

## parents ask

Dan Williams

Experts respond to readers' questions with helpful suggestions and information.

**Q:** My seven year old always seems to be watching TV, playing on her iPad or picking up my phone to play games. How much is too much and how can I make screen time more educational?

-Valerie from Anthem

**A:** Children in earlier generations played outside in nature all day long - riding their bicycles, playing sports, building forts and creating imaginary games – and returned home physically and mentally exhausted as their play involved a lot of movement. The emergence of technology, all competing for our children's attention, has changed this. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, today's children are spending an average of seven hours per day on entertainment media. These are hours that children spend not moving and movement is necessary to achieve optimal sensory and motor development. People often think they need technology to survive, when really they need to move to survive. Technology is also replacing our connection with other human beings. The AAP recommends that parents monitor their child's media "diet" and limit screen time to no more than one to two hours per day for children and teens. Entertainment technology should be avoided for infants and children under the age of 2.



In addition to the amount, the content is also important. Connections between brain cells change and condition the mind based on experiences children have while their brain triples in size between birth and age 3. The research of Dr. Dimitri Christakis, Director of the Center for Child Health, Behavior and Development, shows that prolonged exposure to rapid image changes (as on a TV show designed for an infant) during critical periods of brain development may precondition the mind to expect high levels of stimulation. This may then make the pace of real life less able to sustain children's attention. The more hours a child views rapid-fire television, the more likely they will have attention challenges later in life. The more frenetic or violent the TV show, the more likely the child will have attention challenges later in life. Television shows that move at a typical pace may

be far better for children. Cognitive stimulation (reading books, playing with blocks or going to a museum) reduces the likelihood for attention challenges later in life, according to Dr. Christakis.

Most of today's parents had television as a child but watched about half the hours children today consume. Parents need to make media-savvy decisions on the amount and content of the screen time – the media diet - as it is relevant. The key is to use, but not overuse, media. Establishing "screen-free" zones, limiting exposure to fast-paced entertainment technology and playing more in general – in the form of cognitive games, spending time outside and physically moving, interacting with people and using the imagination - should help to create a much more balanced and focused individual.

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