How do we get the most out of screen time with young kids?

1.   Relationships. The best screen time is with you.

Ideally, interactive media should be used in addition to or along with as opposed to instead of quality time with caring adults. For children whose screen time is currently dominated by solitary passive media use, educational and age-appropriate interactive technology may be a very promising alternative.

That said, learning is intensely social. This is why co-viewing and co-engagement are such giant protective factors when it comes to screen time for kids. So even if an App says all the words out loud, pulling your child onto your lap and getting lost in the story together is still the best way to raise a reader.

Of course, the reality of parenting is that sometimes screen time is your window of opportunity to make dinner, bathe yourself, get ready for a second work shift, or get your other child down for a nap. My first son slept like a dream. My second son needed to be wrestled down for a nap like a wild raccoon. Screen time was the only way we made it through the first 6 months safely. So if sitting down next to your child isn't always possible – ask them questions about the show they watched, read books related to the themes of their favorite app, or use Legos to recreate their favorite game in real life.

Find ways to bring digital experiences back into the context of your relationship.

2. Play. Children learn best with "minds on, hands on, feelings on."

While memorizing numbers and letters might cause adults to beam with pride and marvel at their child's tangible learning, the real work of the early years is practicing the messy, complex and harder-to-see life skills. Things like emotional regulation, creative problem solving, persistence, empathy, negotiation and communication, impulse control, and other skills that fall under the umbrella of executive function. The good news? Children learn these skills in the context of warm, caring relationships and by doing what they love best: playing.

Resist the urge to download apps that operate only under what founding editor of The Children's Technology Review Warren Buckleitner calls "smother mode." Think rigid instructions and constantly being rewarded for performing prescribed tasks. Instead, try to find apps and games that honor the spirit of free play. Do your child's apps:

- Encourage imagination, focus, and exploration?
- Encourage perspective taking and creative problem solving?
- Create a storyline that children can expand on offline? If so, let the children play.

3. Boundaries. What, when, and where still matter.

The best media are age-appropriate and don't get in the way of the first two ingredients – play and relationships. Is media enhancing these? Getting in the way?

Here additional suggestions of where boundaries make sense:

What: Choose age-appropriate media. Media stories influence behavior and play – the best programs have a narrow age range. Look at Common Sense Media and Children's Technology Review for ideas.

Where: Carve out plenty of screen free spaces and times for connection. You could start by focusing on meals, bedtime, or car rides.

When: Screen time for kids should be a small part of their day.

When: Avoid media before bed and in bed – screens are sleep disruptors for children.

When: Reduce background media while children are playing. Children's are distracted by background media even if it doesn't look like they are watching.

When: Reflect on your own media habits. Your children learn more from your actions than from your words.

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