

Babies and toddlers should learn from play, not screens

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The temptation to rely on media screens to entertain babies and toddlers is more appealing than ever, with screens surrounding families at home, in the car, and even at the grocery store. And there is no shortage of media products and programming targeted to little ones. But a new policy statement from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) says there are better ways to help children learn at this critical age.

In a recent survey, 90 percent of parents said their children under age 2 watch some form of [electronic media](#). On average, children this age watch televised programs one to two hours per day. By age 3, almost one third of children have a television in their bedroom. Parents who believe that educational television is "very important for healthy development" are twice as likely to keep the television on all or most of the time.

The policy statement, "Media Use by Children Younger Than Two Years," will be released Tuesday, Oct. 18, at the AAP National Conference & Exhibition in Boston and will be published in the November 2011 issue of Pediatrics (published online Oct. 18). Ari Brown, MD, FAAP, lead author of the policy, will discuss the recommendations in an embargoed news briefing for reporters at 10 a.m. ET Monday, Oct. 17, at the Boston Convention & Exhibition Center.

The AAP first provided guidance on media use for children under age 2 in 1999. This consisted of a recommendation in the Academy's policy statement, "Media Education," which discouraged TV viewing for children in this age group.

At the time, there was limited data on the subject, but the AAP believed there were more potential negative effects than positive effects of media exposure for the younger set. Newer data bears this out, and the AAP stands by its recommendation to keep children under age 2 as "screen-free" as possible. More is known today

about children's early brain development, the best ways to help them learn, and the effects that various types of stimulation and activities have on this process.

"The concerns raised in the original policy statement are even more relevant now, which led us to develop a more comprehensive piece of guidance around this age group," said Dr. Brown, a member of the AAP Council on Communications and Media.

The report set out to answer two questions:

- Do video and televised programs have any educational value for children under 2?
- Is there any harm in children this age watching these programs?

The key findings include:

- Many video programs for infants and [toddlers](#) are marketed as "educational," yet evidence does not support this. Quality programs are educational for children only if they understand the content and context of the video. Studies consistently find that children over 2 typically have this understanding.
- Unstructured play time is more valuable for the developing brain than electronic media. Children learn to think creatively, problem solve, and develop reasoning and motor skills at early ages through unstructured, unplugged play. Free play also teaches them how to entertain themselves.
- Young children learn best from -- and need -- interaction with humans, not screens.
- Parents who watch TV or videos with their child may add to the child's understanding, but children learn more from live presentations than from televised ones.

- When parents are watching their own programs, this is "background media" for their children. It distracts the parent and decreases parent-child interaction. Its presence may also interfere with a young child's learning from play and activities.
- Television viewing around bedtime can cause poor sleep habits and irregular sleep schedules, which can adversely affect mood, behavior and learning.
- Young children with heavy media use are at risk for delays in language development once they start school, but more research is needed as to the reasons.

The report recommends that [parents](#) and caregivers:

- Set media limits for their children before age 2, bearing in mind that the AAP discourages media use for this age group. Have a strategy for managing electronic media if they choose to engage their children with it.
- Instead of screens, opt for supervised independent play for infants and young children during times that a parent cannot sit down and actively engage in play with the child. For example, have the child play with nesting cups on the floor nearby while a parent prepares dinner.
- Avoid placing a television set in the child's bedroom.
- Recognize that their own media use can have a negative effect on children.

The report also recommends further research into the long-term effects of early media exposure on children's future physical, mental and social health.

According to Dr. Brown, "In today's 'achievement culture,' the best thing you can do for your young child is to give her a chance to have unstructured play -- both with you and independently. [Children](#) need this in order to figure out how the world works."

Provided by American Academy of Pediatrics

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