The Trouble with "Screen Time" Rules

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Abstract

In this chapter we analyse the widely influential American Academy of Pediatrics' (AAP) "screen time" guidelines (issued in 1999 and updated in 2016) in relation to the existing evidence about parental mediation and the lived experience of families in the digital age. In our interviews with 73 diverse families in London, we have been struck by how often some version of these guidelines surfaces, often without knowing where they come from, as parents castigate themselves for allowing their children "too much" screen time, without much critical examination of what this means. We argue that these and similar time- or exposure-based guidelines rely on an insufficient evidence base, and lead parents to prioritise restrictive forms of screen time that neither serve the purpose of keeping children safe, nor of helping them towards opportunities.

Keywords: screen time, parenting, American Academy of Pediatrics, families, twenty-first century skills, parental mediation

Introduction

From worries about toddlers' use of tablets to teens being glued to their mobile phones or "addictive" video games or social media apps, the amount and nature of children's "screen time" is as hot a topic as ever. Expert inquiries and journalistic investigations reflect growing concerns that childhood is being thoroughly reconfigured by the influx of digital media. Parents take on, and often amplify, the abundant and fearful claims that screen time is damaging their children physically and mentally. Yet parents – and society – face a troubling paradox. For alongside their worries, families also greatly enjoy the opportunities, pleasures and the conveniences of digital media in their daily lives. Beyond the present,

parents look to tomorrow's world in which the jobs are forecasted to require "twenty-first century skills" crucial for navigating artificial intelligence, algorithms, robots, internet of things, and more (Children's Commissioner, 2017; European Commission, 2017).

Parents are at the frontline in navigating today's contradictory visions of media change – working to ensure that their children learn digital skills and yet castigating themselves for not providing the less pervasively digital childhood they say they benefited from (Livingstone & Blum-Ross, 2018). In order to unpack some of the dilemmas parents face in bringing up children in a digital age, in this chapter we put our fieldwork with parents into conversation with the influential guidelines produced by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), originally produced in 1999 and updated in 2016. In interviews with diverse families in London, we were struck by how often some version of these guidelines surfaced unattributed in our interviews with parents, although they were originally intended for American parents trying to manage their children's television viewing.

In our interviews they were most commonly referenced through the concept of screen time and secondarily through some mention of the famous "2x2" rules, namely that no child under 2-years old should be exposed to any screen media, and no child over 2 should watch more than two hours per day. For example, Robert Kostas's son Jake (aged 15) is now on a "reduction programme" in which the parents are trying to "cut [screen time] down… until it's at a manageable level, which should be no more than two hours." Leila Mohammed, (mother of 8 and 10-year old) told us:

> In the news I heard…no more than two hours… one hour I say stop … do what you want, up and down, stay, go out, writing or what you want, more than one half on the computer and on the TV, it's not good sense.

In the same period of time that we were interviewing parents, the AAP recognised the significant changes in children's media landscape over recent years and decided to update its review of the evidence regarding screen time "harms" so as to revise its recommendations to parents (Chassiakos et al., 2016). However, in key respects the evidence reviewed and the resulting recommendations remain at odds with the experiences and concerns we were finding in family homes. This led us to produce a policy brief for UK stakeholders that highlighted the poor fit between screen time rules and the messy realities of family life (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016). Here we explain our critique of the revised AAP guidelines and discuss the implications for the still-unmet needs and concerns of parents.

To do so, we draw on our qualitative interviews with 73 families in London, UK. These were conducted face-to-face, usually in family homes but sometimes at another location convenient to the parent. We balanced a purposive sample of parents for whom the digital offered something distinctive (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017) with others whom we recruited as a cross-section of families by age of child (from birth to 17), ethnicity and socio-economic status. In this chapter, we explore whether screen time rules and guidelines match up with parents' on-the-ground practices. We critique the AAP

guidelines on the basis that these are based on limited evidence and often lead parents to focus on restrictive forms of screen time regulation that neither serve the purpose of keeping children safe nor of enabling digitally-mediated opportunities. As other countries are now following the US in developing their own guidelines, often building on the work of the AAP, our critique has a wider applicability (Australian Government Department of Health, 2017; Canadian Paediatric Society, 2017).

A critical commentary on the AAP "screen time rules"

The original 1999 parental guidance (revisited in 2011 and 2013) centred on banning any screen time for infants and restricting it to two hours per day for children. In 2016, the AAP conducted an updated evidence review (Chassiakos et al., 2016) before publishing its findings and revised recommendations (Council on Communications and Media, 2016a, Council on Communications and Media, 2016b). The new recommendations are not as simple as the headline-grabbing "2x2" rule that has embedded itself into parents' consciences, with somewhat better acknowledgement that media use must be contextualised within diverse family cultures (Clark, 2013). The new guidelines state that:

1. Infants and toddlers should be screen-free, excepting interactive media like video chats,

2. From 18 months, high quality television content is OK as long as a parent watches and engages with their child,

3. For 2 to 5-year olds, screen time should be restricted to one hour per day, with parents helping to interpret content,

4. Families should develop a "Media Plan" (the AAP provides an interactive tool), including designated "media free" times,

5. Children aged 6 and over should be included in creating the media plan, and parents should enforce time limits to ensure that screen time doesn't displace sleeping, playing, conversation and physical activities,

6. Last, rather than simply controlling or monitoring their children's media use, parents should think of themselves as their child's "media mentor," paying attention to how they model screen time values for their children.

The new rules are problematic in two ways – first, when one tries to match these recommendations to the available evidence, and second when one tries to match them to the practical realities of family life. Although the AAP has made greater efforts to review for positive effects in the technical report, there are familiar methodological problems. Not all kinds of screen or screen time are equivalent so findings cannot simply be merged. For instance, not all involve sedentary activity (think of motion-enabled games or wearables), so to add up screen *time* and correlate it with obesity is flawed. Also,

researchers often control for only a limited number of factors influencing children's wellbeing and, since they can hardly expose children randomly to potentially harmful media, it is hard to rule out reverse correlation (e.g., overweight children prefer to sit and watch television) or confounding factors (e.g. some children may be kept home by their parents more often for safety reasons). Yet the AAP technical report primarily relies on correlational evidence, and so is unable to draw conclusions that screen time has a straightforward causal effect on children.

There are problematic gaps in the evidence too. There is a section on whether it is alright for babies and toddlers to be in touch with their grandparents using video chat that cites (just) one study on language development (Choi & Kirkorian, 2016), but it remains unclear whether such interactions support or undermine the development of intergenerational emotional connections (McClure et al., 2015). Studies are cited on whether watching videos helps toddlers learn new words (answer: perhaps, but only if parents actively support; Richert et al., 2010) but nothing that recognises children's pleasure in singing and dancing along with a video, or enacting the drama on the screen also with their siblings in front of it. There are studies showing that many "educational apps" are not very educational at all, but few on what children learn from the apps that are effective (see, by contrast, Marsh et al., 2015). Most surprisingly, it's hard to find evidence in the report for the specific new recommendation of a one-hour limit for 2 to 5-year olds. Yet parents might find it surprising that, after decades of research, there still isn't a robust body of research which definitively shows robust causal evidence of harm (Ferguson, 2017), nor which distinguishes different types of effects from different media on different children over the long-term (Millwood Hargrave & Livingstone, 2006). Notwithstanding the limited evidence underpinning the new recommendations, they have attracted significant media attention – with one headline proclaiming "A major update relaxes screen time rules for some kids" (Cha, 2016).

The daily realities of parenting in the digital age

From our research, we learned that parents understand the role of digital media in the ecology of family life in many different ways. Notably, they are often more concerned about the day-to-day impact and possibilities of media use rather than about abstract future harms. Parents invest in digital media to help their children learn (Davies & Jewitt, 2011), to spend time together (Lull, 1980), and to help children connect with peers, especially when physical safety outside the home cannot be guaranteed or a parent has other demands (Warren, 2005). As both parents and children gain digital skills, assumptions that parents are "digital immigrants" (Prensky, 2001) or that children are passive viewers become increasingly outdated (Livingstone et al., 2017). In this context, it is problematic that the AAP guidelines emerge from the dominant framework driving research (and funding) in the US and in Europe, which has substantially focused on mitigating the presumed negative effects of media consumption rather than, also, rec-

ognising the potential benefits as digital media become important not only for children's leisure but also their learning, communication and participation (Livingstone, 2016). For parents with children who play several hours of sport and then like to collapse in front of a screen, the idea that such viewing will cause obesity must seem misplaced. And for parents whose children who are learning how to code or create their own video content or turning to Youtube to learn a new guitar chord, ignoring potential benefits of screen time could be undermining.

Yet the reach and influence of the AAP rules has the consequence that the very idea of screen time looms large over parents' heads. Time and again we heard parents of young children struggle to balance the convenience of screen time with their worries about being a "good" parent. For example, Beth Watson, the mother of a 4-year old and a 2-year old, who works part-time, pressured herself to "do stuff" on the days she is at home, "otherwise what's the point… why am I [at home] if they're just watching telly?" She mused that although sometimes she "just [hasn't] got the energy to fight it today", she feels "really guilty" if they watch too much TV. This sentiment was echoed by other parents, especially mothers, who used words like "guilty" and "lazy" to describe "letting" children have "too much" screen time – although "too much" was often ill-defined. At the same time, and without taking the opportunity to critique the notion of screen time, Beth happily recounted their kitchen dance parties to Disney songs on Youtube.

In addition to parents judging themselves harshly, they also noted other children's screen time critically. Sweta Fletcher detailed her rules for 4-year old son Nikhil, and her thoughts on his peers:

> I might say, right, you can play with [the tablet] until it's time to go upstairs to bed. But normally that's no more than 10, 15 minutes… I think once I let him use it for half an hour because I got distracted… also he doesn't use a tablet every day. And I think for a lot of children, they do. And that's not a judgment. The conversation about screen time is a big thing, because I think a lot of parents worry firstly about how long is okay, and secondly about the impact.

While limiting screen time may be tricky, it is helpful for discipline – a motivational punishment or reward. For example, Ariam Parkes (mother of daughters aged 2, 8 and 9) explained that "a couple of times I've used [screen time] as a punishment… I've taken away the Kindle for a week." The reverse is also true. Daisy Bardem, the mother of boys aged 3, 6 and 8, described how her husband "made up this song… called the Screen Time song, and so if they did something exceptional that we were really happy with, we said, 'that's ten minutes of screen time for you!' So it was a reward and we'd all sing." For some parents screen time was simply a necessity. Mother of three Andrea Foster let her oldest children (6 and 3) "have a couple of programmes while I'm having a shower." Andrea's oldest daughter has autism and so for her the tablet also provided respite from the chaos of her two younger siblings.

Parents viewed the potential negative effects of screen time as both physical and psychological. For example, Amber Boon (mother of a 5-year old girl) wondered whether

"looking at the screen all the time… really limits the amount of eye contact that children have". Many parents, like single mother Anisha Kumar (with a 3-year old boy) worried that their children might (or had already) become "addicted" or "obsessed" with screens. But even in this there is some ambivalence. Anisha recounted how "on one hand I thought I never wanted him to be addicted… But given that he started speaking late, he picked up so much from [Peppa Pig] and I was like… it can't be such a bad thing". Ariam Parkes, although nervous about screen time, also appreciated the new digital homework platform at her daughters' school because her oldest "loves going on the computer… her maths skills have improved a hundred per cent, just completely – her confidence, her speed".

One undercurrent in the screen time debate is the elision of very real differences in resources, support or special needs. For instance, Florence Lewis describes:

> I think this is one every parent's battling with, because we all know that you should probably try and limit screen time… However, my [9-year old] son's on the autism spectrum, and I think that that makes it hard for him to interact in the real world… I try and make sure he gets enough social time that he can handle, and I let him have downtime on the computer because I know that actually relaxes him.

We interviewed several families living well below the poverty line who had diverse reasons for turning to screen time to help their children. For example, single mother Cecilia Apau (with 4 and 8-year old sons and a 13-year old daughter) worked long hours at a grocery store but had purchased a tablet so that her children might improve in "maths, spelling, reading, anything… I want them to learn every day". Some families lived in unsafe neighbourhoods, so their children's physical safety was a more pressing preoccupation. Anna Michaels (mother of a 9 and a 13 year-old) said "there's a lot of gang violence around here," so she was happy when she could keep watch on her son while he was indoors playing video games or watching TV.

Other families were physically separated – sometimes over great distances. For immigrant families screen time provided a cost-effective way of maintaining ties. Wembe Kazadi (father of a 5 and a 10-year-old) came to the UK as an asylum seeker and described how he had not seen his daughter since she was an infant, but they'd been "speaking on the phone… their mother had Viber and Whatsapp so they could see that I was sending pictures and they were sending pictures to me as well". Digital media also helped immigrant parents keep their children in contact with their family culture or language. 9-year old Mariana Ferreira exclusively watched Portuguese language satellite TV. Her mother Claudia said she wanted Mariana to "know [she] is Portuguese" and to be able to communicate with friends and family when they visit Portugal.

Conclusion: Beyond screen time

Having critiqued the screen time guidance, it is only fair to observe that the AAP notes that its approach is deliberately conservative, favouring a precautionary approach in the

absence of solid evidence (Kamanetz, 2016). This is understandable, given that parents want guidance now and cannot wait for further decades of research or, indeed, for their children to grow up only for parents to realise their mistakes. What concerns us most is that parents seem to use these rules as a yardstick to measure themselves against, often judging themselves to be failing if their child watches TV or plays video games "too much," without a deeper rationale for why they made this judgement (Evans et al., 2011). Further, simple time limits are not actionable when screen time can mean homework, shopping, time with friends or video calls with parents or relatives far from home. So we are, first, concerned about the considerable pressure placed on parents to focus on limiting children's screen time, given the limited evidence of harm, and we find it troubling that although the old time limits are somewhat relaxed, parents still cite the "two hour rule" as if it were set in stone.

Changing the conversation around screen time will help parents recognise that there are as many ways of "good" parenting with screens as without them. Research has long suggested that when parents "jointly engage" with their children – asking questions, extending play – children attain more sustainable learning outcomes (Strouse, et al., 2013; Takeuchi & Stevens, 2011), and yet this nuanced advice is often lost in the anxiety over watching the clock – instead of watching, or engaging with, one's child. One can also read the intention underlying the AAP's recommendations as not so much, in fact, that screens are *bad* for children but, rather, that social, cognitive and physical activity is *good* for children. Our contention is that in the digital age such activities are themselves often mediated, complicating the simple polarisation of screen time (as implicitly mindless and sedentary) versus time well-spent (as implicitly screen-free). For example, consider the sudden popularity of the augmented reality game Pokémon Go in 2016, which raised concerns about safety (Serino et al., 2016) but is also credited with supporting healthy activity and exploration (Althoff et al., 2016; LeBlanc & Chaput, 2017).

For parents caught between fears of media harms and hopes for a digital future, a more nuanced consideration of the nature and purpose of screen media in different contexts is now urgent. The very discourse of screen time distracts parents into counting minutes rather than making judgements about the nature of their children's media use or reflecting on how they interact with their children through media or model good habits in their *own* lives. Focusing only on limits is hardly a realistic proposition in an age when digital media are fast becoming the infrastructure for work, leisure, learning, relationships and community life.

Instead, we suggest that support for parents needs to focus on helping parents understand that the content of what their children watch and do on and with screens, the context of where they watch and do, and the connections they make (or do not make) while watching and doing. These give more insights into the positive or negative ramifications of digital media use than a simple measure of time. Rather than seeing themselves as policing children's media use, parents need to be encouraged to think critically about how they can support positive uses and minimize negative consequences (Barron et el., 2009). The next generation of advice for parents needs not only a stronger underpinning

in robust evidence, but also guidance about what uses of digital media might benefit or harm their children in particular circumstances, and why.

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