

How should we teach our kids to use digital media?

October 24 2016, by Jenny Radesky



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Any time a new technology is introduced, it disrupts values, routines and

behaviors. This goes back well before the printing press replaced oral histories or the telephone replaced face-to-face conversations, but is evident today in our regular habits of checking our [smartphones for notifications](#). Kids are growing up with the expectation of auto-playing [streaming videos](#) and having access to our phones when [we need them to be quiet](#).

Human anxieties about these changes can take years to resolve, as we slowly figure out how to [control the technology to meet our values and needs, rather than being controlled by it](#). With the rapid pace at which new digital products and services are being developed, parents report feeling particularly overwhelmed. They fear missing out on what benefits tech might hold for their families, yet don't fully trust that electronic devices and apps are designed or marketed with their child's best interests in mind.

We doctors used to urge parents to discourage media use under age two, and to limit kids' use to two hours a day, at most. But we have now arrived at a more nuanced understanding of the various ways in which [children](#) use [digital tools](#). Through review of the updated science, interviews and focus groups with parents from diverse backgrounds, and our own clinical experience, we are now recommending that parents use media as a teaching tool – a way to connect and create – instead of just to consume.

As a developmental behavioral pediatrician, parent of two young boys and lead author of the new American Academy of Pediatrics policy statement "[Media and Young Minds](#)," I hope to help parents shape tech use in their homes [based on their human ideals and values](#).

Main principles to keep in mind

This new policy statement represents the best medical research and

academic scholarship about electronic media and health and development of children from birth through age five. Along with the associated [family media-use planning website](#), it focuses on how parents can use [electronic media](#) together with their young children to encourage family connection, learning and digital literacy skills, in several ways:

1. We emphasize teaching children that media use means more than just entertainment. It can also involve connecting with others: Videochatting, for example, is fine at any age, although infants need their parents' help to understand it. Another great use is for creating and learning together – letting the child take photos and record videos or songs, as well as looking up craft ideas. We hope parents will feel comfortable seeing digital media as a tool to meet their parenting needs, and not the thing-in-itself that controls us or our children [through the attention economy or gamification](#).
2. As far as entertainment, we recommend trusted content producers such as [Sesame Workshop](#) and [PBS Kids](#), who design apps with the child's and parent's needs in mind. There is also [Common Sense Media](#), a great site for finding information on digital products and answering any tech-related parenting question you can imagine.
3. We recommend having unplugged spaces and times of day so that both parent and child can play, be bored, or talk without distraction or feeling a need to multitask.
4. We ask parents to test apps and watch videos with their children to determine if they are good fits for their child's temperament, rather than letting the child make all of these choices. Parents are the best people to decide whether a particular app or video is appropriate for the child's current stage of development and knowledge.
5. Parents should not feel pressure to introduce their children to technology early in life for the sake of seeking a competitive

advantage. Kids will catch up when they are older or in school. But, if parents want to introduce media early, the youngest age we recommend is 18 months. At that age, it's important to note, parents must play or view along with the child for there to be any educational benefit, such as learning new words. Otherwise, that expensive tablet may just be a portable TV or cause-and-effect toy.

Time limits and rules remain important

We still recommend time limits (one hour of entertainment media per day – which does not include videochatting, taking pictures, using with parents as a learning tool and the like) and rules, for several reasons. First, pediatricians are trained to be child advocates, making us naturally protective. In our day-to-day experiences with families in clinics, we see children having difficulties with sleep, obesity, school, relationships or behavior that appear to be intertwined with problematic media habits.

We hear parents asking for concrete guidance from us about the role digital devices might play in their families' lives. They want to know what to let their child watch and how much of it. They ask about how to make sure their child can be tech-savvy without ending up in a position where the child prefers and will choose digital play to the exclusion of other important activities.

Parents also tell us that they don't want their child to be spoon-fed information by online media. In addition, they're concerned about apps determining their [child's](#) play ideas. And they want help finding alternative activities to really encourage the [creativity, persistence, and cognitive and social-emotional skills kids need to flourish in school](#).

Overall, the research still shows that excessive media use is associated with poorer sleep, higher obesity risk and developmental outcomes such

as poor executive function (the "boss" of our brain that helps us focus, control impulses and plan), so we want parents to prioritize [unplugged, social and unstructured play](#) as much as possible.

Parents have always been interpreters of the world for [young children](#). If kids are to grow up with a healthy concept of what digital tools are and how to use them effectively, creatively and kindly, we need to teach them. This means both guiding them directly and modeling with our own behavior from the very start. The longer-term goal is to raise kids who see us, their parents, as guides when they encounter weird stuff online or have negative interactions on social [media](#).

We want to raise kids who don't react to negative emotions by spewing out their feelings – sometimes at others' expense – online, nor binge on videos or games. We want to raise kids with good sleep habits, healthy bodies, a variety of interests and curiosity about the world, who feel good about their learning and their relationships, both on- and offline. We hope our new guidance can help us all – [parents](#), medical professionals and children alike – achieve that.

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