

Time spent watching videos may stunt toddler language development, but it depends on why they're watching

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A new study from SMU psychologist Sarah Kucker and colleagues reveals that passive video use among toddlers can negatively affect

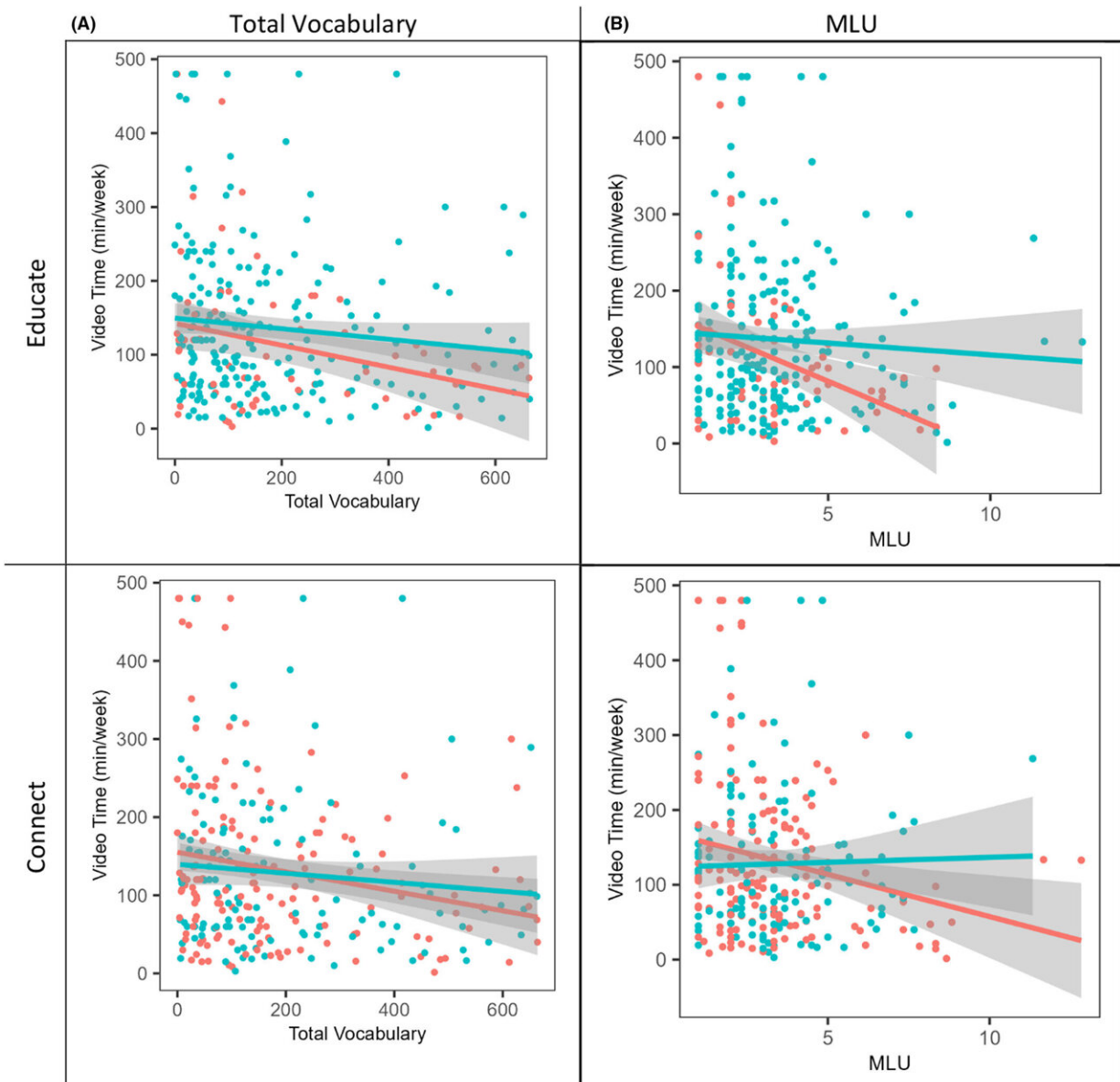
language development, but their caregiver's motivations for exposing them to digital media could also lessen the impact.

Results show that children between the ages of 17 and 30 months spend an average of nearly two hours per day watching videos—a 100 percent increase from prior estimates gathered before the COVID-19 pandemic. The research reveals a negative association between high levels of [digital media](#) watching and children's vocabulary development.

Children exposed to videos by caregivers for their calming or "babysitting" benefits tended to use phrases and sentences with fewer words. However, the negative impact on language skills was mitigated when videos were used for educational purposes or to foster [social connections](#)—such as through [video](#) chats with family members.

"In those first couple years of life, language is one of the core components of development that we know media can impact," said Kucker, assistant professor of psychology in SMU's Dedman College of Humanities & Sciences. "There's less research focused on toddlers using digital media than older ages, which is why we're trying to understand better how digital media affects this age group and what type of screen time is beneficial and what is not."

Published in the journal [Acta Paediatrica](#), the study involved 302 caregivers of children between 17 and 30 months. Caregivers answered questions about their child's words, sentences, and how much time they spend on different media activities each day. Those activities included video/TV, video games, video chat, and e-books, with caregivers explaining why they use each activity with their child. Print book reading was also compared.



Moderation of (A) vocabulary and (B) MLU by reason for use. The red line represents caregivers who did not report that reason for use; the green line represents caregivers who did give that reason for video. Bolded cells are those with a significant moderation. Non-significant reasons are not shown. Credit: *Acta Paediatrica* (2024). DOI: 10.1111/apa.17100

Researchers looked at the amount of media use and the reasons provided

by caregivers for their children's media use. These factors were then compared to the children's vocabulary and length using two or more words together (the mean length of utterance).

Kucker suggests that caregivers need to consider what kind of videos their children are watching (whether for learning or fun) and how they interact with toddlers watching videos. She acknowledges that parents often use digital media to occupy children while they complete tasks. Kucker recommends caregivers consider how much digital media they allow [young children](#) and if they can interact with them while using it.

The study's findings underscore the need for parents, caregivers, and educators to be aware of the potential effects of digital media on [language development](#) in children 30 months and under. By understanding the types of digital media children are exposed to and the reasons behind their usage, [appropriate measures](#) can be taken to ensure more healthy language development.

Future research by Kucker and her colleagues will continue to explore the types of videos young children watch, how they use screens with others, and if young children watching digital media for two hours is the new normal and, if so, how that impacts language development.

More information: Sarah C. Kucker et al, Variability and patterns in children's media use and links with language development, *Acta Paediatrica* (2024). [DOI: 10.1111/apa.17100](https://doi.org/10.1111/apa.17100)

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