

# MEDIA GUIDE FOR PARENTS OF INFANTS AND TODDLERS



**Center on Media  
and Child Health**



# Center on Media and Child Health

## Media Guide for Parents of Infants and Toddlers

© Boston Children's Hospital 2020

All Rights Reserved

For permissions, contact:

Center on Media and Child Health

300 Longwood Avenue

Mailstop: CMCH BCH3186

Boston, MA 02115

[cmch@childrens.harvard.edu](mailto:cmch@childrens.harvard.edu)

617-355-5420

[www.cmch.tv](http://www.cmch.tv)

# Introduction

Video games. Social media. TV. Videos. Music. Apps. Today's children are growing up in an environment filled with media and technology, and it can be hard to know how it is affecting their lives in positive and negative ways. With games and videos created especially for children under the age of 2, infants and toddlers use media on a regular basis:

Use	Time	Ownership
97% of children have used a mobile device by the time they are 1.	Children under age 2 spend an average of 42 minutes per day using screen media.	42% of children aged 0 to 8 own their own tablet device.

You may have questions about your infant or toddler's media use, and you are not alone. Common questions we receive include:

1. Should I be concerned about my young children using screen media?
2. Will my child be left behind if they don't learn to use screen media at an early age?
3. Should I feel guilty for allowing my infant or toddler to play with a mobile device to keep them occupied?
4. What kind of media content should my child be engaging with at this age?

Using information provided by pediatricians, researchers, and other experts, we have created a guide that will provide you with tips and strategies to help balance healthy media use with other activities in your young child's life.

Our guide is broken down into three sections, with resources at the end:

1. Infants, Toddlers, and Media
2. Parents and Media
3. Using Media Together

# Infants, Toddlers, and Media

In this section, you will learn about some of the risks and benefits of young children's media use, as well as information you can use to help your child get the most from the media they use.

## How can digital media affect the health and development of my infant/toddler?

Smartphones, tablets, and other forms of technology are easy for infants and toddlers to hold and use. Seeing your child swipe, click and play on a touchscreen shows you how incredibly well-designed these devices are! That said, although they may be easy for your child to use, interacting with technology can affect their health and development in both positive and negative ways:

### Language Skills

- Infants and toddlers acquire language skills rapidly during this stage, and they learn best from hearing language directed at them. Be sure to talk and read aloud to your child.
- Introducing music to an infant or toddler is an excellent way to encourage their brain development. Listening to music can help infants and toddlers with their ability to hear, recognize, and use different sounds.

### Physical Development

- Sleep is crucial for infants and toddlers. Make sure that their sleep is not interrupted by loud music, device notifications, or videos. Sleep disruptions caused by screens can take away from the quality of a child's sleep and may make it harder for them to fall asleep. White noise machines or apps may help your child fall and stay asleep, but they can cause hearing damage if they are too loud.

- Children who grow up with a TV in their bedroom have a higher chance of being obese. Be sure to keep all screens outside of the bedroom.
- Digital eyestrain is a potential hazard of using screen media for prolonged periods of time. Make sure that any screens are not too close to your child's face (the American Academy of Ophthalmology recommends holding it at least 18-24 inches away), and take breaks every 20 minutes.
- Researchers found that children who were exposed to higher levels of screen time at 24 months of age did poorer on developmental screening tests at 36 months of age.

### Cognitive Development

- Infants and toddlers are actively developing their ability to interact with objects and people in their physical environment. Encourage playful activities that help them see, touch, and hear different things in real life, not on a tablet or phone.

Children grow and develop rapidly in their first years of life, and are constantly learning from their caregivers and environment. Research shows that it is faster and easier for young to learn by interacting with caregivers when exploring the world around them.



## What should I know about “screen time” when it comes to my infant or toddler?

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends that toddlers younger than 18 to 24 months old should avoid using digital media entirely other than video chatting. Toddlers who are 18 to 24 months old can use high-quality digital media, and parents should watch and use the digital media with them.

The reality of our busy lives can make it difficult to meet these expectations, especially when digital media can help soothe a fussy infant or toddler. Instead of feeling guilty for handing your toddler your phone while waiting in line at the grocery store, consider how you are using media as a tool to help you accomplish a specific goal in the moment when there may not be an alternative activity available.

Because technology has only recently become a large part of children's everyday lives, there is not a lot of research on the effects of long-term of technology use on young children's health and development. But there are well-researched activities that can benefit their development. Many of these can engage or distract a child when they are fussy, bored or you need a break. According to the National Association for the Education of Young Children:

Infants	One-year-olds	Two-year-olds
Use toys that they can hold, suck on, or make noise with (such as rattles), or toys they can look at (such as picture books or hanging mobiles).	Use toys that they can create or build with (such as crayons or blocks), or play them music or nursery rhymes from your tablet or phone.	Use toys that help them practice their fine motor skills (such as puzzles or balls).

If you just can't think of a specific activity, simply talk to your infant or toddler. You can talk to them about anything, the things you see, the colors around you, or sing a favorite song. Remember, you are your child's favorite person, interacting with them in any way is fun for them and can benefit their development.

As you will learn later in this guide, video chatting with young children is often an exception to screen time rules. Video chat apps are often used for maintaining and strengthening relationships, especially with faraway friends and family.



# What types of media should I choose for my infant or toddler?

With an endless amount of mobile apps, videos, and music to choose from, it can be difficult to determine what will actually help your child learn and grow. Children under 18 months are unlikely to learn from media, so it's important to set your expectations. If you choose to let your child use apps under 18 months, pick ones that are simple to use (so your child doesn't get frustrated), don't have on-screen ads (these can take your child to unknown websites), and have some creativity to it (drawing and painting apps can be especially fun). For children over the age of 18 months, keep these tips in mind when choosing media:

## Apps

- The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshops suggests taking three steps when choosing an app: identify your child's learning needs, search under Education categories in app stores, and read app reviews from trusted parenting websites and in the app store prior to letting your toddler use an app.
- Common Sense Media suggests avoiding any apps that show violent or aggressive behavior, scary images, sex, swearing or threatening speech, or any other risky or unhealthy behavior.
- Researchers suggest looking for apps that support four main 'pillars' of learning: make sure the app is active, engaging, meaningful, and social. See our Resources section for more guidance.

## Music

- Choose music that does not contain inappropriate language or themes, and look for songs that your infant or toddler can babble along with.

## Television

- Research shows that children under 18 months do not learn from TV aside from some language skill development.
- The American Academy of Pediatrics suggests choosing high quality programming for toddlers over 18-24 months, such as Sesame Street, and watching with them (see Using Media Together section).

- Zero to Three suggests choosing television shows and videos where the characters speak to the child directly, and ask the child to participate (such as repeating words).

Just because an app or video claims to be “educational,” it does not necessarily mean that this is true. Very few app developers or video creators test their products to determine whether they will truly help a child build skills.



# Parents and Media

In this section, you will learn how your own media use can affect your infant or toddler and how best to manage your use and time spent with media.

## How does my own media use affect my infant/toddler?

What we do with media and how we use technology can affect our infant or toddler in both positive and negative ways. Below are several common ways parents of young children use media and some key points to keep in mind to help you optimize your use for you and your infant or toddler

### Using media during feeding times

Using the time you spend breast feeding or giving your child a bottle to also scroll social media, text or watch a video is tempting and common. Unfortunately, these kinds of behaviors distract parents from interacting with their child during this time. When checking a phone, parents adopt a “still face” expression, which infants find alarming in comparison to sensitive and responsive caregiving. Maintaining eye contact with your infant while feeding promotes parent-child bonding and helps your infant feel calm. Instead of turning to media during meals, consider:

- Putting away phones and other technology during feedings
- Enabling “Do Not Disturb” or silencing devices for uninterrupted one-on-one time with your infant
- Singing or talking to your infant while feeding

### Sharenting

Sharenting is when parents use social media to share pictures, videos, and other information about their children. This practice can be beneficial as it is a way faraway friends and family can stay connected to what is happening in the child’s life. Social media can also be a way for parents to receive parenting advice, tips, and support from one another. While social media

can create a community of caring for parents and families, there are concerns about privacy and your child's feelings, consider:

- Being selective of the information you post about your child on social media. For example, do not post naked images, detailed information about your child's birthday, location, school, or full name.
- How your child might react to a post when they are older. For example avoid posting or sharing content that may embarrass them or cause them to be ashamed in the future.

### Background television

Since your child is not directly watching a TV or video that is on in the background, you may think they are not affected. However, research shows that having a TV or video playing in the background decreases play and the quality of your interactions with your child. Background TV can also take away from your child's language development. Instead of having a TV or video playing in the background, consider:

- Turning off the television when your infant or toddler is at play
- Scheduling dedicated time to watch TV or videos when your child is not present
- Turning off the television if no one is directly watching.

### Modelling media use

Infants and toddlers are very observant, and are continually learning from you and what you do. Keep in mind what you want your child to learn from you regarding your own media use and model that behavior. Starting this at a young age will help shape your child's own interests in and interactions with media and technology. While none of us are able to model best media use behaviors all the time, we can continuously try our best explain our choices to our children, consider:

- Avoiding media use in your daily routines, such as mealtimes, bedtimes, or when playing with your child.
- Explaining work-related media use to your infant or toddler, such as "Mommy needs to check her work email on her phone for a minute and

will put it away after.” This will help set you and your child up for good communication about media use in the future.

- Plan how you want to use media around your infant or toddler and set limits ahead of time as much as possible. This will help you model positive behaviors for your child.

Infants and toddlers are very observant, and are continually learning from you and what you do. Keep in mind what you want your child to learn from you regarding your own media use and model that behavior



# Using Media Together

In this section you will learn how to best use media with your infant or toddler as well as alternative, screen-free activity ideas.

## How can I use media with my child in ways that support their health and development?

Engaging in media alongside your child is an effective way for them to get the most out of the experience. Below are several ways you can use media with your infant or toddler that will support their healthy development and learning.

### Co-view

- Watch TV and videos with your child and talk about what is happening. Your child is continually learning from their interactions with you, including your reactions to different media.
- Babies are especially attuned to parents' feelings and can form associations between your emotional responses and what is in the environment, including what is on the screen. Think about how the media you are choosing will most likely make you feel, knowing that your child will pick up on, and be affected by your emotional state.
- Talking to them about what is happening will help you be more aware of your own emotions and help your baby pick up on the social cues around them.

### Video chat

- Video chat with your child and friends and family. Using an app such as Skype and FaceTime can be a great way for your infant or toddler to connect and stay in touch with faraway family and friends. Research shows that children 12-25 months old learn better from real time

interactive video chat with adults than from educational videos, and the AAP includes video chatting as an exception to screen time limits for young children.

### Co-read

- Read e-books with your child. Electronic or e-books on devices such as tablets, e-readers and even smartphones are popular as they offer additional features that traditional paper books do not.
- While clickable animations, funny sounds, and embedded videos are fun and new, they can distract from the narrative being told and your child's ability to learn from it.
- To help your child get the most out of any ebook, sit down with them and go through all the fun interactive features first. Then, go back to the beginning and read through the story, explaining how the features fit into the narrative. This will help your child form the building blocks of understanding stories. If the interactive features are still distracting, some e-books allow you to turn them off to better focus on the narrative.

### Create a Family Media Plan

- Create a family media plan through the AAP's helpful online guide. For families with children 18-24 months (and older) this tool can help optimize the time you spend with media including scheduling media-free times, setting up media-free zones in your house (such as bedrooms) and providing tips about how to best use media. You can find a link to the Family Media Use plan in the "Resources" section of this guide.

## What are some alternative screen-free activities I can do with my child?

Engaging in screen-free activities with your child can be a fun way for you both to bond and support your child's healthy growth and development. Below are several media-free activity ideas for you and your child to do.

### Sing or listen to music together

- Singing to your child or with them is a wonderful way to support their vocabulary learning and also have fun together. Research shows that

listening to music encourages their brain development, so choose music that is appropriate for your child and that you will enjoy.

### Play together

- Playing with your child, whether using toys during tummy-time or dressing up with your toddler for an imaginary tea party is a wonderful way to engage them in a media-free activity and have fun! Research shows that play can support children's social, brain, and physical development. For specific play ideas, see our Resource sections

### Make art together

- Whether using sidewalk chalk, molding clay, chunky crayons or finger paints, making art with your child can help them develop motor skills, decision making skills, and supports their creativity.

# Resources

In this section you will find links to additional tips and techniques from reputable experts in the area of media and child health.

## **Family Time with Apps**

A brochure providing guidance in choosing and interacting with apps. *Created by the Joan Ganz Cooney Center, the research group within Sesame Workshop (the non-profit organization behind “Sesame Street”)*

## **What's age appropriate at 0-2?**

A description of developmental milestones children reach in this age group, as well as a list of what aspects of media are appropriate for children in this age category. *Created by Common Sense Media, a non-profit organization focused on education and media use in children.*

## **Beyond Twinkle, Twinkle: Using Music with Infants and Toddlers**

A resource about how music positively impacts development, with suggestions of how to incorporate music into home activities. *Created by Zero to Three, a non-profit organization with a focus on early childhood development.*

## **Five Tips to Make the Most of Video Chats**

List of how to take advantage of video chatting's potential for young children's learning. *Created by Zero to Three, a non-profit organization with a focus on early childhood development.*

## **The Magical Effect of Watching TV With Your Child**

Information about the benefits of co-viewing, along with suggestions of how to interact with children while watching television. *Written by PBS Kids, a non-profit children's programming organization.*

## **How to Read an E-Book With Your Child**

Guidance of how to approach e-book reading with young children. *Created by Reading Rockets, a national public media literacy initiative.*

## **The Importance of Art in Child Development**

Information about the benefits of children engaging in the creation of art from PBS. *Created by PBS a non-profit children's programming organization.*

### **Healthy Digital Media Use Habits for Babies, Toddlers & Preschoolers**

Description of how media use can affect children's health, and tips to manage screen time and media exposure. *Written by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American professional association of pediatricians.*

### **Family Media Plan**

Resource for creating a personalized family media plan to guide and structure children's media use. *Developed by the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American professional association of pediatricians.*

### **Technoference?**

Brief video describing "technoference," or the disconnect that technology can cause between parents and children. *Created by Child Trends, a non-profit research organization focused on child development.*

### **PBS Kids: Age 2**

Offers a variety of ways to engage children in play and learning, such as role play and exploration activities. *Created by PBS Kids, a non-profit children's programming organization.*

### **Learning Through Play**

Provides a variety of playful activities to participate in with young children, all of which include a suggested age range and length of time for completion. *Created by Sesame Street in Communities, a program within Sesame Workshop (the non-profit organization behind "Sesame Street"), that aims to provide tools and resources for communities to help children grow and develop.*

### **Screen Time Guidance: A Psychologist's Perspective**

Informational articles and blog posts about the research surrounding screen time and its effects on children's development, written by Dr. Kathy Hirsh-Pasek. *Hirsh-Pasek is faculty in the Department of Psychology at Temple University who researches ways in which play contributes to learning.*

### **Screen Use for Kids: American Academy of Ophthalmology**

Article providing information regarding how screen use affects children's vision, including a section with tips on how to prevent long-term impacts. *Written by the American Academy of Ophthalmology, the American professional association of ophthalmologists.*

### **Good Toys for Young Children By Age and Stage**

Suggestions of developmentally-appropriate toys for children in each stage of development, including 0-6 months, 7-12 months, 1-year-olds, 2-year-olds, and 3- to 6-year-olds. *Created by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, a non-profit organization that advocates for high-quality learning experiences for young children.*