



## Greene County Public Health

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# Press Release

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### **“DISCONNECT TO CONNECT” for Infants & Preschoolers**

*Addressing the Mental Health of Children and Youth in a Digital World*

**GREENE COUNTY, OH** -- We live in world full of technology. The presence of cell phones, iPads, and computers in everyday life is a reality. The impact of technology on a young child’s brain development is not widely understood. Recent research indicates that adults should create boundaries and balance for their children around screens. We must understand that with these devices, there can be a negative impact on child development and mental health.

During the years of the pandemic and even to this day, families connected to loved ones with devices. ZOOM is now a familiar word to most. Further, some parents/caregivers had to navigate working from home while caring for children. Technology can offer a quick and convenient way to keep young children occupied while adults focus on work and other priorities.

Determining the best uses of tech for young children can be difficult for parents. Children gravitate toward screens, and it is not easy for adults to compete. Screens often disrupt interactions between adults and children. Real-life learning opportunities are key to building social/emotional skills. Without meaningful interactions, children do not learn to talk about their feelings.

Children should have many types of experiences to learn social skills and learn to handle stress. Children are not born resilient. They become resilient over time. Too much screen time can get in the way of critical growth.

#### **Does the benefit of screen time outweigh the risk?**

Technology use can disrupt the normal developmental process. The risk for children under six is magnified because of this period of rapid brain growth.

#### **From the experts...**

According to researchers at the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University

(<https://developingchild.harvard.edu/science/key-concepts/brain-architecture/>). . .

“a child’s capacity to regulate emotions develops in a complex interaction with his or her environment and ongoing mental, physical, and social development. **Brains are built over time, from the bottom up.**”

Because young children’s minds are just developing, they cannot learn as well from technology as they can from trusted adults. Excessive and/or unmonitored screen time can be detrimental to a child’s brain development and emotional/social growth.

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Some issues that can arise include:

- unseen damage to brain development = cognitive delays, psychosocial delays
- less physical activity and movement = physical or motor delays, obesity, trouble sleeping
- fewer words spoken in home = language delays, speech/articulation delays
- fewer and less developed personal interactions = social/emotional delays, difficulty forming relationships

*Too much screen time is like too much sugar. A little bit can make life sweeter, but too much can rot your teeth and ruin your health. Finding the healthy balance is key.*

### Background Television

A child's ability to learn new things, self-calm, pay attention, remember details, learn to talk, and transition from one activity to another is hindered by background television. Having the television on in the background is even worse for young children when the show content is at a level that is too high for them. The shocking fact is that children under three are being exposed to an average of 5.5 hours of background television per day. **That's 40% of a child's waking life.**

### How Much Is Too Much?

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends the following:

- Infants/Toddlers, ages 0-2 years: NO screen time exposure for infants and toddlers. The only exception --being connecting with loved ones on a screen.
- Children ages 2-5 years: Up to one hour per day of high-quality screen time.

The AAP also recommends that adults not use technology to help care for or supervise a young child. Adults should view television alongside young children to support their understanding. However, this set of recommendations does not reflect current home practices. In 2016, researchers found that babies (0-2 years) spend 42 minutes per day on screens, and children (3-4 years) spend two hours 40 minutes per day on screens. Most parents teach their child how to use a touchscreen by age two. Screen time usage per day was too high *before* the pandemic. It is even higher, now.

### What Can We Do?

Technology is a part of modern life. Recognizing the benefits and risks is important. Parents can promote healthier living and manage technology use by following these simple strategies to **Disconnect to Connect**:

- **Maintain daily screen-free times** – Set sacred times. Try disconnecting for mealtime, bath time and bedtime.
- **Play together** – Set aside time each day to actively play, interact and communicate. Get outside to run, play, swing, and climb.
- **Use hands-on/manipulative toys and games** – This helps with gross and fine motor skill development.

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- **Avoid background television** – Turn off the TV to avoid noisy distractions. Too quiet? Try music instead.
- **Be consistent with limits** – Set limits together and stick to it. For example, 30 minutes of screen time in the morning, another 30 minutes in the evening. Use a timer so your child is clear on the time. Keep screen time away from bedtime to avoid negotiation and meltdowns that can interfere with important sleep schedules.
- **Read daily to your child** – Make sure they have hard copies of books available to them. You can join the *Dolly Parton Imagination Library* and your child will receive a free book each month through age five. Visit [www.imaginationlibrary.com](http://www.imaginationlibrary.com) to sign up today!
- **Find artistic avenues for your child to explore** – Painting, drawing, and playing music are great activities for brain development.
- **Be intentional** – Know what shows and games are educational and on your child’s level. Be clear about what shows, and games are “bad for your brain” and unhealthy.
- **Set limits** – Setting the tone for screen time limits early in your child’s life will enable you to keep a structure in place as your child gets older.

**Interested in doing more?** Try creating a Family Media Plan:

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx>

**Be sure to mark your calendars for the Global Day of Unplugging in Greene County, sundown to sundown, March 1-2, 2024. This is a day to block out a few times during the day to put down all of your digital devices and BE TECH FREE!**

**Resources for this article:** *Zero to Three, American Academy of Pediatrics, Common Sense, Center on the Developing Child Harvard University*

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