

Too much screen time hurts toddlers' social skills, new study shows

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Toddlers who spend too much time watching television or using devices like tablets have been shown to have underdeveloped social skills, according to the latest University of Alberta research gauging the effects

screen time has on early childhood development.

The findings come on the heels of another U of A study that showed kindergarteners who get too much screen time may be more at risk of behaviour and attention problems in school.

In the new study, behavioural epidemiologist Valerie Carson and her research team examined associations of [physical activity](#) and sedentary behaviour with [social skills](#), as well as how physical activity and sedentary behaviour tracked at one to two years, two to three years, and three to four years of age in 251 [children](#).

The researchers measured physical activity levels using motion sensor monitors the children wore for a week at all three time points. Over the same period, parents reported on their child's screen time and social skills using a questionnaire called the Adaptive Social Behavior Inventory.

Responses for the social skills checkbox were broken into three subscales:

- express, which rates how well they interact and relate to other children
- comply, a measure of a child's ability to help others, follow rules and take direction
- disrupt, a list of the more negative aspects of behaviour such as teasing, bullying, being bossy or getting upset to receive more attention

Carson said the more toddlers viewed screens, the more their social skills suffered. Higher amounts of screen time were significantly associated with lower express and comply scores—the positive aspects of social skills—while the disrupt scores were inflated.

"Screen time was unfavourably associated with social skills across early childhood," she said. "Unfortunately, these behaviour patterns, once they're established in early childhood, seem to persist as children get older."

Carson noted that long-term implications have been observed for social skills in early childhood.

"For instance, they have been linked with better education, employment and mental health outcomes, as well as lower criminal activity and substance use in adolescence and adulthood."

Carson said the Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines recommend no screen time for children under two and one hour or less per day for children between two and four.

"We always think that the most cost-efficient and effective way to a healthy life is early prevention," she said.

"It becomes more challenging to change these behaviours over time, particularly around screen time, especially with some of the devices we have, which can be addictive and very habitual."

On top of following the movement guidelines, Carson, who receives funding from the Stollery Children's Hospital Foundation through the Women and Children's Health Research Institute, suggested parents set limits on the amount of screen time children watch, and watch along with children to talk about what they're seeing.

"You want to try to turn it into more of an interactive learning experience," she suggested.

The study didn't show any associations between social skills and the

different intensities of physical activity.

However, physical activity and sedentary behaviour did track at moderate levels across the three time points, suggesting physical activity patterns seemed to be imprinting even at these early ages, Carson said.

"Given that physical activity—moderate- to vigorous-intensity physical activity in particular—is associated with a wide variety of health indicators throughout childhood, current evidence supports the promotion of regular physical activity in toddlerhood."

More information: Valerie Carson et al. Physical activity and sedentary behavior across three time-points and associations with social skills in early childhood, *BMC Public Health* (2019). [DOI: 10.1186/s12889-018-6381-x](https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-018-6381-x)

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