

Recommendations for young children's screen time do more harm than good, says researcher

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Recommendations from the WHO on limiting screen time for children under the age of five are almost impossible to follow, and risk causing

unnecessary anxiety and stigmatization of parents of young children. This is according to a study from Lund University in Sweden on the digital media habits of young children. Instead, the researchers recommend that parents support their children by exploring digital media alongside them.

The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends as little [screen time](#) as possible for children under the age of five. Children under two years old should preferably not be exposed to screens at all. The Swedish Paediatric Society reiterates the WHO guidelines but makes allowances for short video calls with grandparents.

Helena Sandberg is a professor of media and [communication studies](#) at Lund University and a member of the Public Health Agency of Sweden's [expert panel](#), which is commissioned by the Government to produce recommendations on children's use of [digital media](#). She argues that it is unrealistic to advise zero tolerance for screens in societies that are highly digital.

"How are parents supposed to exclude screens in other people's homes or in public places that [young children](#) frequent? It's essentially impossible, even in your own home. Not only that, but they would be the first generation not exposed to screens since the television entered Swedish living rooms in the late 1950s."

On 15 February, Helena Sandberg and her research colleagues published the results of a study on young children's daily digital habits. The researchers observed and filmed 16 families with children aged between six weeks and just over three years old, some with older siblings. In interviews, parents reflected on the needs of the family, how they introduce and limit screens for their children and how young children use technology.

Parents want to restrict their children's screen time and say they limit screen-based activities largely because of the [social stigma](#) surrounding children's use of digital media. However, the researchers' observations show that parents also encourage their children to use technology and that it is an integral part of everyday life.

"Today, screens are a natural part of modern family life and parents often find that they have positive experiences together with their children through the use of technology. Screen-based activities can be very useful for socializing and learning, for example. Video calls with [distant relatives](#) can, among other things, contribute to the child's linguistic development and maintain meaningful and close bonds," says Helena Sandberg.

At the same time, screens are a source of worry and shame for parents. The recommendations on zero tolerance and the debate about screen time increase the demands on parenting and make many question whether they are good parents. But by focusing on screen time and not the content of those activities, they miss out on key aspects, argue the researchers.

"Parents want guidelines, but the current recommendations are doing more harm than good. Instead of focusing on screen time or screen abstinence, the recommendations should encourage interaction and use of digital media under parental guidance to foster exploration and learning," concludes Helena Sandberg.

More information: Report (in Swedish): lucris.lub.lu.se/ws/portalfile...la_vardagsliv_TG.pdf

Provided by Lund University

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