

New Healthy Media Habits for Young Kids

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10/18/2017

Who among us hasn't fibbed when the doctor asks how much alcohol you drink? Who takes the suggested daily amount of Vitamin C? Who engages in moderate exercise precisely 150 minutes per week? Thought so. Turns out [families treat their media diets the same way](#). Despite [pediatricians' ongoing recommendations to curb kids' screen use](#), the *Common Sense Census: Media Use by Kids Age Zero to Eight 2017* found that families with young kids are buying up mobile devices, using screens before bed, and streaming tons of video. But plenty of parents think their own kids' media use is perfectly fine, and most believe that on the whole, it's good for kids. So what does it mean when the reality doesn't match the recommendations? It's time for new rules.

Not *no* rules, just different ones -- you may be OK for now, but studies show that media use steadily increases as kids get older, and there are risks to overexposure. [Changing your approach to screen management before the tween and teen years](#) will increase the chances that the stuff they're interacting with is (mostly) good for them. It also allows you to think more deeply about how, when, and why you want your family to be using technology, so it enhances and enriches your lives.

Interestingly, the census found that even with all the new things kids are doing, [their total daily amount of screen time hasn't changed that much in six years](#). That's good news because as long as you have basic limits, you can focus on choosing quality media and tech to make screen time really count. And with many parents reporting that media use benefits their kids' learning and creativity, the new rules call for co-viewing and co-playing to boost those positive benefits (rather than screaming at your kids to turn off the computer).

Some parents ask: Why restrict media at all? Because honestly, [nothing takes the place of the things that are proven to be best for little kids' bodies and minds, like talking, playing, growing bored, and learning how to do stuff](#) -- especially in the crucial early years of a kid's life. At the end of the day, it's not your doctor you have to answer to -- it's your kids. Media and tech are and will continue to be huge in their lives. Start now to create a balanced approach that keeps everyone healthy.

5 Tips for Parents of Young Kids

Choose the good stuff (and not too much!). When your kids ask to see, play, or download something, don't just take their word for it -- check up on it. A lot of the age recommendations on media products are the creators' best guess and aren't necessarily a match for your child's age and developmental stage. Read [product reviews from independent sources \(like Common Sense Media\)](#). Say no if you're not comfortable with it. And when you approve something, help your kids enjoy it along with their other activities.

Don't use screens right before bed, and keep them out of the bedroom overnight. Kids really need their sleep. Screens in the bedroom -- especially in the hour before bedtime -- [interfere with the entire process of winding down, preparing for rest, and waking up refreshed and ready to tackle the day](#). If you're unable to make the bedroom a screen-free zone (which is optimal but not always possible), keep TVs off for at least an hour before bedtime and set tablets or phones to night mode, turn off any notifications, and/or consider using Guided Access or another device setting to keep phones/tablets locked on a music or an alarm clock app.

Turn off the TV if no one is watching it. A lot of parents of young kids keep the TV on for company. But so-called [background TV has been shown to get in the way of parents talking and interacting with their kids](#) -- which are key to helping kids learn language and communication. Background TV can also expose kids to age-inappropriate content. Seek out other forms of entertainment that you can listen to with your kid, such as music, kids' podcasts, and audiobooks.

Make time for enjoying media with your kids, especially reading. Reading to your kid is one of the best things you can do -- period. It's great for bonding, but it also sets the stage for learning. While [it's nice to have a little library of books at home](#), you can read whatever's available and it'll be good for them. Product labels, signs, packaging copy -- anything with words is fine. If you're raising your kid in a place where you don't completely know the language, feel free to read books or articles to them in your native tongue. Or just make up stories -- it's the rhythm, sounds, and communication that are important for kids to hear.

Practice what you preach. Remember, your kids are watching you. When your kids are little, create a [family media plan](#) to help you balance media and tech (theirs and yours) with all of the other things that are important to you. This isn't just for them; it's for you, too. Schedule in downtime, chores, homework, outdoor fun, reading, meals, etc. And then figure out how much extra is available for TV shows, games, apps and other media activities. Don't worry about counting up daily screen time minutes -- just aim for a balance throughout the week. Try to carve out times and locations that are "[screen-free zones](#)." Hold yourself to them. Kids learn more from what we do than what we say, so make sure you're role-modeling the right habits.