

Unplugged playtime critical for youngsters

By Danielle Priem

For years, the nation's pediatric experts have advised parents to ban screens before age 2 and limit older kids to two hours daily. These rules from the American Academy of Pediatrics, however, date to 2011—just after the release of the first iPad.



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Now, 30 percent of kids touch their first screen while still wearing diapers. Three-fourths of teens have smartphones. These policies require an update, the organization admits. At a recent meeting of researchers, educators, and doctors, experts recognized the realities of today's digital world and offered these key points to guide parents through it.

For infants and toddlers: Children ages 2 and younger do not reap many benefits from technology. What's more, plunking toddlers in front of a TV or tablet reduces chatter with parents that's critical to brain development. Studies show even just having the TV on in the background reduces the number of words parents speak, meaning less learning for little ones.

That said, a total ban isn't necessary, the panel noted. Instead use screens for interaction and to enhance

communication. For instance, video chats with a traveling parent can boost language development in very young children.

For school-aged children: Once kids are a bit older, educational TV and apps can help kids learn, provided you choose wisely. Organizations like Common Sense Media review apps, games, and programs for educational quality.

Kids at this age should spend most of their time offline. Make a point to allow unplugged, unstructured playtime each day. This type of play helps kids develop creativity.

For teens: Allowing adolescents on social media can help them develop and form their identities. Teach your teens about appropriate online behavior. For instance, explain that sending suggestive messages or photos puts them at risk.

Create profiles yourself, or ask teens to show you what they do online. That way, you'll know what's happening in their virtual world. Take action if you see signs of cyberbullying.

At all ages: Setting smart limits on media usage can prevent harms, from obesity to troubled sleep to problems at school and home. One way to do it: create a family media use plan. Together, draft a document that lays down basic rules.

Consider:

- No screens in bedrooms.
- Unplugged family mealtimes.
- A "media curfew" before bedtime. Pick a time to plug all devices into a central charging station—and leave them there for the night.
- Sticking to age-appropriate content, consulting movie, game, and TV ratings.

Model proper media use yourself. For instance, put your phone

away during family dinners. And take advantage of digital tools to teach the same lessons and values you've always imparted on your kids. Skip violent TV programs in favor of those that foster empathy, kindness, and tolerance.

Danielle Priem recently joined the pediatric team at Barton Pediatrics.