Improved 'Screen Time' Guidelines Could Make Parents & Kids Happier

By Erik Lief — October 21, 2016

Some clear thinking and sound guidance from one of the nation's leading medical associations on the issue of screen time is giving both parents and their technology-laden children reason to text thumbs-up emojis to one another.

This is welcome news, as the assistance provides a roadmap for navigating the often-perilous topic of determining the right amount of time that kids and teens can spend staring at computers, smartphones and TV screens.

Recognizing the rapid rate of technological change in U.S. households, the American Academy of Pediatrics announced Friday the creation of new guidelines for Children’s Media Use that can be applied to everyone under age 18, including infants and toddlers.

The guidelines are smart, and infused with common sense that parents can feel comfortable applying at home. They're also sensible, because while the recommendations are looser and provide greater flexibility than those in year's past, they simultaneously encourage parents to remain engaged with their kids, either sitting next to or interacting with them through the changing stages of their lives.

"Parents can set expectations and boundaries to make sure their children's media experience is a positive one," said Dr. Megan Moreno, the lead author of the policy statement on media use in school-aged children and teens. "The key is mindful use of media within a family."

Two important principles create the foundation for the new recommendations: (1) an updated definition of what screen time is, and (2) the necessity in making the guidelines age-specific.

In the past the AAP, which is comprised of 66,000 primary-care pediatricians, basically said that all
screen time was the same. But now, recognizing how schoolwork and peer communication are deeply intertwined with the internet, the doctors' group says screen time limits should apply to only to entertainment choices. Meaning that if your 12-year-old is looking for his math assignment on the school's website, or is doing research on the works of Edgar Allan Poe, that's off the fun clock and should not be counted.

As for age guidelines, even infants can get in on the internet act -- provided that it's for video communication with Grandma, and the like, on apps like Facetime and Skype. AAP also went as far as stating that if parents are adamant about their toddler's early exposure to media, those 1 1/2 to 2 years of age could watch “high-quality” TV programs, but accompanied by parents so they can explain what their child is watching.

Kids aged 2 to 5 should be limited to one hour of screen use daily, while for those 6 years and older parents should, according to the AAP recommendations, "place consistent limits on the time spent using media, and the types of media, and make sure media does not take the place of adequate sleep, physical activity and other behaviors essential to health."

Here are some other key guidelines (courtesy of the Los Angeles Times):

- Keep bedrooms, mealtimes and parent-child playtime free of screens. (Parents, that goes for you too: Set your phone on “Do not disturb.”).
- Discourage the use of entertainment media while doing homework.
- Children of all ages should avoid exposure to devices and screens for one hour before bedtime.
- Keep smartphones, TVs and other devices out of the bedroom.
- Communicate the family’s media guidelines to grandparents, babysitters and other caregivers so screen rules are followed consistently.
- Have an ongoing conversation with older children about online citizenship and safety. This includes treating people with respect online; saying no to cyberbullying and sexting; and avoiding communications that can compromise personal privacy and safety.

Childhood obesity continues to be a concern, which prompts pediatricians to remind parents to keep kids moving, and prevent them from lingering on the couch in front of the television. Therefore, given these relaxed screen-time guidelines, for those 4 to 13 years old the AAP says daily TV viewing should be scaled back to no more than 90 minutes, down from 2 hours previously.

Finally, the AAP recommends that families create a media plan, so that some ground rules can be set to prevent arguments from taking place.

"Families should proactively think about their children's media use and talk with children about it, because too much media use can mean that children don't have enough time during the day to play, study, talk, or sleep," said Jenny Radesky, MD, FAAP, lead author of the policy statement. "What's most important is that parents be their child's 'media mentor.' That means teaching them how to use it as a tool to create, connect and learn."