

More screen time for kids isn't all that bad, researcher says

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Chances are that your children will turn out OK even though they spend hours playing video games or watching TV. This is according to Christopher Ferguson of Stetson University in the US, who led a study in Springer's journal *Psychiatric Quarterly* which found that there is only a negligibly small association between excessive screen time and higher levels of depression and delinquency among teenagers. Ferguson therefore believes the strict attention to limited screen time by policy makers and advocacy groups is uncalled for.

Until late last year, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommended only two hours' screen time a day for youth, but dropped this recommendation from their new guidelines. This change reflects that screen time recommendations often remain best guesses, while data about the use of such recommendations are not always clear. Ferguson's team therefore sought to address gaps in previous literature by examining what levels of screen time were associated with negative outcomes in teenagers and how strong these associations were.

They analyzed data from the 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, which included data from participants from Florida who were on average 16 years old. They were asked about their sleeping patterns, physical activity, how often they had meals with their family, if they experienced symptoms of depression and how much screen time they spent watching television or playing video games. The participants also reported on their grades, whether they participated in delinquent behavior, risky driving or sexual activities, used illegal substances or suffered any eating disorders.

Data from the current study suggests that children are resilient to screen consumption for up to six hours daily. When negative outcomes were noted, these were very small and in general affected males more. Time spent in front of a screen only accounted for between 0.49 percent of the variance in delinquency, 1.7 percent in depressive symptoms and 1.2 percent in average grade points. It did not have an influence on [risky driving](#) or risky sex, substance abuse or restrictive eating.

"Although an 'everything in moderation' message when discussing screen time with parents may be most productive, our results do not support a strong focus on screen time as a preventative measure for youth problem behaviors," says Ferguson. Results also suggest that the AAP was correct to discard their previous two-hour maximum guideline.

Ferguson believes that setting hard time limits on screen use is a fraught avenue for policy and does more to foster guilt in parents unable to meet unrealistic expectations than they do to help children. He sees more value in focusing on how media are used than on time consumption alone, as it could for instance foster learning and socialization.

He also believes that it is important that youngsters are allowed to become intimately familiar with screen technologies. "Screens of various sorts are increasingly embedded into daily life, whether they involve education, work, socialization or personal organization," Ferguson explains. "Setting narrow limits on [screen time](#) may not keep up with the myriad ways in which screens have become essential to modern life."

More information: Christopher J. Ferguson, Everything in Moderation: Moderate Use of Screens Unassociated with Child Behavior Problems, *Psychiatric Quarterly* (2017). [DOI: 10.1007/s11126-016-9486-3](https://doi.org/10.1007/s11126-016-9486-3)

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