

New study raises concerns about screen time among urban children with asthma

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Urban children with asthma engage in an average of an hour more of screen time daily than the maximum amount American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends. This is the first study to examine screen time among children with asthma.

"We know that both asthma and excessive screen time can be associated with other difficulties, including behavior problems, difficulty with attention, poor school performance and obesity," said Kelly M. Conn, M.P.H., of General Pediatrics at Golisano Children's Hospital at Strong and lead author of the study, which was published recently in *Academic Pediatrics*. (*Academic Pediatrics* changed its name from *Ambulatory Pediatrics* this year.) The study was conducted out of the University of Rochester Medical Center.

As a part of a larger study on how to more effectively treat asthma, Conn and her colleagues surveyed parents of urban children with asthma in Rochester, NY, to better understand their screen time viewing habits. Screen time includes TV watching and video tapes, playing video and computer games and using the Internet. The study found that 74 percent of the 226 children whose parents were surveyed exceeded more than two hours of screen time per day. On average, these children with asthma watched 3.4 hours daily.

"Even though these findings are preliminary, a message for parents would be to remain aware of the amount of time your child is spending in front of screens and try to encourage your child to participate in a

range of activities," Conn said. The types of programs children watch are also important; young children should watch shows meant for their age group, rather than watching PG-13 or R-rated movies, or playing Teen-rated games.

More than half of the parents interviewed knew that the AAP recommends a maximum of two hours of screen time per day and most parents who reported that their child had too much screen time were worried that this was the case. Though the AAP recommends that no child have a television in their bedroom, 77 percent of the children had a TV in their room and nearly half the children owned a hand-held video game system. The widespread presence and popularity of screen time activities in children's lives makes monitoring and setting limits for screen use very difficult. In addition, in an urban setting, safety concerns often limit a child's ability to engage in activities outside of the home.

Even though the goals of asthma therapy are to quell asthmatic symptoms and prevent limitations with activities, about 63 percent of children used screen time when their asthma symptoms physically limited their activities. Those children who used screens when they were having physically limiting symptoms used an average of 3.67 hours daily, which is more than half an hour extra daily than children who engaged in other non-physical activities such as resting, reading or coloring. Researchers suspect that some parents could have underestimated their child's screen time, which would demonstrate an even larger problem of excessive screen time and lack of other physical and mental activities than the study found.

The study did not have a control group of children without asthma. Children with asthma most likely watch a similar amount of screen time to all children, but children with asthma are more at risk for the health problems associated with too much screen time. In the study, children included were between 3- and 10-years-old. According to the Kaiser

Family Foundation, on average children in this age range watch between two and four hours of screen time daily. So, while they may not spend more time on screens than children without asthma, the lost opportunities for physical and mental engagement may be even more detrimental to these vulnerable children.

"It is not unreasonable or uncommon for children to watch TV or play a video game when they are not feeling well or when they need to slow down their activity. For all children, it is important for parents to be aware of how much screen time their children have and the types of programs they are watching," Conn said.

Source: University of Rochester Medical Center

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