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SETTING LIMITS ON SCREEN TIME

By Lynne Griffin

Close interaction with loving caregivers; an enriched, interactive, human language environment; engrossing hands-on play opportunities; and age-appropriate academic stimulation — enhance the brain's development.

Environments that encourage intellectual passivity and maladaptive behavior (e.g., impulsivity, violence, aggression), or deprive the brain of important chances to participate actively in social relationships, creative play, reflection and complex problem-solving may have an irrevocable impact on brain development, because too much screen time affects brain circuitry and risks bypassing important aspects of development.

Too much screen time correlates with lower academic performance, especially in reading.

This may be because screen time substitutes for reading practice, and partially because the compellingly visual nature of the stimulus blocks development of left-hemisphere language circuitry. A young brain manipulated by jazzy visual effects cannot divide attention to listen carefully to language. Moreover, the mind easily becomes impatient with any material requiring depth of processing.

The nature of the stimulus may predispose some children to attention problems.

Even aside from violent or overly stimulating sexual content, the fast-paced, attention-grabbing "features" (e.g., rapid zooms and pans, flashes of color, quick movement in the peripheral visual field, sudden loud noises) were modeled after advertising research, which determined that this technique is the best way to engage the brain's attention involuntarily. Such experiences deprive the child of practice in using his own brain independently, to play hands-on games, engage in hobbies, and participate in social interaction.

The brain's executive control system, or pre-frontal cortex, is responsible for planning, organizing, and sequencing behavior for self-control, moral judgment, and attention.

These centers develop throughout childhood and adolescence, but some research has suggested that "mindless" screen time may idle this particular part of the brain and delay its development. The interaction between environmental stimulation and the stages of pre-frontal development, suggest it is a grave error to expose children to a stimulus that may short-change this critical system.

Lack of supervision with complex learning activities leave room for serious fence pushing.

Sophisticated social activities, such as the use of social networking or online media, without proper role modeling and without appropriate guidance may increase behavior issues, and/or lead to physical, social, or emotional safety repercussions.

What Parents Can Do To balance Technology?

- Learn about technology. You can't take a stand, building the right fences for iPhone use or Facebook, for example, if you don't know what you're dealing with.
- Build the right fences, for each child, in advance of use. You know you've given too much freedom to your child if he isn't using technology wisely. Always be prepared to readjust the size of the backyard with new fences and freedoms.
- Focus on the freedoms your child does have with technology. Power struggles over use will increase your child's fence pushing. Talk about can-dos.
- Teach your child how technology, specifically social media, works. Better yet have your child teach you.
- Get usernames and passwords at the outset, and check in periodically to see how your child is using technology.
- Keep ALL technology out of your child's bedroom. Screens should be out in the open to facilitate your supervision.
- Create lists of alternatives to video games and TV. Have your child engage in physical, creative, and social activities before using screens.
- Put a time limit on screen use. Cell phones, video games, computer use, laptop use, and television all interfere with brain development in similar ways.
- Role model effective use of technology. Setting a good example—showing your child how to use technology wisely—teaches more than your words and limits can.
- Have no-technology zones like the dinner table, and tech-free times like when visiting with family and friends. Hold your child to a high standard of respect regarding cell phones, et al.