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Essential Articles on Parenting & Education

From Screen Time Guilt to Media Mentorship

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The woman was probably no older than 25, but her face was full of worry and exhaustion as she approached me. On this gray Oregon winter day, she and two dozen other parents and caregivers had decided to come to the Hillsboro Public Library for my presentation about technology's impact on young children (and, no doubt, for the free childcare that the library offered with it). When I finished my slide show and stepped away from the podium so we could talk, I could see that she was at a breaking point.

In halting English, this young mother told me her story. She was new to the United States. Her baby daughter was not yet 12 months old, new to this *world*. Her husband worked long hours and her mother was home in China, across an ocean and hours of time zones. For months, she and her mom had been using video chat to stay in touch. But lately she had heard that she should avoid exposing her infant to screens.

Her eyes glistened as she arrived at her question: She had been putting her child in front of the computer on a regular basis. "Am I doing harm to my baby?" she asked.

Is Screen Time Bad?

Variations on this question have been appearing for years in online and offline forums, in early childhood magazines and blogs, and in sometimes heated discussions among parenting groups across the globe. Typically the conversation starts with the premise that *screen time is bad for young children* and ends with a call to try to *keep kids away from screens as much as we can*.

But what if this isn't the right premise or the right solution? What if the consequences are not what we think they are? By starting with the assumption that screen time is bad for kids, parents are led into a zone with one exception after another. We hear: Screen time is bad, except when it's grandma's face on the computer. Screen time is bad, except when it's mom and her toddler giggling as they dance along with a silly music video for kids. Screen time is bad except when it's a videogame that teaches problem solving, or a TV show about how crayons are made.

Screen time is bad . . . except when it's good. No wonder we're anxious and confused.

A Changing Approach

I've spent 12 years examining the scientific literature on how young minds are affected by screen media. I've interviewed and visited with parents, librarians, health experts, learning scientists and early educators around the world. Most importantly, I've been raising my own two daughters.

All of this has given me a different perspective on how screen media affects the developing mind: Experts from multiple fields have converged on the understanding that children's welfare does not depend on the screen being on or off. Instead, they focus on what I have come to call the Three C's: the *content* on the screen, the *context* in which it is used, and the *child*. What matters is how parents, caregivers, librarians and teachers—the whole host of adults who work with young children—engage with kids around the screen and choose what they see on it. What's more, when approached right, that engagement can have positive benefits for kids not just during screen media moments, but also before and after.

Over the past few years, a host of authorities on child development have published reports to explain this new viewpoint, including the American Academy of Pediatrics, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, the non-profit advocacy group ZERO TO THREE, the U.S. Department of Education and the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. In each case, experts are moving away from a push for "no screens" and are instead advocating for active engagement between parents and children, onscreen and off. Minds, even mindsets, are changing around the world.

The New Mindset

This doesn't mean anything goes. No one argues that parents should cede responsibility for what they have always needed to do: Set limits. Yes, create daily routines that include play, sleep and lots of exploration of the natural physical world. And science clearly shows that it is important to provide children opportunities for socially contingent interactions, those everyday moments when others listen and respond to their gestures and early utterances.

In fact, this media mindset shift puts an even stronger emphasis on those interactions—which means there are some new responsibilities for adults. Parents, teachers and caregivers have to start paying greater

attention to their own behavior when they are around media with kids. Are they using media to cut off those interactions or to foster them?

Let me relate a story from a children's librarian in Farmington Hills, Michigan: One day, a father entered the public library and approached her desk. He was in search of a video for his preschool-age daughter who, in his estimation, was struggling to learn how to use utensils at the dinner table. Were any videos available that taught children how to use a fork?

The librarian was taken aback. "Doesn't your daughter watch you use a fork when you eat?" she asked. He paused and considered the question. "No, not really," he said. "We are usually watching television when we eat dinner."

Oh, how much there is to unpack in that short conversation! Given what we know about the value of family meals and face-to-face interaction, some might see this as a lost cause. When the librarian told me this story, she was shaking her head in disbelief. Not only had the father put so much stock in the power of video that he had ceded his responsibility to teach table manners, he had also immersed his daughter in a media routine that deprived her of conversation and the opportunity to watch and learn from him.

Yet there is also a foundation to build upon here. This is a father who meant well. He was actively trying to help his daughter. He was paying enough attention to notice that she was struggling with a specific skill and took the time out of his schedule to look for information about how to learn something new. Even better, he had come to the library to find it—he sought a professional (a librarian) with the expertise to vet materials and guide him in the right direction.

In short, his instincts were not all wrong. He just needed them to be channeled differently. For child development advocates, the shift in screen media mindsets is really about shifting parenting mindsets. The old "no screens" approach is, in fact, little more than a "blame the parent" approach. At its most crass, this mindset assumes that parents are trying to get out of the job of parenting, that they are too lazy or ignorant to pay attention to their children and would prefer to just stick them in front of a screen.

It is not easy to raise young children, and work, family and financial pressures (not to mention the massive stresses faced by today's new immigrant families) do not make it any easier. The new mindset—the one promoted by the authorities mentioned earlier, including the American Academy of Pediatrics—assumes that parents want to do the right thing, that they are not oblivious to the needs of their kids, and that they may need guidance from people who understand their life circumstances.

The Three C's

Over the past decade, in visits to preschools, PTA meetings, community centers and human services agencies, I have met hundreds of parents, educators and social workers who are hungry for guidance that is not preachy or judgmental. They want a media mentor—someone they can turn to who will listen to their life situation and give screen-media advice that is specific to the needs of their child. When those mentors exist—many of them are popping up in public libraries, such as the ones in Hillsboro, Oregon and Farmington Hills, Michigan—they can allay fears, remind families of the simple magic of social interaction, and empower them to be choosy about apps, games and television shows. When they can't find those mentors, parents are more likely to rely on what they hear from big media companies and retailers whose mission is to promote products and sell screens, not to help children grow and develop.

So, instead of fixating on "screen time," the mission now must move toward helping mentors become more informed so they can help parents. In many cases, these mentors start by working through those Three C's and using findings from scientific studies to help explain them.

Content. Consider the first C: *content*. Studies from University of Wisconsin-Madison are showing that toddlers are far less likely to learn from content on a touchscreen tablet when the game invites indiscriminate clicking and tapping that is not connected to a learning goal. But when the content is specifically designed to help a child associate, say, a new word with an image, then the child is more likely to gain insight from it. Another avenue of study has uncovered a stark difference between media that is designed to help young children learn (think PBS KIDS programming) and media made for adults (such as crime shows and the nightly news). Educational media is not associated with worrisome outcomes such as attention deficits or lower literacy achievement, while adult-oriented media often is.

Context. The second C–*context*–can be used to spark richer discussions about daily routines and what kinds of conversational experiences children receive. For example, scientists are uncovering a link between poor sleep and engaging with bright screens before going to bed, while a separate study found an association in 3-to-5-year-old children between disrupted sleep and the viewing of screens in the evening. These findings are leading many experts to advise parents to limit screen media before bedtime. Other studies are showing that children are more likely to learn from viewing video stories or using electronic books when a parent or teacher asks them questions about the storyline or characters and engages

in conversation about what they are experiencing. In other words, screen media are just like any other tool (including print books or field trips) that can be harnessed for learning: they work better when they are used with purpose and in ways that prompt conversation.

A recent series of studies will be particularly reassuring to the young mother who was nearly in tears over her daughter's video chats with her grandmother. Experiments conducted at Georgetown University are not showing evidence of harm in using video chat software with young children. In fact, those socially contingent interactions don't just span oceans, they can be rich learning experiences for children (not to mention a real treat for overseas grandparents). (The young mom seemed visibly relieved when I mentioned the preliminary findings from those studies.)

The Child. Each of these cases could be tailored to the individual *child*—the third C. The specific age of the child in question carries a lot of weight. For example, researchers have found evidence that, while children can follow the sequences in a video story at 30 months, just six months earlier this may have been more than they were developmentally ready to handle. Add into the mix all of the unique features of little boys or girls—whether they play or watch with their siblings, whether they are scared of loud noises, whether they need video clips to practice with their speech therapist, whether they go dizzy for *Dinosaur Train*—and it becomes more and more difficult to abide by one-size-fits-all rules about avoiding screens.

Media Mentorship

Once children reach late-preschool and kindergarten ages, educators and parents can take an even more advanced step in media mentorship: They can use moments with the screen (as many already do with printed books, with billboards, and with almost anything that features symbols) to help kids build the skills they'll need to flourish in the digital age, in which media will likely surround them and be embedded in their daily routines for their entire lives. Today's kindergartners are the Class of 2030–are we building a strong enough foundation in these children to help them learn how to distinguish between media materials and seek out quality in the information and material that they will watch and read 15 years from now?

A first step for parents and educators is to simply speak questions out loud so that children hear their thinking processes and see a model of what it looks like to think critically. "I wonder who designed this game? Why do you think they picked this character?" A second step is to shift

from consuming to creating, by pulling children into activities such as taking photos, creating slide shows, dictating stories into the tablet's microphone, and showing how mini books can be built on a screen and then emerge from the printer on paper.

Parenting over the past two decades has been filled with dread, confusion and battles over "screen time." Now we can reboot. Using the science of learning and new guidance from education groups and developmental scientists, the next 20 years of raising children can become less fixated on the presence of screens and more attuned to the constellations of tiny but meaningful interactions happening between kids and their parents, onscreen or off. The next 20 years of parenting and education can become better aligned with the critical thinking and media literacy skills that our next generation will need. Say goodbye to screen time guilt. Welcome the days of media mentorship instead.

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