

Small Children Spend Too Much Time on Tiny Screens

Dr. Todd Huffman

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All day every day in my exams rooms I see it. And when out in public you see it too: young children in strollers, grocery carts, restaurants, even in their parent's lap, mesmerized by what author Salman Rushdie once called "pocket-sized alternate-reality boxes".

According to a recent study by San Francisco-based Common Sense Media, among the diaper-wearing set nearly 40 percent use tablets or smart phones. Drawn like a moth to a street lamp, the bored or cranky toddler is quickly placated by the glow of devices whose screens today are hardly bigger than hotel soap.

A vast and fascinating world is thus crowded out by miniature images on what amounts to little more than a pocket babysitter. Some parents defend their reliance on these gadgets by claiming to offer their pre-classroom aged child "educational" apps. But it is a pleasant fiction that these apps "educate" in a manner more beneficial than the education gained by the young child's relentless exploration of her environment.

The young brain's neuronal ambition is not to learn letters and numbers, but rather to through all the senses engage and interact with the world and all the things and people in it. Head bowed, eyes transfixed on some tiny screen amusement, even under the guise of "education", a toddler misses out on the endlessly educational hands-on reality all around him.

The job of toddlers is to construct and deconstruct, and reconstruct differently. It is to try and fail, try again and succeed. It is to conquer their fears and develop new competencies and confidence. And it is to learn from their relationships, particularly with their parents and whoever else takes care of them.

Sadly, some toddlers are instead learning from their relationships to squander their youthful energy on sedentary screen-fixedness. Many adults today are themselves constantly using their tiny screens around and in lieu of their children. This says to the child, "this screen is more important than you". And it models screen time as how life is best lived.

We need to come to an honest acknowledgment that we've gone too far with these devices when parents are increasingly subordinating parenting, and child care providers are subordinating their paid duty, to gadgets and their games. It has become seductively easy to turn on these "free" babysitters rather than turn on the parenting.

Of course, balance is achievable, and is often achieved. Electronic fluency is crucial in the modern world. Teaching children how to use a computer is as important as teaching them how to use a hammer, a broom, and, still, a pencil. An older child whose life is balanced between computers and reading and outdoor play and crafts and hobbies and learning an instrument and learning to cook is a child prepared for 21st-century adulthood.

But more and more I see young children being orphaned from the real world, raised by cyberwolves. Given little hope that "pocket-sized alternate-reality boxes" will one day be programmed to go blank when in young hands, parents should wait until after their child's fourth birthday before introducing

tablets and smart phones. There is no evidence that waiting to introduce technology puts children behind – they can still pick it up quickly.

Once upon a time, in a reality not long ago but far, far away, children when bored eventually found or created something to do. Or, when confined to a cart or restaurant high-chair or back seat, they learned patience and how to look inside themselves.

After all, boredom is the engine of creativity and imagination and activity. Whether at home or in public, rather than pacify the bored and cranky young child with a device through which all the creating and imagining has been done for them, refocus their eager mind on the amazement that can be found in the ordinary going on around them. Simply giving them your attention might even be enough.