

Parents: Don't worry about how much screen time kids have right now

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"When the screen is needed—which it will be—find the most creative uses for those screens," said Marina Umaschi Bers, chair at the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development. Credit: Ingimage

Screen time limits can be hard to enforce under normal circumstances.

Setting screen limits on kids who are home during the COVID-19 pandemic can feel impossible, especially as many school-age children are taking classes virtually.

Which is why parents should take a deep breath (in through the nose, out through the mouth) and reframe their thinking around screens during this time, said Marina Umaschi Bers, professor and chair at the Eliot-Pearson Department of Child Study and Human Development, adjunct professor in the Computer Science Department, and head of the Developmental Technologies (DevTech) research group at Tufts.

"I think the worry about screen time remains, and we have to keep true to what we know is good for children, which is balance," said Bers.

"That means creating a schedule, and when the screen is needed—which it will be—finding the most creative uses for those screens."

Bers has a strong metaphor that may help: Think of a screen as either a playground or a playpen. Playgrounds are open spaces where children can explore, be creative, and communicate with each other. They use their physical bodies, they problem-solve, and they invent. Playgrounds are beneficial for children's social, emotional, moral, and language development, Bers said. For example, children may learn to wait in line or ask for a turn there.

In contrast, she said, playpens are more limited. Children have access to only certain toys or games, all chosen by the adults. There is less communication, freedom, and activity. However, they are safe.

"If we take that metaphor to the world of technology, we will discover that many technologies are playgrounds, and most of those technologies put the child in the driver's seat. The child is creating, programming, recording, drawing, and discovering," Bers said. "As opposed to some technologies that are more like playpens, which are fine, but we don't

want children to be in a technological playpen for a long time."

For a young child, a screen playpen experience might be playing a simple game on a tablet. But in this metaphor, playpens aren't just for little kids. For a teen, a technological playpen might be watching mindless videos or endlessly scrolling social media.

The goal should be to maximize using the screen as a playground and minimize using it as a playpen, Bers said.

There are lots of ways kids and teens can use screens creatively:

- Learn to code with the free ScratchJr app, created by the DevTech research group.
- Draw or color.
- Take and edit pictures of yourself, other people, things in your life.
- Make collages or albums with those creations.
- Create videos of yourself or others (with their permission).
- Take your device outside for scavenger hunts or geocaching.
- Record sounds you hear around your house or yard.
- Move—exercise along with a video or learn a new dance.
- Communicate with others—talk via video chats, create correspondence like e-cards, or interview family members.

Bers also said to think about the type of screen kids are using. Smaller devices encourage movement, whereas larger screens encourage sitting. Both have their places. E-learning may be more suitable for a large screen, while some forms of creative screen time may be better on a smaller one.

Lastly, Bers said, since children learn by watching, parents should try to create a schedule for themselves for screen use during the day. "We want

to make sure that we are intentional about our own screen use and understand how we are using screens and why. Once we do that, we can start thinking about a plan for our [children](#)."

With a schedule and a reframed view on screen time given the COVID-19 pandemic, parents can relax when kids are engaged in a "playpen" screen activity, Bers said. Just aim to use such activities sparingly, when you need time to cook or prep for an online class. Or, you know, just catch your breath.

More information: Dr. Marina Bers recently led a webinar titled "Young Learners, Technology, and Learning at Home," which was hosted by the ISTE Early Learning Network. Watch it here: bit.ly/DrBerswebinar

Find and register for upcoming webinars on parenting topics from her DevTech research group here: sites.tufts.edu/devtech/learn-with-us/educators/

The free ScatchJr app developed by Bers and colleagues can be downloaded here: scratchjr.org/

Provided by Tufts University

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