How much screen time is safe for children?

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Despite studies, research and recommendations, there are still no uniform international rules on how much screen time is safe for children.

Not only does every child have different needs, but by the time science has collected enough data to make a recommendation, technology and social norms are already several steps ahead.

But there are a few principles that doctors, psychologists, addiction researchers, and media educators agree on. These are closely linked to the stages of childhood development and follow the principle of precaution. The consensus: It is better to act on the scientifically based suspicion that electronic devices cause harm than to regret not doing so later.

The first years of life are for exploring the world

"Screen-free until age three" is the slogan for the first years of life in Germany. "At this stage, children do not yet need or understand screen content," says pediatrician Ulrike Gaiser, who co-authored the country's media guidelines for children.

The World Health Organization is less strict and recommends no more than one hour of screen time per day for children aged two and above. But it also says that less is better.

In the first one to two years of life, it is important for a child to explore its environment. During this phase, the child broadens its focus, Gaiser says. To do this, they must learn to control their attention themselves - and not be placed in front of something distracting.

Children should also learn early that it takes time for their needs to be met, she adds. That time passes between crying and their parents providing food. That you can't shape or make the world disappear with a swipe or the push of a button. Waiting and acceptance are basic life skills, Gaiser adds.

Screens rob children of time to develop

"Children perceive the world differently from adults," Jena University child psychologist Julia Asbrand says. This also applies to content in films or on social media. "For very young children, everything they see can be real in their imagination," she adds. "Of course that's scary! As a parent, it's good to pause and ask, 'What did you see there?' And, 'Do you have any questions about it?'"

Experts are concerned by the way that screen time replaces actual time in which children should develop their motor skills, interact with other people and gain social experience. Recent research shows that for every minute spent in front of a screen, children hear six fewer words from their parents. Added up over time, this amounts to a significant amount of vocabulary by the time a child graduates from high school.

The longer children sit alone in front of screens, the poorer their language skills will be later on. Reducing screen time also improves fine motor skills, attention, and social behavior.

Kindergarten: all about interaction and imagination

Before children start school, it's important for them to explore the world, have tactile experiences, orient themselves in space, and play with others - all for several hours a day, Gaiser says. Through play, they also learn that others sometimes have different ideas that require negotiation, assertiveness or acquiescence. And that sometimes these tactics still fail.

This phase is also important for developing imagination. Children need to learn to explore the world and shape it themselves. The less opportunity they have to create inner images, the harder this skill becomes to develop. That's why a maximum of 30 minutes of screen time is sufficient at this stage of life, Gaiser says.

Teaching values in elementary school

Between the ages of six and nine, children develop something like a moral compass for the first time, Gaiser says, and wonders: "Do we want to leave that to the internet?" This entails skills such as discipline, performance, and acquiring knowledge - and whether kids can rely on themselves for this or only on what they find on the internet. The recommendation in Germany is a maximum of 30 to 45 minutes of supervised screen time.

While clearly less screen time is better, nowadays many discussions take place digitally, child psychologist Asbrand says. "You trade one thing for another." If the child is not in the class WhatsApp group then they might be excluded, especially in the next phase of life, which should not be allowed to happen, she adds.

The difficulty of monitoring adolescents

Experts know that keeping children away from smartphones is unrealistic. The question is how to define healthy media use. In Germany, doctors recommend a maximum of 45 to 60 minutes of screen time during leisure time for 9- to 12-year-olds. For those between 12 and 16, a maximum of one to two hours, and between 16 and 18, about two hours.

During this time of individuation, it is all the more important to ask open questions and let children show you what they are looking at, Asbrand says. "One of the biggest problems is when children do things secretly and then encounter grooming, for example, which is when adults

Continued on page 56