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Use devices to enhance family time

The Straits Times · 25 Jan 2021 · C3 · Elisa Chia

How much screen time for kids is too much?



It is up to parents to decide what they are comfortable with, discuss with their children if they are old enough and implement those rules, says Dr Andrew Yee, who does research on how social and technological environments affect the health and well-being of young people.

Parents should note what kids are doing on phones and tablets. “Device use can differ in terms of content and context, and they are not all equal,” says Dr Yee, 32, a Faculty Early Career Award Fellow at the Singapore University of Technology and Design.

He notes that a young child could be passively watching sing-along videos such as Baby Shark or a Daniel Tiger’s Neighbourhood episode aimed at building socioemotional competency.

Older children could be experimenting with game design and storytelling on platforms such as Roblox or Minecraft or learning violent behaviours through games inappropriate for their age, he adds.

Cooperative video games such as Overcooked and Moving Out can be great ways for families to spend time together.

“These help kids learn how to communicate and work together to overcome various tasks. Hence the device use can be considered family time,” he says.

Dr Yee classifies his five-year-old son Noah’s activities into academic learning such as literacy and numeracy, family and social time, physical activity, free play, and eating. These can involve device use.

“In learning literacy, for example, I might bring in Pokemon videos as the names of Pokemon characters make for an engaging way of teaching phonics to children who like the show, or I might bring in a printed book to read,” he says.

“In family and social time, we might catch a Netflix movie or play video games together.”

Asked how parents can strike a balance between device use and classic playsets, he says they should not be limited by whether the activity is screen-based. Instead, look at what it involves and help kids find the balance in terms of achieving broader developmental goals, such as physical development, socioemotional competency or language and cognitive development.

He cites the example of a child playing a board game such as Ice Cool and a video game such as Overcooked with his or her family. Both will give quality family time. “The interactions, such as communicating, working together, competing and enjoying one another’s company, are very similar whether it is on a device or in physical form.”

That said, make sure your kids take frequent breaks from looking at screens and schedule outdoor play to protect their eyesight and help them develop physically.

But it would be a mistake to rely on devices to get children to sit still during meals or to calm them down when they get upset.

“Kids may end up depending on devices to manage their emotions rather than learning how to recognise, confront and regulate their feelings. Parents must be aware of this and to use devices in healthy ways.”