

Controversies Around Children and Digital Technology

Parents can strike a balance between potential risks and rewards of technology use in childhood.

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Key takeaways for caregivers

- Many caregivers and policymakers around the world are concerned about possible [effects of excessive screen](#) time on children's healthy development.
- While a growing number of individuals and groups advocate for a total ban on young children's screen use, it is important to also consider the

potential benefits technology can offer.

- Rather than prohibiting screen time outright, parents might consider evaluating the *quality* of the content their children are consuming. While many of the most popular children's apps hold little value in terms of authentic educational content, well-designed options can [support children's learning](#).
- Selected media should be engaging, meaningful, and linked to the child's life, and they should be socially interactive and designed with a learning goal.
- Digital learning tools can be especially helpful during times of conflict (e.g., when in-person education is interrupted), as illustrated by [Stories with Clever Hedgehog](#).
- Parents can help children manage the balance between screen time and other activities, just as they help children avoid too much candy in favor of a balanced diet.

Is digital technology bad for children?

The debate over children's interaction with digital technology has reached a fever pitch. At the forefront of this discussion stands Jonathan Haidt, a professor at New York University with expertise in social psychology and morality. Haidt's most recent and popular book, [The Anxious Generation](#), boldly challenges the pervasive integration of digital devices into children's lives. Haidt argues that smartphones and screens contribute to "social deprivation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation, and addiction," (p. 98), painting a dire picture of the consequences for today's youth.

Haidt goes further when he asserts that "play-based childhood is over," (p. 189), replaced by screen time that inhibits genuine interaction and developmental growth. His concerns are echoed in the recent actions of nine U.S. school districts that have banned cell phones completely, even though the [data to support these claims is mixed](#).

Media use has grown exponentially

Media use has skyrocketed in recent years. The smartphone was invented in 2007 and the tablet came along in 2010. These devices have made technology more portable, user-friendly, and accessible than ever before. Imagine, for example, the difference between a simple night out to dinner with young children before tablets versus now. In 2005, a bored toddler fussing at the table would have little by way of entertainment. If they're lucky, they might be given some crayons and a paper menu to keep them entertained, but the burden of entertainment would fall largely on the parents.

By contrast today, years after the tablet hit the market, the phenomenon of "iPad kids" appearing at restaurants is becoming the norm. From the moment they arrive at the dinner table, a child can sit for the entire meal without ever turning off their favorite mobile game. Children have gone from practically no access to technology to being surrounded by it at every turn and in every setting. The average child in the United States spends just shy of five hours a day on screens (up almost an hour from the pre-pandemic average), and this phenomenon is almost universal. [Common Sense Media](#), a U.S. organization, says that 42% of children have their own phone by age 10, and by age 12, that number increases to over 70%.

A nuanced perspective on children and digital technology

While Haidt's warnings about the potential harms of excessive screen time are sobering, they do not tell the whole story. Furthermore, the potency of his argument is based on a cherry-picked set of findings. Candice Odgers is a professor at the University of California Irvine with expertise in digital technology use in childhood and adolescence. She wrote a [March 2024 essay](#) arguing that the data do not support a strong link between screen time and mental illness. Nor is there compelling evidence, she suggested, that

anxiety is the result of recent changes in digital use; perhaps children with more anxiety simply use screens more often.

Most Western children are growing up in a technologically rich world in which they cannot avoid screens. Parents' job is to help their children use media critically and be sensible in their choices about content and time spent.

Haidt's argument also misses key advantages of the technological revolution: the potential to visit places we have never visited, have information at our fingertips, and stay in touch with faraway friends and family. As an article in the [Hechinger Report](#) notes, concerns about a link between screen use and anxiety overlook the tremendous value for education that digital technology can have, if it is done right. "We don't have to devolve into extreme 'ban' or 'don't ban' positions on smartphones, laptops or other technology," suggest the article's authors.

The dilemma for parents

It is no surprise that the barrage of messages about media use flooding parental inboxes and mommy blogs leaves parents at a crossroads: At one end of the spectrum is the fear that unrestricted access to screens will lead to profound mental health and developmental problems for children. At the other is the concern that outright prohibition may deny children access to the valuable learning tools and social connections technology can provide. Is there a middle road?

Michael Rich of Harvard University, a self-styled media pediatrician, or "mediatrician," recently published the [Mediatrician's Guide](#) to suggest a balanced and achievable approach for parents. He reminds us that most Western children are growing up in a technologically rich world in which they cannot avoid screens. Therefore, parents' job is to help their children use media critically and be sensible in their choices about content and time spent.

Being sensible about the content of the technology children use

A key message from the science of learning is that not all screen time is created equal. Parents must evaluate the quality of digital content and ask whether a particular product or platform is created with children's developmental needs in mind.

[Research shows](#) that of the 100 applications (hereafter called apps) most frequently downloaded by parents of preschoolers and kindergarteners, only three have the qualities that should be present in a *true* educational app. Based on this finding, some might suggest that parents not let their children use technology.

But is that a logical conclusion? And if it were logical, is it a feasible solution for parents? In 2013, the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) began recommending that parents and children use technology together, meaning that rather than limiting children's screen time outright, parents should make an effort to engage in the technology alongside their children. But this recommendation is far from viable for many families, especially those in developmentally vulnerable populations (e.g., families whose parents have a limited amount of one-on-one time with their children).

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In a [study](#) of a representative sample of U.S. families that examined parental involvement in their children's screen time, one of the strongest predictors of media co-use was the amount of time a parent stayed home. But many families (e.g., those in which both parents work one or multiple jobs, single-parent families) lack the time and resources to sit through every

technological interaction with their children. A more viable solution would be for parents to carefully select specific media and develop a bank of high-quality programs for children to explore.

What defines “good” versus “bad” content

The best apps for children capitalize on *how* they learn best. The science of learning tells us what good app design or digital content should look like, suggesting the presence of four pillars: Children learn best when their minds are *active* – rather than mindlessly swiping – and *engaged* – immersing themselves in rich content. Content that is *meaningful* and linked to children’s lives is more likely to help children learn, as does content that promotes *social interaction* so [children develop social skills](#); solo app play does not fulfill that goal.

In addition, to determine whether an app is educational, parents should ask whether it has a clear learning goal. Rather than restricting all screen use or [allowing screen use](#) only when parents can be present to mediate children’s use, parents can filter their child’s digital interactions with these pillars in mind.

Sites such as [Common Sense Media](#) have curated helpful lists of recommended apps, games, shows, and suggestions to help ensure that children’s digital interactions are of high quality. Parents can refer to these lists to identify valuable sources of educational entertainment.

The value of non-educational apps

Of course, not all apps have to teach or be educational. Some, like those produced by [Toca Boca](#), can just be fun and encourage social interaction. Other products, like Amazon’s Glow (which has been discontinued), were developed to enable parents and grandparents to play games with their children when they are not in the same place.

These kinds of products demonstrate the promise of digital technology: When curated thoughtfully and intentionally, [digital resources can supplement traditional learning methods](#), provide enriching experiences, and encourage children to laugh with other people – even if they are far away.

Digital technology in times of conflict

Digital technology not only links people who are distant from one another. It can also augment learning for those who do not have access to schools, books, and libraries, such as children who are refugees or live in war-torn areas.

For example, in Poland, children who fled the war in Ukraine entered a new life and new schools where their native language was not spoken. Many families fled with few possessions, leaving children without access to books and other educational tools, as well as far removed from their culture. A platform created by Golinkoff and her team called [Stories with Clever Hedgehog](#) provides children's books, games, and activities in Ukrainian to children and families in the midst of the upheaval. The website was also designed to reduce children's and parents' stress.

How to be sensible about the time children spend with digital technology

Children are spending tremendous amounts of time on digital media. In the United States, children under eight years spend up to four hours a day on screens, and children eight and older spent up to eight hours a day.

Although there is little evidence that brains are “rewired” by this experience, these numbers clearly represent too much time on screens. Children need to run and jump, have time to be bored and develop an interior life, discover the power of books and their own imaginations, and interact with their peers.

Most children love candy and would eat a lot of it if allowed. Just as parents

monitor the consumption of sweets, they should monitor their children's media use and make sure it is not taking over their lives.

A balanced approach to children and digital technology

Today's children were born into a digital world in which the lines between reality and digital life are often blurred. By embracing a balanced approach, parents can protect their children from some of the less positive digital forces while also empowering them to navigate the digital landscape responsibly. But doing so is not as easy as banning or enabling media, whether good or bad. The new world is not that simple.

Haidt claimed that because of the rising influence of technology, "the play-based childhood is over," (p. 189). We certainly agree that it is important to encourage children to spend time away from screens, and engage in physical play and screen-free learning.

But Haidt's claim assumes that digital play holds no value, educational or otherwise, and that is simply not the case. During this giant digital experiment, parents can both protect children and enrich their lives by embracing technology with a mindful and evidence-based approach.

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