

# Toys or TV? AAP Says It's A 'No-Brainer'

By Michele G. Sullivan, Pediatric News, December 2011

Can videos create Baby Einstein? Not likely at all. New research on babies and toddlers suggests that media screen time will never replace play time with toys or interactions with actual human beings. The American Academy of Pediatrics is taking a strong stance on this issue, releasing a new policy statement that warns against exposing little people to the big screen.

According to the policy, released Oct. 18, 2011, TV programs and videos – even those touted as educational – are likely to do more harm than good for young children. Screen time can limit creative play time and reduce interactions with parents and other children and disrupt sleep and meal routines – all critical processes in a baby's developmental journey, said Dr. Ari Brown, the paper's primary author.

"The key concerns here are that infants and toddlers who get 'screen time' get less 'talk time,' " Dr. Brown said during a press briefing. "Even though parents may view videos and programs as safe, educational and entertaining, these are marketing claims," without data to back them up. "Studies have already shown that 84% of parents talk less to their babies when the television is on and that they use 74% fewer new words," a pattern that definitely affects language development, she said.

Dr. Brown, a pediatrician from Austin, TX., stressed the paper's take-home message: Unstructured play time is the best way to stimulate the developing brain. "When babies are engaged in unstructured free play with toys, they are learning to problem-solve, to think creatively, and develop reasoning and motor skills," she said. "Free play also teaches children how to entertain themselves, which is certainly a valuable skill."

In an achievement-driven society, parents often feel pressured to provide their child with every possible "leg up" on intellectual development. But videos don't fit that bill – at least for babies younger than 2 years.

She cited a study in which children aged 6, 12, and 18 months watched a "Teletubbies" video both forward and backward. The younger children watched the video with the same attention whichever direction it played, showing that they made no real cognitive connection. "Only the 18-month-olds started following it more as the video went forward, paying attention to some content, and to the fades and special effects," Dr. Brown said. Around 2 years, children may actually begin to learn from a program that has a proven educational benefit," especially if watched with an engaged adult.

Household media use also decreases reading time, the report noted. Children in households with lots of media use get an average of 25% less time reading with an adult and have a lower likelihood of being able to read, compared with children from households with lower media use.

The policy also addressed unsupervised screen time in bedrooms. By age 3 years, about a third of American children have TVs in their bedrooms, with many parents considering a bedtime video to be a calming sleep aid.

Not so, said Dr. Brown, asserting that TVs have no place in babies' bedrooms. "Studies have found that TV as part of [the] bedtime routine can shorten sleep duration and provoke irregular sleep cycles."

Among the new policy's other key recommendations:

- Although AAP discourages the use of any media for children younger than 2, parents who use it should set strong limits and have a strategy for sticking to them.

- Instead of screen time, opt for supervised – but independent – play during the time when an adult is present.

- Recognize that adult media use can have a negative impact on children. "Even if the program isn't intended for children to watch, research has found that children playing nearby will look up from their play about three times each minute instead of focusing on their own activity, and they interact less with adults when a TV is on, perhaps because the adult's attention is focused on the program."

While pediatricians can stress all of these points to parents, they can also offer an alternative to worried moms and dads: Don't feel guilty about putting your child down on the floor with toys.

"Look, we all live in reality. If you want your child to learn and do well, give [her] the skill set of learning through play. Not only is it OK to put your child in a room with toys, it is a good thing. Don't feel guilty about it. We know you can't be with [your child] 24 hours a day, and now we know there is real value in this independent play."