AWARENESS ALERT

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

From birth to three years of age is an extraordinarily sensitive period of human brain development when babies and toddlers need responsive face-to-face social interactions and the ability to move freely and use all of their senses in order to grow and thrive. While digital devices have become integral to the lives of adults, extensive 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.

Taking steps to prevent the harms associated with digital device use in early childhood may help lessen the rapidly growing need among young children for costly speech, behavioral, and other therapeutic interventions.

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

Caregiver mobile device use 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, fewer child vocalizations, and fewer adult-child conversations. Frequent use of mobile devices to calm very young children is associated with their increased emotional reactivity. Television playing in the background with young children present can distract their play, reduce language skills, increase oppositional defiant behaviors, and lead to fewer caregiver-child interactions.

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.

When face-to-face interaction is not possible, video chatting on screen devices between small children and loved ones has been shown to support relationships, although face-to-face interaction is always preferable.

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.

These actions can help close the gap between what researchers have learned and what the public knows:

♦Inform parents about how to support children's early brain development, as through gentle touch; responding to coos and babbles; using words directed to baby and baby's interests; reading together; providing indoor and outdoor play time and non-electronic playthings such balls, blocks, pots and spoons, and imaginative play, as with dolls, fabric pieces, water, sand, mud, and empty boxes; and attentive verbal interaction during routines such as feeding, diaper changes, dressing, and bathing.

♦Ensure that healthcare and childcare providers are aware of recommendations limiting screen use and that caregivers are supported and informed about the association of early life screen exposure with negative developmental outcomes. Encourage healthcare professionals to present supportive, empathetic guidance on screen management and potential intervention at prenatal and well-child exams.

♦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.

♦Support caregiver mental health and well-being. Address sources of stress that could potentially lead to increased caregiver or child screen usage.

♦Support screen guidelines and parents who follow them by promoting affordable screen-free nurseries, childcare centers and preschools. Provide education for primary and secondary school students about brain development and potential effects of technology.

♦Allocate safe and secure public spaces including playgrounds, parks, sidewalks, and community centers. Provide lending libraries for non-electronic toys and playthings.

♦Require labels on digital device packaging warning against use by very young children.

♦Provide support for families unable to consistently meet their children's developmental needs.

♦Initiate public health campaigns that: (1) Promote face-to-face social interactions within families of babies and toddlers, as well as enjoyable low-cost non-screen play and activities, and (2) Convey how digital products can negatively impact the development and well-being of very young children.

♦In devising policy, prioritize independent research and carefully scrutinize industry-funded studies.

Prevention is the solution. Public awareness of how to promote social interaction and avoid harms from digital device use in the earliest stages of life forms the foundation for thriving citizens and a healthier world.