disappointed with the child when letting them use a device?

Consistent negative uses of technology, which aim to suppress child behaviour, have many long-term implications.

For example, knowing how to change our speech and actions in different social situations comes from engaging in different social scenarios over and over again. If a child is always encouraged to be head down and focused on their screen when they are in a café or on the bus, then they will miss developing these understandings and skills.

Can we really blame them for inappropriate behaviour if they've never had opportunity to become familiar with what is appropriate and understand it? Similarly, we often lament dinner table conversation or conversation in the car but if the DVD player is always turned on when children get in the car, then the learnt behaviour is not talk in that

context.

A positive influence

Very different implications are achieved if a device is used in a positive and empowering way, for example when a device is consistently handed to a child at home to support their creativity, imagination, communication and language skills.

Not only is technology being used in a way that will enhance learning, but it's also communicating the understanding that it is an empowering part of our lives.

This is important in the long term if we actually want children to have positive attitudes towards using technology to learn at school and in future employment. Imagine a child's confusion if they were asked to work on a iPad at school, when at home it had only been given to them in response to screaming and bad behaviour.

From a practical point of view, there are times when parents need quiet but consistently using tablets or [mobile devices](#) as the preferred method for achieving it is a problem. It dumbs down the potential that technology holds for children's learning.

It also strips our children of important knowledge and skills for life today.

The effects are exacerbated since this use often begins when a [child](#) is still in infancy. Consistently demanding children disengage with the world around them and expecting them to be quiet all the time limits their opportunities to learn how to engage confidently with society. It teaches them that they are not important.

They may be having fun using a device, but the message is subliminal. If we want happy and successful children then it's important to take stock of our own actions for developing their behaviour so that technology is an empowering part of [children](#)'s lives.

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