

Digital Nutrition and Early Childhood Years

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How much is too much; Digital nutrition and early childhood years

Battling over screen time and devices has become a depressing part of one's family life. The problem sounds more pertinent with Apple co-founder and former chief executive Steve Jobs admitting in an interview in 2010 before his death that he limited screen time of his own children. More and more parents are realizing that the amount of time their children spend glued to the screen – be it television, computer, or phone can prove alarming for their physical and mental health. So, the big question is how much time should children spend with screens? And the answer is a lot depends on the child's age and family structure.

Digital nutrition Vs Digital junk

The type of programs that kids might be watching may be just as important as the time they are watching it for. Here comes the latest concept of “digital nutrition”, which links media diet to what's on our plates. It's not just about whether you consume any digital junk food, but also your relationship to technology and the role it plays in the family life. It's common for parents to use screens to soothe or pacify kids. However, relying on devices to calm down or distract a child amounts to binging on ‘treats’ to calm emotional storms.

Striking a balance

Generally, conversations about kids and technology tend to become negative, but it need not be the case always. Technology can be part of a healthy childhood if these mediums are used for entertainment and gaining information and not misused or overused. The key is striking a perfect balance and not letting the gadgets become a ‘virtual babysitter’. Parents just need to find a way to maximize the benefits and minimize the downside.

The flip sides

Increased screen time can take away the real fun of childhood. Most kids today are plugged into devices like TVs, tablets, and smartphones well before they can even ride a bike. American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends a maximum of one hour of ‘high quality programming’ for children below 6, but at the same time encourage parents to set limits on the time spent in using any form of media” and designate screen-free time for the family.

Health alert

Obesity check: Children consistently spending more than 4 hours per day watching TV are likely to be overweight. Health experts have long linked too much screen time to obesity

which is a significant health problem today. While staring at screens, kids are inactive and tend to snack. They're also bombarded with advertisements that encourage them to eat unhealthy foods like potato chips and drink empty-calorie soft drinks.

Increased Aggression: Children who play violent video games and have access to such apps are more likely to be aggressive. Many violent acts are committed by the so called "good guys," whom kids are taught to admire. In fact, in video games the hero often succeeds by fighting with or killing the enemy. This can lead to confusion when kids are grappling to understand the difference between right and wrong. Violence generally has a negative impact on young minds and leaves them scarred. Behaviour problems, nightmares, and difficulty in sleeping are some of the side effects. Reassurance and sharing honest information helps allay such fears.

Watching Risky Behaviors: Characters on TV and in video games often depict risky behaviours, such as smoking and drinking. This might lead to substance abuse.

Keeping a check

Television is not an enemy. What you watch is important. If you as a parent are actively watching a program with your child and asking and answering questions. It would end up being a positive experience for both of you. But digital media should never replace healthy activities, particularly sleep, social interaction and physical activity. According to developmental experts, young children need to spend a major part of their waking hours actively engaging in the world around them. Creative unstructured play boosts problem-solving skill, attention span and social development.

Tips for healthy digital media use

Never hurry in introducing tech devices to kids
Prioritize non-screen time play
Do screen time together with your child
Spend time researching the shows, games, or apps your child uses
Set clear limits
Offer fun alternatives
Monitor your own screen use
Make a family agreement
Value family meals and car rides

It's important to create a balance in the online and offline worlds and in leisure and learning. Research shows that not having access to the digital world has a negative impact on kids – so it's about finding the right amount with a holistic approach. But never try to replace yourself with screens; screens should not assume the role of a babysitter.