

The Interplay Between Digital Media Use and Development



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KEYWORDS

• Media • Development • Social media • Television • Mobile • Video game • Family
• Advertising

KEY POINTS

- Today's children and adolescents spend their lives immersed in a digital media world.
- Surveys have consistently shown increased, earlier, and more diverse use of digital media.
- Media preferences and their effects depend greatly on cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development.
- Youth should be considered a vulnerable population to lurid content, consumer culture, advertising, media overuse, and addictive behaviors.

INTRODUCTION

The meaning of the word media has evolved over time. In short, media characterizes the way people communicate information, and is often a direct reflection of a society and its present culture. However, looked at more closely, media is a deceptively simple term that describes a vast and heterogeneous set of technologies and the content transmitted by these mediums.

Digital media has become an increasingly powerful influence on the lives of both adults and children. Modern technologies afford an almost limitless and instantaneous ability to be connected around the globe. The normal way of life increasingly both relies on, and draws people to, being able to access media quickly. It often involves simultaneous use of various devices, including televisions, computers, consoles,

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mobile telephones, and tablets. These devices enable streaming video, apps, video chat, games, texting, e-mail, and browsing the Internet.

Today's youth will spend their entire lives immersed in a complex web of online and digital technologies. Children and adolescents are tasked with fast adaptation. In 1970, children began to regularly watch television at 4 years of age, whereas in 2012 the average child was 4 months old when they first watched a television.¹ There have been escalations in overall daily use in the past decade, likely based on both preference and necessity. Specific use for tweens and teens is shown in Fig. 1.²

The overall data are clear: children and adolescents spend more time with media, have earlier use, and use digital media in more social and interactive ways. Leaders, scholars, and professionals entrusted with child welfare frequently provide a negative perspective. A quote from a recent publication regarding media and youth stated “enthusiasm and technological progress goes hand and hand with fear or even aversion of the same progress.”³ Risks regarding the introduction of new digital media into children's lives will always be opaque: controlled experiments will not occur for practical and ethical reasons. Similarly, the downfield benefits of such use are unknown. Thus it is unlikely that professionals tasked with promoting child welfare will ever be to predict precisely how new technologies and changing use patterns will affect development.

A balanced approach regarding the positive and negative effects of electronics and the media content is to first examine the individual child's cognitive, physical, and social-emotional development. Both risks and benefits need to be examined, with attention paid to what needs the use of digital media fill. The effects of electronic media on individual youth are highly variable.³

CHANGES IN YOUTHS' MEDIA DIET

A media diet encompasses many activities and ways of interacting with media.⁴ The use of more established older media, such as reading, radio, watching television, is categorized as mainly passive. Today's children and adolescents continue to consume large amounts of passive digital media content.⁵ However, electronics and media usage now includes highly social and interactive options and more

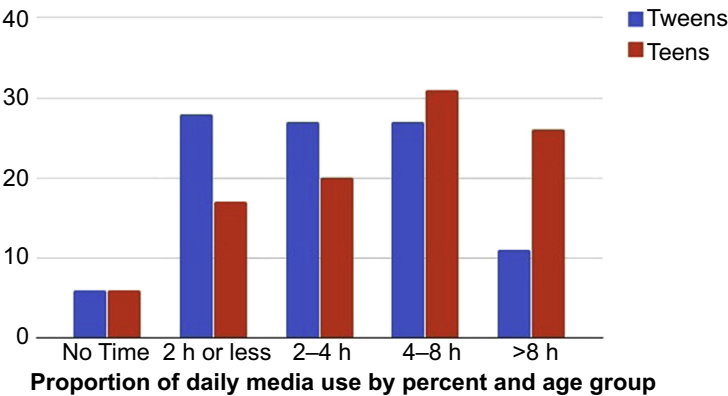


Fig. 1. Comparison of daily media use by age group. (Data from Common Sense Media. The common sense census: media use by tweens and teens. Available at: <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-tweens-and-teens>. Accessed May 6, 2017.)

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