

With Children and Technology, Moderation Is Key

Questions about kids' screen time and digital privacy are not going away, and parents, advocacy groups and the government are grappling with how to respond.

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Parents today are in a tough spot: They worry about the effect of screen time on their kids' well-being, but recognize that screens are here to stay and efforts to curb their use will be an uphill battle.

A July New York Times article by Nellie Bowles illustrates how far some parents will go to curb kids' screen time. They're hiring professional screen-free coaches who charge as much as \$250 per hour to remind them how parenting worked before digital devices were always within reach. The coaching includes such analog ideas as throwing a ball outside or building with blocks.

Of course, this advice may be easier to offer than implement, especially when parents themselves are glued to screens around the clock. Americans are more likely to watch a screen than engage in any activity other than sleeping and working, says Jonathan Rockwell, principal economist at Gallup. It's not easy to restrict time kids spend scrolling through Instagram or streaming the latest episode of "Stranger Things" if parents are doing the same.

THE RESEARCH

Parents who take drastic action to limit screen time may be responding to sensational headlines. "Horns might be growing on our heads because of cell phones," (Forbes, June 2019). "Too Much Screen Time Can Have Lasting Consequences for Young Children's Brains," (Time, January 2019). What's a conscientious parent to think?

Some may be relieved to know that such headlines are overblown and misleading at best – and that a lot of research is spotty or inconclusive.

A December 2018 New York Times article, "Is Screen Time Bad for Kids' Brains?" cites a 2014 review by Queen's University Belfast scientists of 43 of the "best designed studies," which concluded that there's "an absence of robust causal research regarding the impact of social media on the mental well-being of young people."

And what about those "horns" that caused panic last summer? Australian researchers found small bone growths on the base of the skull of about one-third of 1,200 people – but their study didn't actually assess individuals' phone use, so there was no way to draw the conclusion that the growths resulted from screens. Critics of the study pointed out that these bone spurs are a common symptom of bad posture.

Certainly, some research shows that excessive watching can have negative consequences, especially for younger viewers who may be unable to distinguish a purely entertaining video from a documentary about new discoveries beneath the sea. But Slate magazine reports that some research cites *benefits* of screen time, even for very young kids, if it's used for educational purposes and spurs kids to interact and converse. High-quality programs can be educational, and parents who watch TV or play screen-based games with kids may have an opportunity to help them understand the nuances of what they're seeing and hearing.

Still, there are plenty of valid reasons for parents to monitor and limit kids' screen time, and there are many resources available to provide guidance. The American Academy of Pediatrics, for instance, has excellent metrics that coordinate age and viewing time. As with anything, moderation is key.

WATCHDOGS, LEGISLATION AND PENALTIES

Parents aren't the only ones worried about kids' screen time. Many watchdogs and advocacy groups are working to protect kids' digital rights, and their efforts may spur new legislation. In March, Sens. Edward J. Markey, D-Mass., and Josh Hawley, R-Mo., introduced updates to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, which, among other measures, prohibits internet companies from collecting personal and location information from anyone younger than 13 without parental consent.

Sen. Hawley also recently introduced a bill intended to "curb social media addiction" by limiting "infinite scroll" and autoplay features that may make leaving a social media platform difficult.

Meanwhile, the Federal Trade Commission recently demonstrated that it's unafraid to take action to stop Big Tech from infringing on kids' digital rights. In September, the agency fined Google, through its subsidiary YouTube, \$170 million for tracking kids through personal information and targeting them with ads. ❖

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