

Should I feel guilty about all the screen time my kid is getting right now?

Our lives have changed quickly since shelter-in-place orders started. For parents like me (I have a 5-year-old and a 7-year-old)—who are suddenly assuming multiple roles as caregivers, teachers, and playmates—the same questions are on repeat: What in the world am I going to do with my kids all day from now until who knows when? And ... how many movies is it OK for them to watch in one day?



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Parents tend to think of screen use guidelines as a daily maximum amount that's acceptable. But if you look closely at popular recommendations, such as the ones from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the message—even before the coronavirus pandemic—is much more nuanced, and much less focused on time.

For a while now, media researchers have been advocating for a shift from screen quantity to content quality. If kids are engaged with high-quality content that stokes curiosity and fuels imagination, who's to say that should end when they've hit their screen limit? Research has also uncovered the importance of kids' experience with media, based on who uses media with kids (siblings? parents?), the purpose of the content (school? entertainment?), and who's talking with kids about what they're watching (*Daniel Tiger* and *Tiger King* both make for great mealtime conversation). In other words: Context matters, too.

Key to this nuance is understanding that all screens are not equal. We shouldn't act as though one hour of old *DuckTales* cartoons is the same as one hour of Zooming with a family member, or one hour of playing Fortnite with a friend, or one hour of drawing tutorials on YouTube. What a kid gets out of each is totally different, and satisfies different needs—and that's OK.

One of the things the current crisis has really brought home is how unbelievably social kids are, and want to be. In some ways, our adaptations to

staying at home have made us use technology in ways that are great for children: in service of relationships. Kids may be watching more Netflix and playing more video games than usual. But they're also video-chatting more, playing games with schoolmates, and even enjoying online playdates. Though nothing will ever replace in-person interaction for children, using tech to strengthen relationships is more important than ever.

With that in mind, here are some recommendations when it comes to using screens during this time:

- **Don't feel guilty.** We are living through a massive cultural shock. Families have enough stress to deal with, and counting screen minutes should be very low on the list of concerns for any of us.
- **Not all screens are created equal.** Worried that the online classroom is adding to your kid's screen time? Don't be. [Screen activities shouldn't be lumped together](#). Some are educational; some are just for fun. Some are high-quality; some are a guilty pleasure. What we do on screens and how we do it is more important than time spent.
- **Good content is key.** Choose age-appropriate, high-quality media and tech for your kids. Use our reviews to [find good content](#).
- **Get creative.** Let kids use your phone to shoot photos and videos and then go to town with stickers, slo-mo, and other editing tools. Give them a prompt like, "Take ten pictures of something round, and then write a story connecting each thing." Have them make their own memes, record a song, choreograph a dance video—anything that gets them using screens to fulfill their imaginations.
- **Use tech to bond.** Relationships are critical to kids' healthy development. Tech can and should help kids connect to friends and family, collaborate with each other, play, and share stories, pictures, and videos.
- **Talk about it.** We're in a unique position where kids are likely using screens more, and we may have more opportunities to [join them](#)—or at least engage with them about what they're watching and playing. Ask questions about their favorite games, shows, and characters. Discuss ideas and issues they read about or learn about through a TV show or a game. This is an opportunity for learning about each other and sharing your values.
- **Balance still matters.** We should aim for a balance throughout the week. So, more screens? Fine. But also find time to be outside, to be active (indoors or outdoors, with or without screens), eat well, and talk to friends and family (on the phone, on social media, or on video chat).

The time at home with kids presents an opportunity to bond with them, even over media. This is not the time to try to deprive kids of something they enjoy and something that research has shown to have positive effects when used appropriately. There's a ton of great high-quality content out there—let your kids use it, use it with them, and don't guilt yourself over something that can still be part of a healthy, balanced childhood—especially during these times of heightened stress.