

When can my baby start watching TV?

The short answer: the AAP discourages *passive* media programs viewed on all screens (TV, DVD's, smartphones, tablets, etc.) for kids under two years of age. (AAP) Note: the AAP's advice is specific to passive screen time, where a child is simply viewing a show. There is currently no official AAP position on apps or computer games, where a child is engaging in activity (interactive media).

Despite that recommendation, 90% of kids under age two watch TV every day and 26% even have a TV in their bedrooms. (Kaiser Family Foundation)

Why are the experts so negative on TV? What's the harm, you say? Sure, we know that a 30-minute kiddie show might buy you time to take a much-needed shower. And don't "educational" shows help kids learn?

Here's why TV and other forms of passive media is bad for babies under age two:

1 WATCHING A SHOW ON A SCREEN IS A LOW ENERGY ACTIVITY. If a screen is turned on, your child is sitting down (unless you are doing an aerobics video).

2 IT'S ONLY EDUCATIONAL WHEN YOU CAN UNDERSTAND IT. Studies have shown that educational programming is beneficial for kids... BUT only for children who understand the content. The magic age to understand TV is two years old. While there are some very bright 18 month olds who "get it," most kids don't and do not gain any knowledge by watching. It gets lost in translation.

3 SCREEN TIME DISPLACES OTHER ACTIVITIES. Screen time is time kids are not spending with their family, engaging in conversation, playing with someone, or playing independently. These are important activities for kids of all ages. *That* is the harm of TV for babies. We know you can't sit down and play with your child 24/7. But realize that independent or solo play is a valuable use of your child's time. That is how kids fine-tune skills that they need in this world (like problem-solving or using their imagination.)

4 SCREEN TIME INTERFERES WITH TALK TIME. If a parent and child are in the same room (even if both are working on individual tasks) and screens are off, a parent is more likely to chat with a child. That "Talk Time" is a necessary part of learning language and social skills. When screens are on, parents talk time goes down by 85%.

5 MANY PROGRAMS ARE INAPPROPRIATE FOR CHILDREN. For instance, the evening news can be very graphic and disturbing (and don't think your baby/child isn't watching because it's "your" show). Even children's programs can be problematic. Have you watched a cartoon lately? The average cartoon has 20 violent scenes per hour.

So, here are some suggestions:

- ◆ ***After your child turns two or older, limit your child's screen time (a daily limit is good).*** Have house rules and stick to them.
- ◆ ***Know what your child is watching.*** Yes, that means sitting down and watching without your child to see if that show is appropriate. You can also go to commonsensemedia.org to get expert and parent reviews of programs.
- ◆ ***Participate WITH your child.*** Talk about what you are seeing.
- ◆ ***Keep screens out of your child's bedroom.*** Any screen that lives in a child's room gives your little one free access without supervision. Bad idea.
- ◆ ***No screens at meal times***—This not only interferes with important time together as a family, but it also encourages people to continue eating after they are full.

What about iPads and educational Apps? Are these ok?

The AAP has no official recommendation on interactive media and young children—yet. AAP policies are based on scientific evidence and in this case, science lags far behind the pace of technology. Trust us, once the cat is out of the bag, your child will be as addicted to it as you are.

There are some great interactive apps that let kids test cause and effect, learn vocabulary words, and practice problem-solving skills. Just know that an app can never replace some toys. There is real value in figuring out how to take two blocks in your hands and stack them up on top of each other so they don't fall over. You can't do that on an iPad. Remember that young children are tactile learners and need to experience real people and real things—not just virtual ones.

Reality Check: Distracted Parenting

Have a media management plan for everyone in your family—that includes YOU. Screen time is distracting for parents. That all-important “talk time” gets reduced when a parent is watching her own adult show or even has the TV on in the background while preparing dinner. And even if the show on the screen is intended for grown-ups, a child playing in the same room will look up at the screen about every 20 seconds and be less attentive to his play. Just turn it off and watch your shows or check your Facebook page later.

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