Can apps make your kids smarter?

December 23 2019, by Serena Gordon, Healthday Reporter

(HealthDay)—Smartphones, tablets and laptops are everywhere, and young children are fascinated by them. Now, new research suggests that parents might be able to harness that curiosity and use apps on the

devices to boost early learning.

The review found that apps could be particularly useful for teaching early math and language skills.

"Screen time is here, and it's here to stay. We should not just be paying attention to the amount of screen time, but instead to maximizing that screen time. The idea is to look for ways to leverage screen time in a positive way," said study author Shayl Griffith, a postdoctoral associate in the department of psychology at Florida International University in Miami.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) discourages any screen time before 18 months, except for video chatting. From 18 to 24 months, for those who want to introduce their children to digital media, the AAP recommends limited use of high-quality apps that you use with your child. From 2 years on, the AAP says to limit screen time to an hour a day.

But instead of looking at the potential risks of too much screen time, Griffith and her team focused on the potential benefits of letting kids use apps. These readily available products are certainly effective at capturing kids' attention. The researchers wondered if that would be useful in teaching kids certain skills.

The investigators looked at 35 studies that had previously been done. The studies included more than 4,600 children under age 6. The kids were from the United States, Australia, the United Kingdom, Canada, the United Arab Emirates, Italy, Greece, Croatia, the Netherlands and Germany.

The apps in the studies needed to be an interactive game app on a touchscreen. Interactive generally means that when a child interacts with

the screen, it has an effect on the material presented. For example, children might have to match items, or they might have to count items.

The review also included three studies that used apps for children with autism to try to teach social communication skills. Griffith said these apps might ask a child to do things like identify a facial expression.

Griffith said the apps appeared to be strongest at teaching math and early pre-literacy language skills. "Academic skills may be more conducive to app learning. These are foundational skills that need to be repeated and varied in practice," she said.

The apps didn't seem to significantly help with social communication skills for kids with autism. Griffith said that while the kids got better at playing the apps over time, that experience didn't seem to translate into real-world social communication skills.

The review was published online Dec. 23 in the journal *Pediatrics*.

In an accompanying editorial, Dr. Michael Rich from Harvard Medical School and Boston Children's Hospital noted that this year marks the 50th anniversary of one of the original childhood media teachers—"Sesame Street"—and he said that show really set the bar that apps and other early childhood "edutainment" should be following.

Rich said parents and kids need to realize that "all media—even books and blackboards—are educational, but what they teach and how they teach varies. Screens are uniquely suited to grab kids' attention. Even if you try to drift away, it's harder than it is with a book."

But, that doesn't mean that screens are inherently bad. Rich said they are a "powerful, but neutral, tool that can be used in a variety of ways."

He said it's important that parents don't consistently rely on these devices or TVs to be an "electronic babysitter." If you let you child watch TV or a movie on a tablet so you can make dinner, "the problem is that you're not there to help your child process the information and content they see. They might see a trailer for a violent film, and because you've let them watch, it's like you're tacitly condoning it, and it leads kids to think it's normal, and they might be terrified," he explained.

"We should be expecting more of our screens," Rich said.

 More information: Here's more about kids and screen time from the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

Citation: Can apps make your kids smarter? (2019, December 23) retrieved 9 April 2024 from https://medicalxpress.com/news/2019-12-apps-kids-smarter.html