May is Speech and Hearing Month

Screen Time and Talk Time:
Considerations for Families

Technology is an integral part of our homes, schools and work places. As technology has become more and more present in our lives, "screen time" has begun to dominate leisure time and social interactions for some children. Parents and educators frequently ask themselves, "Is all this screen time good or bad for my children?" The answer is: "it depends". Pope Francis reminds us that internet and media, when used by responsible citizens, can help us to "feel closer to one another, creating a sense of unity of the human family" (Message for the 48th World Communications Day, Jan. 24, 2014).

The following article is provided to help parents evaluate screen time in their home. There are three key considerations:

1. opportunities for parent-child interaction;
2. kinds of screen time activities;
3. amount of time spent using technology.

Opportunities for parent child interaction

Turn screen time into talk time. Perhaps the most important consideration when evaluating screen time activities is the opportunity for **interaction between you and your child.** Screen time can promote language and social development if you are actively involved with your child. This means that when your child is looking at a screen you are sitting with them, watching and talking about what he or she is seeing or doing. Sit in a position that allows you to make frequent eye contact with your child and see the screen. Have a two-way conversation, discuss thoughts and feelings, exchange ideas, ask open ended questions and relate what your child is learning to real life. Another way to interact with your child and create opportunities for discussion during screen time is to play screen games with your child. Let your child tell you what you need to do or give you suggestions on things to do differently. Lots of opportunity to talk will occur when you take part in an activity that is of high interest to your child.

Turn screen time into story time. Some children may be resistant to looking at traditional paper books but be highly interested in books that are read to them from their screen; books that have lots of music and animation. Capitalizing on the child's interests by allowing them access to books on their screen can be especially beneficial if you are interacting with your child during the reading experience. Take this time to talk about what is happening on the page, explain the meaning of new words that they are hearing or reading, and point out written words or sentences

on the screen. For emergent readers, talk about letters and the sounds they make. Help your child make connections between the story characters and their own lives. Retell favourite parts of the story. Change parts of the story and ask your child to tell what would happen next. Remember, the language and literacy benefits of reading may be lost when your child is watching or listening to a screen story by themselves.

Kinds of screen time activities

Whenever possible, try to ensure that your child's screen time activities are **educational**. In addition to stories on screen, look for games to practice academic skills. Choose games that promote pretend play, creativity and enhance writing. In addition, make sure that the activity is not too easy or too difficult for your child. Easy activities limit the opportunity for developing problem solving skills and often minimize exposure to new vocabulary. Activities that are too difficult, on the other hand, might result in disengagement or frustration and could turn your child off educational activities all together. So how can you determine if an activity is right for your child? The best way is to observe your child while they are playing the game and see how they are doing. Is it easy resulting in them completing the task very quickly or are they getting frustrated because it is too difficult? Ask them what they think of the game. Remember, the games need to be interesting to the child in order for them to continue to play them. In addition, games that peers are playing will be of greater interest to your child and will open up opportunities for them to engage with their peers about mutual interests, facilitating expressive language and social skill development.

Skype and FaceTime are excellent ways to use screens to **promote language development and social interaction** e.g., Skype a grandparent who lives far away, or invite a friend to a virtual tea party. Be mindful, however, of children and teenagers who text but do not seek opportunities to spend time with friends and family in person. They may be doing this as a way to avoid face to face interaction, defeating the benefits that screen time can provide. Speak to your child's teacher or physician if you are concerned that your child is avoiding interaction with people.

Amount of time spent using technology

Like most leisure time activities, **moderation** is the key to screen time. But what exactly does that mean. The Canadian Paediatric Society (CPS) recommends 1-2 hours per day for children 3 years to 18 years old, but discourages screen-based activities for children under 2 years of age.

Why the limitations? Screens distract infants and toddlers from looking at their parents, siblings and others around them. Seeing, hearing, learning to read facial expressions and observing the environment are experiences that support cognitive, language and social development in young children. Children need to learn about the reciprocal nature of communication. We take turns speaking and listening; initiating and responding to a common topic. These opportunities are typically limited when young children are looking at screens. In addition, toddlers need to be actively discovering their world (e.g., crawling/walking) and manipulating objects with their hands. It is important for toddlers to explore toys and people games through physical and social play rather than receiving stimulation from screen time. That is why the CPS recommends no screen time for children under the age of 2 years.

For children aged 3 to 18 years, child development experts recommend limiting the number of hours they spend engaged with technology. Children need to have a healthy balance between sedentary (sitting) time and physical activity. Consider allowing your child to play on their screens after they have met their daily target for physical activity, e.g. one hour of screen time after one hour of physical activity. In addition, play with peers is an important activity for the development of social skills, which may or may not occur during the child's screen time. Social skills are life skills! Limited opportunities to interact with others may adversely affect the development of social skills.
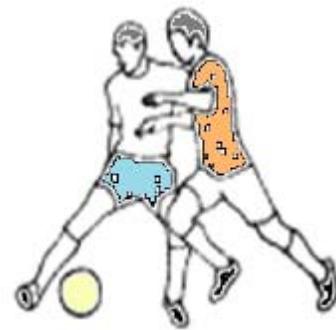
Stay tuned for a follow up article entitled **"Unplug and Communicate: 50 Screen Free Activities to Promote Social Skills and Interaction".**

For further information, speak to your school speech-language pathologist about language, literacy and social development.

References:

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