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In the Danger Zone: Raising Our Children in the Age of the Screen

Christian parents must be concerned, not just with what content children are watching, but how much exposure they really experience. Something has gone wrong when the default position of the television is on, rather than off.



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We are now the people of the screen. We are surrounded by screens, monitors, and other flickering devices, and each demands our attention. What began with the television has now spread to a host of other technologies. Our minds are increasingly shaped, entertained, informed, stimulated, and perhaps even altered by the Age of the Screen — and so are the minds of our children.

The American Academy of Pediatrics, meeting this week in Boston, expressed concern about the effects of exposure to screens on children. Over a decade ago, the academy proposed that pediatricians should ask questions about screen exposure when conducting routine medical exams and evaluations. Just this week, the groups adopted a new set of guidelines, calling upon parents to put severe limits on the exposure of young children to television.



Parents should pay close attention to the group’s statement, released as “Media Use by Children Younger than Two Years.” According to the AAP, 90 percent of parents reported that their children under the age of two “watch some form of electronic media.” These

children watch, parents reported, an average of one to two hours of television a day. A considerable number of parents indicated their belief that television is “very important for healthy development,” and leave the television on virtually all waking hours.

The pediatric group’s statement took direct aim at the idea that television can be educational for young children. The doctors straightforwardly rejected the value of “educational” programming for young children, arguing that unstructured play and face time with parents produce far greater educational outcomes. As Benedict Carey of *The New York Times* reported, the AAP statement “makes clear that there is no such thing as an educational program for such young children.”

The physicians called for “unstructured, unplugged play” for toddlers, warning specifically that television exposure around bedtime is associated with “poor sleep habits and irregular sleep schedules, which can adversely affect mood, behavior, and learning.”

One statistic cited by the group is truly shocking — by age three, almost one third of all children have a television in their bedroom.

Of course, the American Academy of Pediatrics was not addressing this new statement to toddlers, but to their parents. Toddlers do not put televisions in their bedrooms; their parents do. Furthermore, the AAP warned parents that their own television viewing was exposing their young children to second-hand adverse effects. It turns out that second-hand television, like second-hand smoke, is a real danger to children.

The very fact that the AAP considers media exposure to be such a serious medical issue should tell us all something. And the research undertaken by the academy is both serious and sobering.

Consider this: An AAP report released just over a year ago found that children and adolescents “spend more time engaged in various media than they do in any other activity except for sleeping.”

Citing the 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation study, the pediatricians estimated that children and teenagers spend more than seven hours a day engaged with various media.

When these children and young people reach age 70, “they will have spent the equivalent of 7 to 10 years of their lives watching television.”

The number of American homes with television outnumbers the number of homes with indoor plumbing. The average American home with children has four televisions, one DVR, up to three DVD players, two CD players, two radios, two computers, and two video game units.

If almost one third of three-year-olds have a television in their bedrooms, 70 percent of American teenagers do. At least one third of the nation's teenagers have a computer with internet access in their bedroom.

The pediatricians warned that the presence of a television in a teenager's room is associated with higher rates of substance abuse and sexual activity.

It should tell us something that the nation's pediatricians are alarmed about the media exposure of our children and teenagers. We should know that "there is no such thing as an educational program" for very young children and that what children really need is face time with parents and the experience of hands-on play.

Christian parents must consider this research carefully and candidly. We know that every technology comes with its own dangers, and the technologies of the screen offer subtle dangers as well as more obvious problems. We must prepare our children and teenagers for life in a world filled with screens, and this will be no easy task. But it starts with parents exercising control and preventing the alarming levels of screen exposure this research reveals.

This means that Christian parents must be concerned, not just with what content children are watching, but how much exposure they really experience. Something has gone wrong when the default position of the television is on, rather than off. There is something even more wrong when children and teenagers have televisions and Internet access in their bedrooms.

We, along with our children, live in a new danger zone. We will need deep Christian conviction — and keen Christian judgment — if we are to remain faithful in the Age of the Screen.

I am always glad to hear from readers. Write me at mail@albertmohler.com. Follow regular updates on Twitter at www.twitter.com/AlbertMohler

"Babies and Toddlers Should Learn from Play, Not Screens," American Academy of Pediatrics, Tuesday, October 18, 2011. [PDF file]

"Sexuality, Contraception, and the Media," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 126 (2010); 576-582, published online August 30, 2010.

"Media Education," *Pediatrics*, Vol. 126 (2010); 1012-1017, published online September 27, 2010.

Benedict Carey, "Parents Urged Again to Limit TV for Youngest," *The New York Times*, Wednesday, October 19, 2011.

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