

LESS SCREEN TIME OPENS DOORS TO LITERACY AND LEARNING

There's one sure thing parents can do to help their kids learn, regardless of financial means: Forbid them from watching television on school nights.

– PRESIDENT BARACK OBAMA

Children today are spending more time with screens than in any activity but sleeping. That's time away from all kinds of constructive activities, including reading and homework. The President has also urged limits on some kinds of entertainment screen media because of their impact on learning, urging parents to read to their children instead.¹

Because television has been around much longer than other entertainment screen media, most of the research about the impact of screen time on children focuses on television.

Research demonstrates that hours spent with screens can have a negative impact on learning.

- **The amount of television viewing before age 3 has been associated with deficits in reading recognition, reading comprehension, and being able to remember sequences of numbers at age 6.**²
- **Children who spend less time watching television in early years tend to do better in school, have a healthier diet, be more physically active, and be better able to engage in schoolwork in later elementary school.**³
- **Adolescents who watch 3 or more hours of television daily are at especially high risk for poor homework completion, negative attitudes toward school, poor grades, and long-term academic failure.**⁴

- **Boys who spend more time playing video games spend less time on after-school academic materials, and have lower reading and writing scores.**⁵

One complicating factor for parents today is that many screen-media products are marketed as educational for young children, and that there are no standards for determining what “educational” means. It's been shown, despite promotional materials to the contrary, that DVDs for babies and toddlers are not an effective means of promoting language development,⁶ and may even be detrimental.⁷

In addition, companies also market computer software for children that they claim promotes reading. Studies show, however, that these programs may also be problematic.

- **Operating the mouse while reading a story on the computer requires more executive functioning skills than turning pages of a book, which means that some children are not able to simultaneously operate the mouse and comprehend the story.**⁸
- **When parents and children interact with electronic console books, parents are less likely to use the kind of verbal interactions that promote literacy. They tend to talk more about behavior (e.g., “Can you click on this?”) than respond to the content (e.g., “What's the elephant going to next?”).**⁹

• **When children read from electronic console books, they spend more time pushing buttons than reading the story, which results in poorer character identification, less story comprehension, and more impoverished parent-child interactions than reading from traditional books.**¹⁰

There is some evidence that truly educational screen media, such as programs on PBS, actually can promote learning and literacy in children. There is also evidence that what content children are exposed to matters. Exposure to violent R-rated or PG-13 movies, and violent video games, can promote aggressive behaviors that can cause problems in the classroom¹¹ and is also linked to poor school performance.¹²

But it is important to remember that excessive time spent with screens, regardless of content, is a problem. Use Screen-Free Week as an opportunity to read aloud more to kids, to encourage their own

reading and creative writing projects—or just to engage more in conversation. All of those activities are fun—and promote literacy.

Literacy Action Steps for Screen-Free Week and All Year Round:

- **Books! Books! And more books!**
- **Visit the library or your local book store.**
- **Eat screen-free meals together and talk!**
- **Play word games.**
- **Tell stories.**
- **Draw pictures and tell stories about them.**
- **Encourage young children to dictate stories.**
- **Read poems out loud.**
- **Make up poems and rhymes.**
- **Make up songs.**

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