

FitFacts®

Is All “Screen Time” Bad For My Preschooler? Maybe Not.

The [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) recommends two hours or less per day of screen time (television, video and computer games, tablets, smart phones, e-readers, etc.) for kids over age two and no screen time for kids younger than two. The rationale is that too much screen time impedes a child’s development and promotes physical inactivity, childhood overweight and, in many cases, aggressive behavior. Despite the recommendations, the average preschool child spends 4.4 hours per day in front of a screen, often watching content that is not educational or is targeted at older kids and adults.

But what if the content of the programming promotes “prosocial” behaviors like sharing, tolerance and empathy? Is the content as important, or perhaps more important, than the quantity of “screen time”? In a recent study, researchers from Seattle Children’s Hospital conducted a [randomized controlled trial](#) where half of the 820 three- to five-year-old participants were randomly assigned to a “media diet” intervention and the other half received a nutrition intervention intended to improve eating habits. As part of the “media diet” intervention, parents received home visits, coaching, resources and phone follow-ups to help them replace violent or age-inappropriate programs with educational or “pro-social” content. No efforts were made to decrease the quantity of screen time. When researchers followed up after 6 and 12 months, they found that the children assigned to the “media diet” intervention watched less aggressive and more prosocial television, scored higher in areas of social and emotional competence and experienced improved sleep; they noted that low-income boys benefited the most from the “media diet.”

This is the first study to demonstrate that intensive efforts to provide more educational and productive media opportunities for young children decreases their aggressive behaviors and increases their social and emotional competence. To date, efforts to decrease screen time have only been marginally successful. Focusing not only on quantity of screen time, but also quality of screen time, will help optimize early childhood development. It is



important to enforce [screen-time limits](#) (accumulating no more than two hours per day) to help ensure that young children engage in at least 60 minutes of physical activity per day. While it is ideal if the physical activity can occur in natural environments with other children, ACE also recognizes that there are some health and fitness benefits to [“exergaming”](#) and other activity programs that rely on technology.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

[American Council on Exercise](#)

[Medline Plus](#)