

No TV for Children Under 2, Doctors' Group Urges

Watching television or videos is discouraged for babies younger than 2 because studies suggest it could harm their development, a pediatricians' group said Tuesday.

Instead of allowing infants to watch videos or screens, parents should talk to them and encourage independent play, said the first guidelines on the subject issued in more than a decade by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

The advice is the same as that issued in 1999 by the group, the country's largest association of pediatricians, but this time it also warns parents that their own screen-watching habits may delay their children's ability to talk.

"This updated policy statement provides further evidence that media — both foreground and background — have potentially negative effects and no known positive effects for children younger than 2 years," it said. "Thus the A.A.P. reaffirms its recommendation to discourage media use in this age group."

The latest guidelines do not refer to interactive play like video games on smartphones or other devices, but to programs watched passively on phones, computers, televisions or any other kind of screen.

Dr. Ari Brown, a pediatrician in Austin, Tex., who is a member of the academy, said the update was needed because of the explosion of DVDs meant for the under-2 age group, and because as many as 90 percent of parents acknowledge that their infants watch some sort of electronic media.

"Clearly, no one is listening to this message," she said. "In this ubiquitous screen world, I think we need to find a way to manage it and make it a healthy media diet."

The American Academy of Pediatrics urges pediatricians to discuss media use with new parents, and says adults should be aware of how distracted they become when the television is on.

"I like to call it secondhand TV," said Dr. Brown, who is the lead author of the guidelines.

Studies cited in the guidelines say that parents interact less with children when the television is on, and that a young child at play will glance at the TV — if it is on, even in the background — three times a minute.

"When the TV is on, the parent is talking less," Dr. Brown said. "There is some scientific evidence that shows that the less talk time a child has, the poorer their language development is."

Though about 50 studies have been done in the past decade on media viewing by young children, none have followed heavy television watchers into later childhood or adulthood, so any long-term effects are not known. Heavy media use in a household is defined as one in which the television is on all or most of the time.

The pediatricians group's guidelines point out that research to date suggests a "correlation between television viewing and developmental problems, but they cannot show causality."

Even so-called educational videos do not benefit children under 2 because they are too young to be able to understand the images on the screen, the doctors' group said.

"The educational merit of media for children younger than 2 years remains unproven despite the fact that three-quarters of the top-selling infant videos make explicit or implicit educational claims," it said.

Pediatricians are therefore discouraging any screen viewing for infants, and urging parents to limit media viewing to no more than two hours a day for children age 2 and older.

"Unstructured playtime is more valuable for the developing brain than any electronic media exposure," the guidelines said.

Fonte: The New York Times, New York, 18 Oct. 2011, Health, online.

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