

back to school

MEDIA MATTERS

Kids are more plugged in than ever, and that can be a good thing. Follow our expert-led road map to help everyone navigate screen time safely.

BY MELINDA WENNER MOYER | PHOTOS ANDY LYONS



The brave new digital world is here to stay, and kids are integral players.

According to a 2014 report from the Family Online Safety Institute, more than half of all U.S. children between the ages of 6 and 17 have access to at least three media devices at home, and they use them constantly: The average 8- to 10-year-old spends nearly five hours a day using digital media.

For parents, reports about this new reality can be alarming: “Too much TV makes kids overweight and

hinders school performance!” “The Internet and social media are a world of dangers!”

But many of these claims don’t stand up to scrutiny; correlation doesn’t mean causality. Yes, some studies have linked video games to aggressive behavior, but others have found that playing video games can teach problem solving and improve hand-eye coordination. And while excessive TV-watchers might have behavioral problems, being glued to the tube might be the symptom of a different problem.

The fact is, completely shielding your children from digital media isn’t just impossible—it’s a bad idea. Experts say that parents should let their kids explore various platforms and engage with them about what they’re doing. “Rather than stressing over and severely restricting media time, I advise parents to participate and create a dialogue,” says Pamela Rutledge, Ph.D., director of the nonprofit Media Psychology Research Center. “The way you control your children’s safety is by educating them.” A good first step: this guide.

WARDROBE: JEN McDONALD; HAIR AND MAKEUP: JILL WITTE; PILLOW: BETTER HOMES AND GARDENS' TANGERINE CHENILLE SWIRLS 18" DECORATIVE PILLOW, WALMART STORES AND WALMART.COM

video games

WHAT YOU'VE HEARD Playing video games makes kids antisocial and aggressive.

THE REALITY Video games aren't categorically bad. They can take time away from physical activity and other important "real life" activities, but the main concern centers around those that display and reward gratuitous physical aggression, especially if fighting, guns, and shooting are involved. Research shows that kids who play violent video games are more likely to display antisocial behavior, but "we don't know that the video games are the direct cause, in part because kids who are prone to violence might also be likely to play violent games," Rutledge says. Experts urge parents to follow ratings advisories, restricting kids under 17 from playing games with an "M" rating.

MAKE THE MOST OF IT Studies show that well-designed, nonviolent, age-appropriate video games can help improve abstract reasoning, problem solving, math skills, and hand-eye coordination. Sports, dance, or fitness-theme video games that use dance pads or sports equipment can help kids become more physically active. Be an engaged participant in your kids' selections, and teach critical thinking about the games so they can make good decisions when you're not around. When it comes to self-contained systems like Xbox and Wii, you can do the choosing and get to know the games. "Ask, 'What are you playing, and why do you like it?'" says Debra Lieberman, Ph.D., director of the Center for Digital Games Research at the University of California, Santa Barbara. "It's powerful for the parent to show an interest. You're meeting the child where she lives, and validating her opinion, so when you talk about what you like and don't like, the discussion is a two-way street and your viewpoint will have an impact." If certain aspects of the game bother you—say a player is rewarded for something unfair—use that as a springboard for a discussion about how to behave in real life.

Can't tell if the game your child likes is on target? Check its rating from the Entertainment Software Rating Board (esrb.org) or Common Sense Media (commonsensemedia.org). Says Caroline Knorr of Common Sense Media: "The games we really love allow kids to express themselves, explore different worlds, and expand their intellectual skills."



Find age- and content-appropriate games and websites: cyberwise.org, ikeepSAFE.org



the internet

WHAT YOU'VE HEARD The dot-com world is like the Wild West—young kids can unwittingly be exposed to inappropriate content, so don't let them surf the Web unsupervised.

THE REALITY Children can certainly get into trouble on the Internet, but there are many ways to limit their access to questionable websites and content when you can't supervise closely. And be sure to keep an open dialogue with kids about what they're doing online and how to stay safe.

MAKE THE MOST OF IT Younger kids can surf the Web in a safer way by using kid-friendly browsers, sometimes called "walled gardens," such as KidZui, Zoodles, and My Kids Browser. You can also control what programs your child uses by changing settings on the computer. On a Mac, go to "Parental Controls" in System Preferences; in Windows, go to "Settings" and then "Family Safety." Downloadable software suites such as Net Nanny or Safe Eyes let you block websites and monitor sites your child visits. Computers should stay in common areas of the house so you can monitor what kids are viewing. Also avoid Internet use within an hour of bedtime. "Screens that emit blue light can decrease the production of melatonin, the hormone that regulates the sleep-wake cycle," says Diana Graber, founder of Cyber Civics and co-founder of CyberWise, an organization dedicated to helping kids be safe and productive online.

And keep in mind that there are many valuable online experiences for kids. "Sometimes they're looking up information or engaging in educational games; other times they're creating new content," Lieberman says. Indeed, media exposure can be empowering, says Michelle Ciulla Lipkin, executive director of the National Association for Media Literacy Education. "How great is it that students are able to interact with the world in a way that no generation of kids before could?"





social media

WHAT YOU'VE HEARD Tweens and teens who are active on social media are more likely to be cyberbullied and are careless about protecting their privacy.

THE REALITY Real-world bullies might be more of an issue than cyberbullies. Although a recent survey from the Cyberbullying Research Center found that 26 percent of middle and high school students say they were bullied online, a 2012 study, which included a large sample of American kids in grades 3 through 12, found that 18 percent had been bullied in real life, while only 5 percent had been bullied online. On the upside, the Pew Internet and American Life Project reported that kids have more positive than negative experiences on social media. Even The American Academy of Pediatrics concludes that social media use "has shown to benefit children and adolescents by enhancing communication, social connection, and technical skills."

MAKE THE MOST OF IT Most social media sites require users to be at least 13 years old due to the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, and younger kids aren't generally ready for social media anyway. "They can't always think through the consequences of their actions, and the problem with social media is that your mistakes last forever," Graber says.

Parents can help younger kids develop social media skills. You can sign them up for kid-friendly networks such as Yoursphere, which rewards kids for interacting positively with others, and Kuddle, a photo-sharing site that allows kids to add captions to photos, but not tag friends or comment. "My kids played Club Penguin," Graber says. "It was such a safe, easy on-ramp to online life."

When your kids are ready, join them online. "Believe it or not, young teens are generally excited for their parents to participate with them," Graber says. Check out the parent privacy-setting guides on Instagram and Snapchat through ConnectSafely.org, a nonprofit organization. You can keep an eye on your kids' activity and stay up on the latest social media happenings.

television

WHAT YOU'VE HEARD Kids who watch a lot of TV are at risk for weight and sleep problems, and poor academic performance.

THE REALITY TV is on the front lines of the kids and media issue. While studies have found associations between watching TV and various issues, that doesn't mean TV is the direct cause. "In some cases, excessive television watching may be an indication of other problems at home," says Tracie Afifi, a community health scientist at the University of Manitoba in Canada. Research suggests that high-quality TV shows, viewed in moderation, can be educational.

MAKE THE MOST OF IT It's a matter of balance: You don't want TV to eat into time kids would otherwise spend running around outside or finishing homework. So limit viewing time and be selective. In a nutshell, "Quality and age-appropriate content matters," Knorr says. And use the parental controls. Most TVs contain a V-chip you can access via the remote through the main or set-up menu to block specific shows or to prevent kids from seeing content that has a particular rating or airs after a certain time. Netflix also has parental controls that can be found and set in the "Manage Profiles" section of "Your Account."

Whenever possible, watch TV with your kids, and use the content to start a conversation. "Talk about portrayals of girls and women, or nonwhite characters, for example," Lieberman says. "Is there bias in the way people are portrayed? Parents can do a lot to help their children interpret, understand, and critique media." ■



Find more strategies to keep kids safe online: connectsafely.com, stopbullying.gov

Find guidance on TV and movie content: fosi.org, commonsensemedia.org, kids-in-mind.com