Research-based information for healthcare providers to support the optimal development of children ages 0 to 3

AWARENESS ALERT

Screen Time for Babies and Toddlers is Associated with Serious Developmental Risks

Brain development in the first years of life is extremely dynamic and highly sensitive to social and experiential factors. Face-to-face, responsive social interaction and full-sensory physical activities support the overall development of very young children and strengthen their sense of trust and safety.

In recent years, concerns about TV watching as a risk factor have shifted to include smart phones and other portable screen devices which are increasingly used by and around babies and toddlers**.** While digital devices have become integral to the lives of adults, **extensive and growing global research has intensified earlier findings that frequent and prolonged screen exposure among children ages 0 to 3 can disrupt their cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development.**

Higher levels of early-life screen viewing are associated with:
Decreased quality of caregiver-to-infant attachment
Atypical brain development
Language delay
Autistic-like symptoms
Atypical sensory processing
Poor executive functioning and problem-solving skills
Decreased sleep quantity and quality
Diminished motor skills

> *"What [parents] need is palatable, simple information that explains how screens can disrupt a child's developing brain, why children's brains are vulnerable to this kind of injury from screens. They need to know that. And then, if necessary, they need to know how to undo that."*
> -Comment from a mother who weaned her 18-month-old from screen dependency by stopping screen exposure and greatly increasing social interaction

New evidence also shows that excessive mobile device use by caregivers in the presence of their children can evoke a psychophysiological stress response in infants and interfere with adult responses to children's bids for attention, resulting in fewer adult words spoken, child vocalizations, and adult-child conversation. Using mobile devices to calm very young children is associated with their acting out and other emotional reactivity. Even television playing in the background in the presence of very young child can result in distracted play, reduced child language skills, increased oppositional defiant behaviors, and less caregiver-child interaction.

Compared to in-person learning, a learning deficit is associated with babies' viewing of screen-based material. Video programs intended for very young viewers may use manipulative design techniques to keep children viewing.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR CARE:

Know the impact of awareness of screentime recommendations for very young children. 3 out of 4 children under age 2 exceed screen time guidelines. Parents who become aware of specific recommendations allow significantly less screen time than parents who are unaware.

Communicate screen use guidelines. Screen time recommendations vary by nation, with most advising no screen use by or around children younger than age 2, except for video chats with caring adults. France extends recommendations for no screen time until age 3. For children ages 2 to 5, the World Health Organization and most countries advise that screen viewing should total no more than 1 hour per day.

Inform caregivers about screentime risks and support them in management strategies, from the first prenatal visit, in the maternity ward, and at every well-child exam. Emphasize babies' need for full-sensory physical play and caregivers' responsive, warm touch and face-to-face interactions.

Encourage caregivers to support their children's early brain development, as through gentle touch, serve-and-return interactions, including responding to coos and babbles and using words directed toward baby and baby's interests; providing unstructured indoor and outdoor play, as well as ready access to non-electronic, hands-on playthings and items for imaginative play; reading books together; singing; and attentive, playful screen-free interactions during care routines such as infant feeding, diaper changes, dressing and bathing. Emphasize the benefit of screen-free times and spaces in the home, such as at meals and in bedrooms.

Suggest how the caregiver's screen use serves as a model for the child's screen use and how adults' screen use can make them less responsive to the child's needs, especially adults caring for children alone in the home and caregivers who spend a lot of time on screens.

Be sensitive to caregivers' states of mind. Caregiver mental health affects babies' time spent with digital devices. Psychological distress among caregivers is associated with lower developmental scores among their young children. With understanding language, encourage caregivers to seek support within their communities. Because of the high prevalence of postpartum depression and anxiety, screening is advised, with referral as needed. If you suspect a very young child may have effects from screen usage, stopping screen exposure and greatly increasing non-tech play and social interactions has been shown to be helpful.

Be a good example by making public areas in your healthcare setting screen-free and providing physical alternatives, such as blocks and sturdy books. Display and distribute information about child-supportive digital device management. Remember that every encounter with a child and caregiver is an opportunity to model brain- and relationship-building conversation and behavior.

Prepared by GAINING—The Global Alliance for Inspiring Non-Tech Infant Nurturing and Growth. Alerts, research and more at MyBabyGains.org