

Reading with your toddler? Books may beat screens

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Parents who want to read to their toddlers and give them a

developmental boost ought to pick up a traditional paper book rather than an e-book on a tablet, a new study reports.

Toddlers are more likely to interact with their parents when they're sharing a paper children's book rather than a tablet, University of Michigan researchers found.

Parents also tended to talk more to their children when reading from a paper book.

Further, unruly children prone to emotional outbursts responded better to their parents when reading from print versus digital.

The point of reading to your child isn't just what's on the page, but the experience you're having with them, child development experts explained.

"Children thrive from back-and-forth interactions with loving, responsive adults in their environment," said Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, an associate professor of pediatrics, human development and [family studies](#) at the University of Wisconsin, Madison.

"That's the number one thing that drives their development, whether it's speech or social/emotional skills," added Navsaria, who was not involved in the study.

According to the new study, paper books produce richer interactions between toddlers and their parents than e-books.

This is important to know because 98% of families of children under age 9 own either a smartphone or tablet, and toddlers spend on average more than two hours a day using digital media, the researchers said in background notes.

"While tablets and other technology are exciting, the best bang for your buck is still going to be from that paper book," said Dr. Brandi Freeman, a pediatrician and associate vice chair for diversity, equity and inclusion at Children's Hospital Colorado. She played no role in the report.

For the study, the researchers examined interactions between 72 parents and their toddlers, aged 2 to 3 years, as they read sets of nursery rhymes either in print or on a tablet app. The rhymes included standards like *Itsy Bitsy Spider*; *One, Two, Buckle My Shoe*; *Hickory, Dickory, Dock*; and *Pat-A-Cake*.

Parents with a tablet tended to ask fewer questions and talk less with their toddler about the nursery rhymes while reading, the findings showed.

Those open-ended questions are rocket fuel for a child's developing brain, Freeman said.

"If someone's reading a book about Clifford—'Do you see a big red dog?' 'What is he doing?' 'Does he look like he's happy?' Different things to get the child to engage," Freeman said. "Even if they're not responding, it's that kind of open-ended inquisitive question that helps in terms of development."

What's more, kids tended to pay less attention to parents when sharing a tablet. They responded less to what their parents were saying, and rowdy toddlers were more likely to get worked up and act out.

E-books are marketed as being better for kids because they are more interactive, with touchable hot spots that cause animations or sounds to occur, Navsaria said.

But all those features are proving to be an unfortunate distraction to the

most important thing about reading—the shared experience of parent and child.

The [interactive features](#) "act as a distractor because the child is looking for the thing that makes something go, which print books generally don't do," Navsaria said. "The tablet ends up putting in these distractions in different ways that makes it more challenging. A parent has to work harder to do the work of interaction."

The interactive features of e-books also make parents less likely to ask questions or talk, because the book is doing most of that work for them, Freeman said.

Navsaria doesn't want to demonize tablets, and acknowledged they can be very useful for parents on the go.

"There are situations in which books on a tablet may be preferable. A family is traveling or running errands or whatever the case may be, and it's easier to carry one [tablet](#) than a stack of 40 picture books," Navsaria said.

But [parents](#) would be better off if they purchase e-books that are stripped of interactive features and function more like traditional paper books, he said.

"Choose e-[books](#) that are more standard, that don't have the interactive bells and whistles, where basically the images appear on the screen much like they do in a print book," Navsaria said. "That will reduce the likelihood that children will be distracted. Recognize that shared reading on a screen in that way is probably better than no reading if your other choice is to not have any kind of book."

The study by Dr. Tiffany Munzer and colleagues was published online

Dec. 1 in the journal *Pediatrics*.

More information: Tiffany G. Munzer et al, Parent Verbalizations and Toddler Responses With Touchscreen Tablet Nursery Rhyme Apps, *Pediatrics* (2021). [DOI: 10.1542/peds.2021-049964](https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2021-049964)

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