

## The Trouble with “Screen Time” Rules

### Aims

Drawing upon interviews with 73 diverse families in London, this research analyses the widely influential American Academy of Pediatrics’ (AAP) “screen time” guidelines (issued in 1999 and updated in 2016) in relation to the existing evidence about parental mediation and the lived experience of families in the digital age. These screen time guidelines are examined and critiqued through an exploration of whether the screen time rules and guidelines match up with reports of parents’ on-the-ground practices.

### Key Findings

- The AAP rules are problematic in two ways – first, when one tries to match these recommendations to the available evidence there are often gaps, and second when one tries to match them to the practical realities of family life, again there is often a mismatch. There are also methodological issues, for example not all kinds of screen or screen time are equivalent, so findings cannot simply be merged. The AAP technical report primarily relies on correlational evidence, and so is unable to draw conclusions that screen time has a straightforward causal effect on children.
- The reach and influence of the AAP rules means the very idea of screen time looms large over parents’ heads. Time and again parents of young children told of a struggle to balance the convenience of screen time with their worries about being a “good” parent. Parents use the rules as a yardstick to measure themselves against, often judging themselves, or others, to be failing if their child watches TV or plays video games “too much,” without a deeper rationale for why they made this judgement (Evans et al., 2011).
- While parents’ limiting of children’s screen time is tricky, it can be helpful for discipline – a motivational punishment or reward. For some parents, screen time is simply a necessity.
- Parents are often more concerned about the day-to-day impact and possibilities of media use rather than about abstract future harms. Parents viewed the potential negative effects of screen time as both physical and psychological. Many parents, worried that their children might (or had already) become “addicted” or “obsessed” with screens. But even in this there is some ambivalence, with parents describing learning opportunities provided by such screen time.
- The current screen time debate elides differences in resources, support of special needs which exist, and which might affect the reasons for use of screen based digital media.
- This research suggests that support for parents needs to focus on helping them understand that the content of what their children watch and do on and with screens, the context of where they watch and do, and the connections they make (or do not make) while watching and doing. Rather than seeing themselves as policing children’s media use, parents need to be encouraged to think critically about how they can support positive uses and minimize negative consequences.

### Policy Context

While carrying out this research project, the AAP recognised the significant changes in children’s media landscape over recent years and decided to update its review of the evidence regarding screen time “harms”

so as to revise its recommendations to parents (Chassiakos et al., 2016). However, in key respects the recommendations remained at odds with the experiences and concerns that were found in family homes. This led the researchers to meanwhile also produce a policy brief for UK stakeholders that highlighted the poor fit between screen time rules and the messy realities of family life (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2016).

### Methodology

Qualitative interviews were carried out with 73 families in London, UK. These were conducted face-to-face, usually in family homes but sometimes at another location convenient to the parent. We balanced a purposive sample of parents for whom the digital offered something distinctive (Blum-Ross & Livingstone, 2017) with others whom we recruited as a cross-section of families by age of child (from birth to 17), ethnicity and socio-economic status.

### Background

The screen time guidelines produced by the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), originally produced in 1999 and updated in 2016 (Council on Communications and Media, 2016a, Council on Communications and Media, 2016b), have been highly influential. In the interviews for this research some version of these guidelines frequently surfaced unattributed, even though they were originally developed for American parents trying to manage their children's television viewing. As other countries are now following the US in developing their own guidelines, often building on the work of the AAP, our critique therefore has a wider applicability (Australian Government Department of Health, 2017; Canadian Paediatric Society, 2017).

### Source

Blum-Ross, A. & Livingstone, S. (2018). The trouble with "screen time" rules. In G. Mascheroni, C. Ponte, & A. Jorge (eds.), *Digital parenting. The challenges for families in the digital age* (p. 179-187). Göteborg: Nordicom.  
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