

The AAP's New View

The AAP has realized that a "just turn it off" stance is not very realistic in the digital age.

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The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) is changing its mind about "screen time" - or at least bringing its stance into the full-blown digital age.

The impending revision of the AAP's policy statement, announced in October, is driven by an acknowledgment that its current screen-time guidelines, best known for nixing any screen time for children under 2 and limiting older kids and teenagers to two hours a day, are outdated. just another wordpress site of the current advice predates widespread Internet use. Ari Brown, a practicing pediatrician and chair of the AAP Children, Adolescents and Media Leadership Work Group, via email. "Our previous recommendations were made because we had enough health and developmental concerns about potential risk of TV use to advise parents about it."

With schools eagerly implementing technology wherever funding allows, not to mention grade-school enrichment classes on coding, software that lets kids compose music on computers and strong anecdotal evidence that playing Minecraft can benefit kids with autism, espousing strict minimization ignores the obvious. Today's kids are "digital natives." Technology is in their blood.

The AAP's new view, summarized in "Beyond 'turn it off': How to advise families on media use," sees TVs, computers, gaming systems, smartphones and tablets as mere tools. Time spent with them can be good for kids or bad for kids, depending on how they're used.

The AAP made addressing children and media a top priority starting in 2012, a focus that culminated in the May 2015 "Growing Up Digital" symposium. The conference brought together experts on child development, social science, pediatrics, media, neuroscience and education, and called attention to the growing body of evidence supporting the potential (and potentially significant) benefits of screen time in child and adolescent development.

At the symposium, social scientists presented data showing that when teens connect online, those peer connections can be "significantly meaningful," and sometimes "more supportive than their real life friendships," reports Brown.

The implication, she says, is that "there are some very positive [online] opportunities for acceptance and support as teens develop their identity and self-esteem."

Other insights pointed to possible ways to strengthen digital media's teaching potential. Neuroscientists, she says, presented research showing that 2-year-olds learn novel words as well by video chat as they do by live communication, suggesting it's the two-way interaction that matters most. Technology that facilitates that back-and-forth, then, is more likely to

facilitate learning.

But here's the thing: Handing a 2-year-old an iPad and walking away isn't going to cut it, no matter what the software facilitates.

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This girl watches cartoons online with the iPad tablet while sitting on the sofa at home.

Artur Debat/Getty

"All of our experts indicated the importance of co-engagement," Brown says. Parental involvement determines the ultimate nature of screen time. For young children especially, positive outcomes rely on "screen time" also being "together time."

Much of screen time's potential for good, in fact, hinges on the parents, whether the child is 3 or 13. The AAP recommends parents join their kids in the digital world when possible, and familiarize themselves with their kids' media of choice even if they don't share the activity.

Parents should also lay ground rules for when, where and how long kids can engage in screen time, establish "screen-free zones" (hint: dinner table) and, of course, monitor all content. The potential benefits of screen time don't negate the potential (and potentially significant) dangers.

"Parenting has not changed," says Brown. "The same rules apply to every environment your child lives in - school, home, tech ... Set limits, be a good role model, know who your kids' friends are and where they are going."

The AAP's new policy statement on children and media will likely not come out until late this year, but Brown says it will "acknowledge where the research gaps are ... look to optimize the opportunity that the digital age presents, and minimize the risks. It will be practical and broad enough to be more evergreen so the guidance will be able to keep up with the next great tech thing."

Now That's Cool

Kids with autism have their own private Minecraft server. "Autcraft" lets them reap all the developmental benefits of the game without all the bullying that happens in the main space.