

Too much toddler screen time tied to worse social, motor skills by kindergarten

Lisa Rapaport

(Reuters Health) - Toddlers who spend too much time in front of televisions, tablets, and smartphones may not become as skilled at problem-solving, communication and other skills needed for school as their peers who have less screen time, a new study suggests.

Children in the study had an average of 17 hours of screen time a week when they were two years old, and 25 hours a week by the time they were three. This far exceeds one-hour daily limit recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics to allow children enough time for creative play and interactions with caregivers and peers.

“Screen time is most often a sedentary or passive behavior, with very few learning opportunities,” said lead study author Sheri Madigan of the University of Calgary and the Alberta Children’s Hospital Research Institute in Canada.

Part of the problem is that toddlers’ brains aren’t developed enough to apply things they learn from two-dimensional screens to what they experience in three-dimensional life, Madigan said by email.

“If they see someone building blocks on the screen, this doesn’t help them build blocks in real life,” Madigan said.

Another reason screen time can slow development is that the hours passed in front of televisions and tablets mean kids may miss out on chances to scribble with crayons or play games that help them learn how to kick a ball or take turns.

“These are critical skills in early childhood, because mastery of skill is needed before further development can occur,” Madigan said. “You need to walk before you can run, and you need to know how to hold a crayon before you can write your name.”

Compared to toddlers with less screen time, two-year-olds with more screen time tended to score lower, at age three, on developmental screening tests that measured communication, fine and gross motor skills, problem solving, and social skills.

The same pattern was seen for three-year-olds. The more screen time they had, the poorer they scored on developmental tests when they reached age five.

For the study, published in JAMA Pediatrics, researchers surveyed 2,441 mothers in Canada about how much time their kids spent on typical weekdays and weekends watching television, movies or videos; playing video games; or using computers, tablets or other devices like smartphones.

Mothers also completed questionnaires about children's progress with a range of developmental milestones during the course of the study.

The researchers also tested for reverse causation, that is, they wanted to know whether parents chose to put toddlers with developmental problems in front of screens more than toddlers without developmental problems. This didn't appear to be true, however - suggesting that the screen time might have contributed to developmental delays, and not that developmental delays might have contributed to kids getting extra screen time.

The study wasn't a controlled experiment designed to prove whether or how screen time early in childhood might directly impact development outcomes later in childhood.

Still, it adds to a growing body of evidence linking limited screen time to better cognitive, physical and psychological development in early childhood, said Gary Goldfield, a researcher at the University of Ottawa who wasn't involved in the study.

"The majority of children of all ages exceed the screen time recommendations, so parents have to be more strict setting healthy limits," Goldfield said by email.

"For those exceeding guidelines, parents can buffer some of the negative effects of screen time by ensuring it does not interfere with adequate sleep (which it often does in older children and youth), daily physical activity or active play, and plenty of enriching, stimulating and positive face to face interaction with parents and caregivers, and of course other children," Goldfield added.

When kids do get screen time, it should be high-quality programming that's designed with development in mind, said Dr. Suzy Tomopoulos of Hassenfeld Children's Hospital at NYU Langone and Bellevue Hospital Center in New York City.

"Parents can minimize risks if screen time is child-appropriate, has educational content, and viewed together with the child," Tomopoulos, who wasn't involved in the study, said by email. "Parents should also turn off the television when no one is watching, during mealtimes and one hour before bedtime."

SOURCE: <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/article-abstract/2722666>

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<https://www.reuters.com/article/us-health-kids-screen-time/too-much-toddler-screen-time-tied-to-worse-social-motor-skills-by-kindergarten-idUSKCN1PM2JS>

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Some pregnant women don't believe cannabis is harmful to their fetus

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Up to one-third of pregnant women do not believe cannabis is harmful to their fetus, according to a new review by UBC researchers.

In some cases, women perceived a lack of communication from their health care providers about the risks of cannabis as an indication that the drug is safe to use during pregnancy.

The findings are outlined in a new review, published in the journal *Preventive Medicine* (<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0091743518303773>), in which UBC researchers sought to identify the latest evidence on women's perspectives on the health aspects of cannabis use during pregnancy and post-partum and whether their perceptions influence decision-making about using the drug.

"Our research suggests that, over the past decade, more women seem to be using cannabis during pregnancy than ever before, even though evidence of its safety is limited and conflicting," said lead author Hamideh Bayrampour, assistant professor in the UBC department of family practice. "As many jurisdictions around the world, including Canada, legalize cannabis, it's becoming increasingly important for public health officials to understand perceptions of cannabis use and to increase awareness of the health concerns around its use, especially for pregnant women."

For the review, researchers identified six studies, all conducted in the United States, which looked at women's perceptions about cannabis use during pregnancy.



Hamideh Bayrampour, Assistant Professor in the Department of Family Practice

Across the studies, the rate of cannabis use among pregnant women varied considerably. In a large U.S. population-based study, nearly four per cent of women self-reported using cannabis within the past month, while seven per cent self-reported using cannabis within the past year. However, in another study that saw researchers also test hair and urine samples, the rate of cannabis use increased to 28 per cent.

Pregnant cannabis users were more likely to be under the age of 25, unemployed, single or uninsured, African American, and to have low income and education, or use other substances such as tobacco and alcohol. A diagnosis of anxiety or depression was also associated with cannabis use during pregnancy.

“It’s becoming increasingly important for public health officials to understand perceptions of cannabis use.”

— Hamideh Bayrampour, lead study author

As for patterns of use, the researchers found that cannabis use rates were highest during the first trimester (7.4 per cent) and lowest during the third trimester (1.8 per cent). Most pregnant users reported using cannabis to treat nausea early in their pregnancy.

In one study involving 306 pregnant women, 35 per cent reported being cannabis users when they realized they were pregnant. Two-thirds of those women quit after finding out they were pregnant, but among those who continued to use cannabis, half reported using almost daily or twice a week.

When women were asked about their perception of general harm associated with cannabis use, 70 per cent of both pregnant and non-pregnant cannabis users responded that they perceived slight or no risk of harm. In another study, when asked if they believed cannabis is harmful to a baby during pregnancy, 30 per cent of pregnant women responded “no.” When women were asked to identify substances most likely to harm the baby during pregnancy, 70 per cent chose alcohol and 16 per cent chose tobacco, while only two per cent chose cannabis.

While research on the health effects of cannabis is limited, some studies have shown an increased risk of problems for pregnant women, including anemia, low birth weight, stillbirth and newborn admission to the neonatal intensive care unit. Due to the risk of potential problems, many professional organizations, including the Society of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists of Canada, recommend women not use cannabis when trying to conceive, during pregnancy and while breastfeeding.

Still, some women reported that not having specific counselling provided about the risks of cannabis use suggest that the drug is safe.

“One of our review findings revealed that some people don’t consider cannabis to be a drug,” said Bayrampour. “With this in mind, it’s especially important for health care providers to ask specific questions about cannabis use during pregnancy and breastfeeding to help spark a productive conversation about the potential health impacts and to help support women in their decision to reduce use and quit.”