




MEDIA | Chandra Johnson

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Why experts keep changing the recommendations for children and screens

Screen time WHY PARENTS MATTER 

Children ages 8-18 spend **7.5 hours** each day in front of a non-school device.

  However, children whose parents set rules about screen time spend about **three fewer hours**.

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SOURCE: Kaiser Family Foundation

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Searching for evidence of how mobile devices have changed childhood and parenting, child psychologist and media effects expert Yalda Uhls suggests a quick Amazon.com search.

Within seconds, Amazon produces a long list of staples of American childhood with a twist —

A bouncy chair (albeit discontinued, but still in stock) aptly named the “Apptivity seat” features a secure rod that suspends a mirror overhead, which doubles as an iPad holder. There are tablet cases designed to make it easier for kids to hold onto the device while protecting the screen from “dribbles

and drool.” There’s even a potty training seat with a tablet holder.

These items get at the heart of the issue Uhls addresses in her new book, “Media Moms and Digital Dads: A Fact-Not-Fear Approach to Parenting in the Digital Age.” Technology has become an unavoidable reality of everyday life, but when should it become a reality for children?

“In the beginning, people either loved technology so much that they thought it was the answer to everything or they were terrified and said it would ruin everybody,” Uhls said. “Now the data is starting to support that it’s neither and there is no perfect answer.”

The once-ubiquitous question of how much screen time is itself outdated. Now the debate has shifted to which devices children should be exposed to first, the best content they should immerse themselves in and how different sorts of media may impact them at different ages, leaving researchers and doctors scrambling to keep up as technology changes — a nearly impossible task, Uhls said.

“Mobile is one of the fastest-growing technologies ever,” Uhls said. “With other things like cars or something, you had to develop skills and understanding over time to use it, but this keeps getting easier and easier and now kids can use it.”

Screen time for children and teens has been debated since the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) made its initial recommendation in 1999 for limiting TV for children under 2. In 2011, AAP pediatrician Dr. Ari Brown co-authored a groundbreaking recommendation that became the go-to response for medical professionals and concerned parents alike: All screen time for children under 2 should be avoided.

Yet that recommendation was obsolete before it was even published, Brown says, since the Apple iPad was released the year before, ostensibly changing everything from what content was available for babies and children to how easy it was for any age to use mobile technology.

“Literally, we were writing a policy statement and then the first iPad came out and the app revolution began,” Brown said.

Now, almost five years later, Brown says the rules continue to evolve — prompting the AAP to announce this month that it plans to revisit its 2011 policy.

A new policy, expected sometime in 2016, will be based on the latest research from different fields (including neuroscience and education) that didn’t exist when Brown and her colleagues drafted their last policy. Brown’s hope is that upon review, the research will be able to answer some of the questions that have vexed pediatricians and parents for years about children and mobile technology.

“It’s not that we’re throwing up our hands and saying this is okay, it’s that we’ve learned some interesting stuff, the facts are different and the media has changed,” Brown said. “In the world of technology, five years is a really long time. Science doesn’t move that fast.”

But others, like psychologist and author Jim Taylor, are worried that any relaxation of the existing policy could be putting kids at risk and enabling parents to make poor decisions about their children’s media use.

“For me, suggesting that guidelines need to be changed because the policy is out of touch is akin to increasing the healthy amount of sugar kids can eat because people still give their kids junk food,” Taylor said. “The times may have changed, but what’s healthy for kids hasn’t.”

Quality vs. quantity

Concern over the media children and teens are exposed to is nothing new — as Uhls points out in her book, parents of the past worried that exposure to dime novels, radio and then television would somehow ruin youths and put them on a dangerous path.

But this time, with the advent of mobile technology, could alarm be the appropriate response? Yes and no, Brown and Uhls say.

While the AAP’s announcement may seem like a shift on its earlier recommendations, Brown says the AAP recognizes that the Internet and mobile technology are different from any other media that’s come before it.

“In no way are we relaxing our policies,” Brown said. “If anything we’re more concerned than ever because it’s taking over everyone’s time. It’s ubiquitous and it’s ever-present.”

Yet Brown and Uhls both posit through new research that a black-and-white approach to media simply doesn’t work anymore. Rather, they argue that because media is more nuanced than ever, it’s impossible to label media use as good or bad.

"It's not a straight story," Uhls said. "Media has so many different uses and iterations now that you cannot say, 'Yes, all of it is good' or it's not."

Brown pointed to child brain activity using different kinds of technology to teach children foreign languages, based on a 2003 [University of Washington study](#) as an example of the potential benefits the AAP will scrutinize.

“In a passive video where an English-speaking child is hearing a teacher speaking Mandarin, there’s no brain activity. But if you look at the child having a video chat with a person who is talking to them directly, there’s a whole lot of brain activity,” Brown said. “Not all media is created equal. There are opportunities and risks.”

But Taylor argues that while content can contribute negatively or positively to a child’s development and well-being, just the amount of time being spent in front of screens — any screen — can be detrimental.

“The difference is sheer volume. The AAP says they’re doing this to create balance, but balance is about setting limits, and right now there is no balance,” Taylor said. “Sure, there’s really bad content out there, but just the time in front of the screen is a huge problem.”

Taylor worries that because technology’s potential impact on child development — from [social skills](#) to [identity formation](#) — can take years to reveal itself, the issue isn't as pressing for parents as other risks like juvenile diabetes or exposure to lead paint.

“It’s really less clear in terms of harm,” Taylor said. “It’s like junk food — most parents today know how bad it is, but they give it to their kids anyway.”

Brown emphasized that any reconsideration of the AAP’s policy doesn’t mean parents can stop worrying about screen time for kids.

“We acknowledge that parents are clearly deciding when to introduce their child to tech, and that’s every parent’s choice,” Brown said. “What we want to say to parents is be empowered and informed about where you’re introducing it, how you’re doing it and how involved you are in the technology, because it matters.”

Digital parenting

In reviewing research that’s begun exploring the impact of technology on children, Brown says one critical, overlooked factor has come to the foreground: The role of parents.

“It starts with you, the parent,” Brown said. “It’s easy to give a child a screen, but it’s important to be present in your child’s life and know your kids are watching you.”

That may sound obvious, but as Uhls outlines in her book, the way parents role model technology use is more crucial than previously known. The 2003 University of Washington [study](#) Brown cited concluded that infants learn primarily through observation of adults.

A 2009 Italian [brain study](#) of primates identified what are now known as mirror neurons, or brain cells that become active or “fire” whether the brain performs an action or merely observes someone else doing it. The study found that mirror neurons in apes fired when they ate food, when they saw others eating and even when they saw humans eating.

The same is true for humans.

Just as children learn how to smile, talk or walk from their parents’ example, they also learn how important an object is through the emphasis adults place on it, Uhls wrote. This is what researchers call joint attention — when a person alerts another to an object by pointing or gazing. Babies instinctively follow a parent’s gaze or hand and file away what they see. If they frequently see phones or tablets, Uhls said, mirror neurons fire and the child will naturally try to mimic their parents’ technology use.

“When a baby begins to meaningfully follow your gaze, or your finger, she can start to share your experience and knowledge,” Uhls wrote. “Model the kind of media behavior you want your child to emulate.”

Similarly, if babies see their parents paying more attention to screens than looking at people’s faces, they will absorb that behavior — putting their social development at serious risk.

“Watching faces provides children with essential facts for survival: Whom can I trust, who will love me, and who is scary,” Uhls wrote. “A screen may entertain a young baby, but too much time in front of a screen, in particular when the child is immobile, could affect healthy development and critical early learning.”

At the same time, Uhls and Brown say some technology can facilitate healthy one-on-one interaction, especially in children a year or older.

“Our concern is, your time would be better spent doing something else (than engaging with screens), but what if you’re having a video chat with a grandparent?” Brown said. “Two-way communication is really important and the more technology facilitates two-way communication or approximating social interactions, the more valuable it is.”

Taylor agreed that parents must think seriously before using the tablet, TV or smartphone as a baby sitter.

“People don’t park their kids in front of a screen for their own best interest,” Taylor said. “They do it because it gives parents the time to devote to *their* own best interests and relieves them of having to

engage with their children.”

Uhls said whatever the outcome of the AAP’s dive into the new research, parents can no longer unconsciously use mobile technology or passively shrug off their children's use of such devices. Doctor recommendations will always change, she says, but the duty of being a responsible, informed parent will never go away.

“It’s time to be a digital parent and parent your kids online just as you would offline,” Uhls said. “If there are 15 studies all saying that kids are benefiting from media use, you should believe it, but that doesn’t mean you don’t have to think about it.”

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