

Examiner Column from Dr. Rosana Salvaterra, Medical Officer of Health Peterborough Public Health

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Protecting Children from the Digital Storm

This summer brought a house full of young grandchildren and the discovery that the television was magical in keeping little ones quiet while others still slept. However, each time I reached for the remote, tiny pangs of guilt stirred in my chest: how safe is screen time for young children? Was I unintentionally opening up Pandora's Box?

The Canadian Pediatric Society (CPS) released evidence-informed guidelines this past June to help parents, and grandparents like me, safely navigate their children through what has become a round-the-clock storm of digital media. The bottom line is that children under two years of age should not get any screen time as they do not absorb the content, and that excessive screen time in children under five years is associated with negative health, speech development and behavioural effects. The CPS recommends an approach that I'll call "The Three Rs": Reduce, Re-think, and Role Model.

The first, "Reduce", is good advice for all ages: reduce screen time in general to leave more time for the face-to-face interactions with parents and others that children need for a number of reasons. Don't use smartphones to reward or distract little ones or they will become upset if refused. Be careful about establishing routines of sedentary behaviour which may only worsen as the child grows up. The CPS reported that only 15% of Canadian preschoolers are meeting the recommended limit of only one hour of screen time per day. Avoiding screen time for at least one hour before bedtime will improve a child's sleep. In fact, parents would be wise to keep all electronic devices away from bedrooms, as well as meal times, as a rule for all ages.

"Re-think" refers to actions that parents can take to limit harm and build on the positive effects that screen-delivered content can have on children. Watching with children provides adults opportunities to build skills and select programming to avoid commercials or content that imparts negative messaging about gender, body image, violence and diversity. Parents and children can choose programs together, and select content from commercial-free sources like publicly funded broadcasters or subscription services like Netflix. By being present and engaged, parents can use screen time to promote learning and even physical activity, as one study of active video games found.

"Role Model" begins with an assessment by parents of current screen habits to develop a plan where devices or TV may or may not be used. Parents need to assist their children in avoiding or questioning the advertising messages, stereotyping or other negative messages that may be transmitted digitally. Role-modelling the responsible use of devices and incorporating screen-free activities like outdoor play, hands-on arts and crafts or reading are all part of a parent's role in shaping the future behaviours of his



or her children. Parents are role modelling respect for their children and others when they give their child attention rather than letting their phone demand to be more important than the people they are with.

Turning on the TV is seductive, I found, both as a parent and now as a grandparent. It can buy precious time to prepare a meal or grab a quick shower on days that can seem endless. The CPS guideline assures parents and grandparents alike that there is no evidence supporting the early introduction of technology at a young age. And too much screen time can mean less time for relationship building and learning – the building blocks to healthy growth and development. Handle screens with care, and you will be protecting your children at a most critical time in their lives.

For more information about screen time, visit <http://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/screen-time-and-young-children>.

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For more information about Dr. Salvaterra, her bio is available on this webpage:

<http://www.peterboroughpublichealth.ca/about-us/about-us-2/our-medical-officer-of-health/>