



Young children's screen time: The complex role of parent and child factors



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ABSTRACT

Many children are spending more time with screen media than has been recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics. There is evidence that parent television use is associated with higher levels of child television time, but we know little about what predicts children's media use with other technology. Using a nationally representative sample of more than 2300 parents of children ages 0–8, children's time spent with four digital media devices – television, computers, smartphones, and tablet computers – was examined. Results from linear regression analyses indicate across all four platforms that parents' own screen time was strongly associated with child screen time. Further analyses indicate that child screen time use appears to be the result of an interaction between child and parent factors and is highly influenced by parental attitudes. Results suggest that policymakers should consider the family environment as a whole when developing policy to influence children's screen media use at home.

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Long gone are the days when a sole television set sat in a living room surrounded by children, parents, and grandparents. Today, 96% of families have at least one television, and 36% of children age 8 and under have a television in their bedroom (Rideout, 2013). Beyond television, children have access to a range of digital media in their home that allow them to stream television content, play games, search the Internet, and engage in other types of screen-based activities. In just the past 2 years, mobile media devices like smartphones and tablets have increased dramatically with 75% of families now owning some type of mobile device (Rideout, 2013). In an age when more families of young children own a smartphone (63%) than not and with tablet device ownership at 40% (Rideout, 2013), it is important to examine what factors are associated with children's technology use of screen media devices.

Many studies have explored predictors of child screen time based on concerns that “too much” use results in negative consequences and the idea that determining what predicts use could lead to better interventions to reduce child screen time (e.g., Bleakley, Jordan, & Hennessy, 2013; Lee, Bartolic, & Vandewater, 2009). These studies largely focus on demographic factors like child age (e.g., Rideout, 2011), race (e.g., Rideout, Wartella, & Lauricella, 2011), and socioeconomic status or parent education (e.g., Bittman, Rutherford, Brown, & Unsworth, 2011) and have demonstrated that these variables are predictive of child screen time, particularly for television. However, few studies have examined newer mobile media devices or the more psychosocial factors that may influence children's media use more generally. Thus, this study uses a nationally representative sample of parents of children age 0 to 8 years to examine the relation between child age and parent variables, including parent screen media use and media use attitudes, and child

time spent using television, computers, smartphones, and tablet computers.

Parent media use and attitudes

Children's time with media technology can be explained using two different theoretical perspectives. First, Bandura (1977) posits that learning and behavior occur as a result of observing behaviors. Young children spend much of their early years watching and learning from their parents and siblings in their home. Children observe as their parents cook dinner, interact with each other, and use media. Furthermore, with more individualized media use, young children likely watch their parents model media use in a range of scenarios throughout the day and with multiple devices. With increased access to multiple types of mobile technology devices, children may no longer need to wait for a parent to finish using a device in order to imitate the modeled behavior. For example, a parent may be using a smartphone to find a recipe for dinner and a child could be mimicking that exact behavior on a tablet simultaneously.

Beyond modeling media use for their children, parents' own media use and attitudes about the impact of media use may set the stage for how the home media environment is created. According to Bronfenbrenner (1979), child development occurs in a series of concentric systems. The microsystem is the system that directly impacts the child and includes the child's family, peers, and school. Of particular importance is the way in which the developing child experiences the different interactions, activities, and roles within their microsystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Bronfenbrenner (1979) explains that not all

activities or experiences in the microsystem play equal roles in the development of the child. Some behaviors or actions only occur infrequently or are less significant, whereas other activities are considered “molar” in that they are forms of behavior and can have substantial influences on development. Given the vast amount of time that adults spend with media technology and its presence across the various contexts within the child’s ecological system, it is reasonable to suggest that parental media use may be a molar activity as it is ongoing, something that the child repeatedly sees the parent and others engage with, and something that may be used together by parent and child, such as co-watching TV or co-playing a game on a tablet device. Thereby the parents’ own media use and attitudes toward media technology may directly influence the home life and the media experiences of the young child.

Evidence demonstrates that most (83%) parents of children age 6 and under use some sort of screen media in a typical day (Rideout & Hamel, 2006), spending, on average, an hour and a half watching TV and an hour and a half using a computer. Supporting social cognitive theory and Bronfenbrenner’s ecological model, research demonstrates that parents’ media habits likely influence those of their young children (Bleakley et al., 2013). This is particularly evident when parents are heavier media users (e.g., Rideout & Hamel, 2006; Woodard & Gridina, 2000). Children whose parents use screen media for more than 2 hours per day spend an average of 28 minutes more per day watching TV compared to children of parents who watch less than 2 hours per day (Rideout & Hamel, 2006). More recent research indicates that children are more likely to watch more than 4 hours of TV per day if their parents spend more time watching TV (Jago, Fox, Page, Brockman, & Thompson, 2010). To date, no study has examined how parents’ specific use of new screen media technology like computers and mobile devices relate to their child’s use of these devices. Therefore, in this study we predict:

H1. Parent time with media technologies will be positively associated with the amount of time the child spends with the same type of technology.

Parents’ own technology use and attitudes toward technology use will likely influence the home environment and the child. In addition to the microsystem, the child is influenced by the mesosystem, exosystem, and macrosystem (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). These other systems impact the child less directly, but are still influential. The macrosystem is the broader cultural attitudes, beliefs, or ideologies of the family members and those around the child. The ideas and beliefs that filter through the systems via the parents likely influence the ways in which parents think about and value media in the home. From this perspective, family characteristics including parental attitudes and morals about media use may play a role in children’s technology use by filtering through the various systems around the child and impacting the microsystem directly as a function of the home media environment.

Parents in the United States express mixed attitudes toward media, especially toward television. In 2006, parents of children 6 and under were closely divided between those who said TV “mostly helps children’s learning” (38%) and those who said it “mostly hurts children’s learning” (31%; Rideout & Hamel, 2006). Parent attitudes are more positive toward computers; almost 70% of parents think that computers “help learning” (Rideout & Hamel, 2006). Research by Vandewater et al. (2007) found that for younger (0–2 years) and slightly older (5–6 years) children, positive parental attitudes toward media were significant predictors of whether the child watched more TV than recommended by the 2001 American Academy of Pediatrics, Committee on Public Education (2001). Further, a recent study of preschool-aged children found that parent attitudes and beliefs about children’s media use predicted how much time their child spent with screen media (Cingel & Krcmar, 2013).

If parents believe that watching TV, using the computer, and utilizing smartphones and tablets have positive impacts on their children’s

cognitive, emotional, and physical development, they may further encourage their children to use screen technology or be less likely to limit exposure. Unlike parents of older children and teens, parents of younger children still have control over much of what their children do in their home; therefore their own attitudes about the technology may play a very powerful role in their children’s amount of use. As such, we hypothesize:

H2. Child screen time for each technology will be positively associated with parental attitudes about each specific technology’s impact.

The role of the child

Among children from birth to age 8, research consistently shows that very young children spend less time with media than older children (Condry, 1989; Rideout, 2011; Rideout & Hamel, 2006). Most of the research has focused on TV and indicates that time spent watching TV/DVDs plateaus between 2 and 3 years at close to two hours per day (Rideout, 2011; Rideout & Hamel, 2006). Time spent on computers also increases with age. Infant use of computers is largely non-existent but children between the ages of 2 and 4 years spend 16 minutes per day and children between 5 and 8 years spend 24 minutes per day using a computer (Rideout, 2011). Among all children age 8 and under, time spent on mobile media increases slightly, but not significantly with age (Rideout, 2011). As of 2013, the number of children who have used a mobile device for any media activity increased for all three age groups; 38% of all children under 2, 80% of children 2- to 4- years old, and 83% of 5- to 8-years-old (Rideout, 2010). Access to mobile media devices has increased significantly in the past 2 years, which may result in more young children using these devices for more time than before. Therefore we predict:

H3. Across all devices, child screen time will differ as a function of the child’s age, with older children exhibiting higher screen time across all platforms.

Again, given Bronfenbrenner’s theory (1979), we would expect that these parental variables and child demographic variables might be working together and influencing the amount of time children spend using media devices. For example, parent attitudes may vary as a function of the age of the child and may be partially influenced by the parents own technology behaviors. Therefore we ask:

RQ1: Is there an interaction between parent technology use, parent attitudes, and child age that predicts children’s media use for these four technology devices?

Present study

In order to understand factors that are associated with children’s screen use, this study uses a large nationally representative sample of United States parents to explore the role of parental and child variables on child media use across four screen media platforms: television, computer, smartphones, and tablets. Further, we examine how the interactions between parent technology use, parent attitudes, and child age are associated with child technology use.

Method

Participants

Participants were a sample of 2326 parents of children between the ages of 0 and 8 years who drawn from GfK’s probability-based Knowledge Panel of participants. The sample data was then weighted to resemble a U.S. population based on a set of study-specific post-stratification variables including gender, age, Race/Hispanic ethnicity,

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