Summertime Screen Time Scramble

By Bill Poorman

Summer break: ten weeks of unstructured time for our children that needs to be filled somehow. Certainly it's possible to emulate school with camps, day care, classes and your own creative non-screen ideas. But if your kids are anything like mine, they want screen time: TV, video games and more. Moderating it is a challenge. So, what to do?

Before I get to that, let's look at the screen time recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP). It's pretty straightforward. If your child is two years old or younger, no screen time. Instead, he or she should be interacting with people. If your child is between age three and 18, two hours per day maximum of entertainment media. Note that it's entertainment media, specifically. The guidelines, updated in 2013, seem to acknowledge how much screens are part of life now, even school.

According to the AAP, "Studies have shown that excessive media use can lead to attention problems, school difficulties, sleep and eating disorders and obesity. In addition, the Internet and cell phones can provide platforms for illicit and risky behaviors."

Yikes! With so much at stake, how are we parents performing in living up to these guidelines? Not so well.

A recent paper published in the journal BMC Public Health found that, on a typical weekday, nearly 63% of kids exceeded the daily recommended dosage. Younger children did better, but teens did worse. As the study notes, "Current pediatric recommendations pertaining to SBMU (screen based media usage) may no longer be tenable because screen based media are central in the everyday lives of children and adolescents." You don't say.

With this reality in mind, the AAP has a set of recommendations to help you try to limit screen time and use it more wisely starting with developing a "Family Media Use Plan." In part, it should cover the amount, whens, and wheres of screen time. For example:

• Work with your children to come up with a set of written down rules regarding screen time that include strict time limits.
• After the screens are off, encourage children to go outside, read a book, take up hobbies or simply use their imaginations.
• Do not allow screens during meals or at bedtime.
• Do not allow screens in bedrooms. Screen time, and especially internet usage, should be conducted where it can be monitored. Other parts of your Media Use Plan should cover what to do when a child is consuming screen time or producing Internet content:
• Choose your child's media wisely. Use rating systems as you would use nutrition labels.
• When it comes to using screen time, join them. Watch programming with children and discuss the values and advertisements in the programs. For older children, actually use the Internet services they do such as Facebook and Twitter. Understand their digital life from the inside out.
• Teach your children proper Internet etiquette, such as what is appropriate to post. Warn them of the dangers, such as cyberbulling. And explain how, thanks to servers saving everything, what takes place on the Internet lasts forever.

So far, so good. But I have always struggled with one question about screen time: do we have to assume that any excess is bad? It strikes me that *creating* media such as animations, films, photos and the like is different than *consuming* it. People get jobs doing these activities, after all. More research is needed on this, but one study out of the UK found that five-year-olds who watched too much TV later had increased behavioral problems, but children who played video games did not. The medium matters, apparently.

Still, using screen time differently doesn't help with exercise or socialization. Children still have to be guided to be physical and encouraged to visit with friends.

Teenagers, especially, might need a special push. Jeremy Craig is with Testtakers here in Singapore, a firm that helps teens prepare for standardized tests. Craig says test preparation is important, of course, but since the summer is so far away from testing, teens should use some of that time to round out their skills and experiences and to plan for the future. For example, teens should instead read a book, play a sport or visit schools. Also, teens can volunteer or benefit from a classic summer time experience: getting a job. Well, kind of. It's not that easy for expat kids to be employed here in Singapore, but Craig recommends unpaid internships at least. "Learn a little about the real world and how it operates," he says.

Yes, living in the real world. That's true for us parents, as well. We know, despite recommendations and best of intentions, we operate in the real world of raising kids. And for me, it's hard to avoid the feeling that all of these guidelines and suggestions are inconclusive. There is no magic trick. Which brings it back, I suppose, to what you're comfortable with as a parent and to just plain, good ol' parenting.

Nuts. I was hoping for an easier answer.

Photo by Frédéric Claveau

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