

The Question of "Screen Time"

Once upon a time the question was only about television. Parents had to decide how much time they would allow their children to sit in front of that box and watch cartoons. With today's technology the issue has become much more complex. Now parents are not only faced with the question of how much time should a child be allowed to watch TV but how much time should be spent watching DVDs, playing XBOX, Playstation or the thousands of apps that can be accessed on a variety of handheld devices. Now that technology has provided us with smartphones and computer tablets, the question is no longer about how much television time but how much *screen time*.

Every family will answer the question of 'how much screen time' differently and there are some families who may even take the extreme position of prohibiting all TV and computer games. But for most families the answer will be a question of how much time. Here are a few things that might be considered when attempting to find an answer to the question.

Watching TV, viewing a movie, or playing a game on a computer device always involves both *content* and *process*. Parents need to monitor the types of content being consumed and decide if the content is appropriate for the age of the child and if the content conforms to their own family values. The issue of violence, for example, has long been a concern when it comes to what children watch on television and continues to be an issue in today's world of video games. In addition to violence, some parents may have objections to the types of humor that are part of the content of television shows, movies, and computer games. Some of the humor, for example, may be crude in terms of language or may focus on poking fun at people to an extreme degree. It may not be necessary that the content of what children watch is always "educational in nature" but parents do need to decide if the content is acceptable by whatever criteria they feel is important.

The second issue concerns the *process* that is part of screen time. To a great degree, watching television or a movie is a passive process. Children sit and watch images go by. In some cases, a child's mind and imagination may become engaged by what she is watching but very often children are mindlessly watching the screen. (Of course this can be true for we adults

as well.) Some amount of mindless watching is harmless but parents need to be careful about "some amount" becoming an "excessive amount."

There are some computer and video games that are designed to engage children's thinking and imagination and these games can be stimulating and enriching. There are resources in print and on the internet that can help parents choose these types of computer based games.

Whether the content of what is on the screen is appropriate or not and whether the process is developmentally enriching or not, it is important to remember that when a child is watching television or playing a computer game she is *not* doing something else. She is not playing outside in the sunlight, she is not manipulating three-dimensional concrete materials in the real physical environment, and she is not engaged in creating make-believe worlds with other children. The reality is that for most children there will be some amount of screen time in their lives. (And the reality is that for most adults we need to let them have some screen time so that we can get other things done.) But parents need to be making conscious decisions about how much and what kinds of screen time they will allow their children to have.

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