

Screen Sense Frequently Asked Questions



Partnering with Parents and Teachers/Child Care Providers

As a nanny, how do I apply *Screen Sense* guidelines when the parents don't seem to mind having the television on all the time?

Consider sharing the [Screen Sense parent resources](#) with the parents you work with, and talk through the recommendations. Ask parents if they would like you to put any of the recommendations into practice (specifically, for example, the recommendation to limit background television).

My 6-month-old goes to a babysitter's house 7 hours a day, where the TV on all the time. How do you recommend starting a conversation with the babysitter about the impacts of background TV on my child?

Parents can make requests of their childcare providers, especially with regard to care environments. Consider reviewing the Screen Sense resources with your babysitter, specifically the [Screen Use Tips](#) resource. Use these as a jumping off point for a discussion about your hopes and goals for your child, and your provider's thoughts about limiting background television. During this conversation, you can clarify your preferences about screen media exposure—for example, you may explain that it is fine for your provider to have the television on while the baby sleeps, but not during playtime/mealtime. Sharing this information with your provider is especially important as it is often babies who are exposed to the most background media since parents/providers often don't think that it affects them, when we know the opposite is true.

Partnering with Co-Parents on Screen Use

I'm a divorced dad and my kids (ages 7 and 2.5) have unlimited screen access (TV, ipads) at their mom's house. They are with her 50% of the time. How can I create a realistic family plan at my house when it's not reinforced or valued outside of my house?

Ideally, divorced/separated co-parents would work in partnership (or with the assistance of a

family counselor) to discuss the creation of a shared family media plan. Developing media expectations for children together is ideal because it provides children with a sense of continuity across their homes. If establishing a shared family media plan is not realistic, remember that children are actually quite adaptable to different rules and expectations in different settings. Establishing clear guidelines for children’s media use while they are at your home is a good idea regardless. The American Academy of Pediatrics offers a tool to guide the creation of a [family media plan](#) and is a good starting place. If children ask why the rules are different, you can simply explain that, “Mom and Dad just have different rules, and that’s okay.” Offering age-appropriate options for play instead of media time is another good strategy: “Would you like me to read you a story or help you build a tower with blocks now?”

Using Screens in the Early Childhood Setting

Do you have teacher resources on the appropriate use of screens in the early childhood classroom setting? What are your thoughts regarding early childhood teachers utilizing Smartboards and media content in the classroom?

There is no need to integrate technology into the infant/toddler classroom as a tool to maximize learning. Very young children learn effectively and efficiently from their 3D environments when they have access to interesting and challenging experiences, toys, objects, and—most importantly—people!

The Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children’s Media and the National Association for the Education of Young children co-authored [a joint position statement](#) providing guidance on using technology in the classroom from birth through age eight years. This position statement offers insight on the best and more appropriate uses of technology in the classroom for this age range. In addition, the [Screen Sense tools](#) apply to all children under age three who are in child care settings; these tools can be used by early educators to make decisions about media content and how to use that content with very young children.

For preschoolers aged 3 to 5 years old, it is recommended that early educators make intentional and informed choices about using Smartboards and other technology in the classroom guided by the E-AIMS. For example, playing a video of a book being read aloud to children is not a particularly impactful or appropriate use of technology (in fact, research on [guided reading interventions](#) find that children learn far more when the reader is “live” and can ask children questions, introduce vocabulary, and engage them in the story). Alternatively, creating an interactive Smartboard sorting game where children drag circles and squares into two “piles” on the Smartboard could be an engaging use of technology that has an intentional, age-appropriate learning goal.

Many early educators believe that technology use in the preschool classroom can support learning, but note that [technical support and professional development](#)—to help them learn how best to maximize technology in service of early learning—is often lacking. Further resources you may want to review on this topic include this set of [guiding principles](#) for using technology to support young learners, as well [as these examples](#) of effective classroom practice using technology tools.

Resources for Finding High Quality Screen Media for Young Children

Do you recommend that parents reference Commonsense Media for research-based information about screen media for a variety of ages? Is there a list of recommended apps or shows for children in different age ranges of 0-5?

Absolutely! [Commonsense Media](#) is an independent nonprofit organization that provides parents, teachers, and policymakers with unbiased information to help them make educated choices about children’s media and technology choices.

[PBS](#) also is a good source for finding high-quality children’s media content. Finally, the [E-AIMS](#) resource from the *Screen Sense* series can also help parents identify appropriate media experiences for their children.

Negative Impacts of Screen Use

What are the negative effects of screen use?

Negative effects of screen use generally emerge from high levels of consumption of children’s entertainment or adult-oriented programming. Background television and technoference (adult distraction due to technology use) have also been shown to result in poorer play and language learning for children. Low-quality content (with no learning/educational goals) and screen time in the hour before bedtime have been shown to interfere with sleep.

Is there a negative effect of screen time on young eyes or vision development?

There is not. However, vision experts say that it is important for children’s developing vision system to have time outside because it gives them exposure to particular light waves. In short, screen use does not damage children’s vision, but time outside is necessary to support the healthy development of the entire visual system.

Is there a negative (or positive) impact on language development?

The first answer is that we know what *does* nurture positive language development and that is language-rich interactions between babies and others around them. That includes talking with

babies, waiting for them to respond (even if not with words), narrating daily activities, and labeling familiar objects. This is the best way to build a baby's language system.

In terms of the effects of media on language development, the answer is: it depends. If the media is an adult television show, then research shows parents talk and respond much less to their children. Even when co-viewing a children's show together, there is not typically much conversation between parents and children. A surprising finding, though, is that once an educational children's television show is turned off, parents tend to use richer vocabulary with children—extending what they just saw on the screen. So educational television co-viewing may have a positive (but indirect) effect for language. Under certain circumstances, for example, if parents talk about the show with their child, the child can learn vocabulary from that screen experience, *but they need the parent input*.

Poorly designed children's programming and background media (when the television is on even if no one is watching, or if adult, and not child-oriented, programming is on) are both associated with poorer language.

Small amounts of children's-oriented media exposure, particularly if it is of high quality and parents jointly engage from time to time, are not associated with negative outcomes. .

Is there research that discusses the impact of screen use on ADHD, attention and focus issues, etc.?

Technoference, poor quality media content, and high exposure rates (high levels of screen time) correlate with negative impacts on children's attentional skills. The link to ADHD is not understood at this time, but the link between high exposure to background television and poorer attention and executive functioning is more clear.

It is important for parents to set limits on screen use—in terms of time spent on screen activities (with the goal of a balance between screen-based and other activities) and in terms of the content of the program, app or game (with an emphasis on high quality content). Mindful parental media usage is important as well.

Choosing Screen Experiences for Young Children

Is there any evidence that a screen-free household is the most beneficial to young children?

There is no evidence that a screen-free household is most beneficial. The research implies that there is slightly lower performance on some metrics for children in both screen-free homes and in homes where children are allowed access to very high media usage. Thus, it appears the extremes (very high or very low screen usage) are where performance issues emerge. At the low end (screen-free home settings), we may see this finding because when children get to

school, screen media is a new tool for children, and learning how to use it takes some time and repeated experiences to master.

Many products on Amazon are listed as "educational" but the only educational benefit listed is "independent play." Any thoughts on that?

Young children do benefit from independent play, BUT in the first three years, they need adults to help them learn from screen experiences. Independent play with screen apps and games has not been shown to be beneficial in the early years. Once a child knows a program structure really well, like *Dora the Explorer*, and sees the same episode a few times, they can begin to pick up information independently beginning at about 3 years of age. They still benefit from some support, like parents labeling objects or making connections between the program and the child's world. This does not need to be continuous, but children do need occasional support to maximize learning.

Some independent play with "3D" toys and objects (like blocks, dolls/cars, shape-sorter, chunky puzzles, etc.) in the early years is beneficial. This is because children can more easily understand and learn independently from sensory, concrete experiences.

Adult advertisers have found ways to push inappropriate ads inside free children's apps and YouTube children's programming. Does this mean parents should stay away from exposing children to app content since there's no way to control the inappropriate ads pushed at random times in apps, especially if parent gives child unsupervised time on internet device?

In short, yes. Children do not understand the purpose of advertisements (to influence and convince) until they are about five years of age. Parents should seek out ad-free screen experiences (as noted above, commonsensemedia.org and public television channels and websites are great resources for identifying these programs/resources). The addition of distracting contact, such as ads, is also part of our [E-AIMS resource](#): if there are distracting "bells and whistles" (such as ads) and the content is not meaningful or comprehensible to children (as ads often are not), parents should avoid that product/program and select more appropriate content.

Sometimes there is an option to obtain an ad-free version of an app by buying it. One way to check whether it is worth the money is to look at it yourself and test the E-AIMS with your child to determine if it is a good fit. Parents often carefully choose books and other toys for their children. Apps are similar in that they also need to be carefully chosen.

What are your thoughts about using video games as a family? Appropriate ages for kids?

Potentially yes, but it all depends on the game content and the children's age, stage, and interests. Check the [E-AIMS](#) to identify high quality, age-appropriate options for games that

offer opportunities for both fun and learning. Family video game time can also be a good opportunity to practice setting limits so children can learn that screen time has its place, and then learn how—and when—to turn off the device.

At what age can you begin using E-AIMS to select screen experiences for children?

The E-AIMS can be used as a tool to select appropriate learning experiences starting from birth, since it can be used to evaluate a range of learning experiences, not just screens.

What activity suggestions can you give parents to use as a substitute for screens when they need to keep their child entertained (while they are cooking dinner/doing laundry/etc.)?

One approach is to engage the child in age-appropriate helping out with the task. For example, if you are folding laundry, you can ask your child to find all the socks and put them in a pile for the two of you to match. Another approach is to have a basket of "special" (high preference) toys that only come out when parent is occupied with a task. Remember, adults can choose to use some screen time as entertainment for the child while the parent is engaged (though, of course, this is not recommended to be the majority of children's activity time). For other non-screen activity ideas, check out these suggestions for babies from [0-12 months](#); toddlers aged [12 to 24 months](#); and older toddlers aged [24-36 months](#).

Should a toddler ever be left alone during a video chat? At what age do children need facilitators to aid in video chat interactions with remote relatives?

Babies and toddlers should always have an adult present to help them make the most of video chat interactions. See our Screen Sense resource on tips for making the [most of video chat](#) with children under three years.

Parents' Screen Use

What about the parent's use of screens and how that impacts the developing child?

Parental use of media while their children are present is a type of technofence. Technofence is when adult media use interrupts interactions with children. Technofence has been shown to result in shorter play periods and reduced language learning in young children.

For domestic tranquility reasons, I watch a lot of soccer (and other sports) on mute on the weekends; is that an issue? Our 22-month-old mostly ignores it now.

There is a lot of soccer on mute in my household too, also in a nod to domestic tranquility. Establishing a family media plan might be a good activity, so that there are shared expectations about how and when the television will be on. Recording and watching games during your toddler's naps/after bedtime (or watching on-demand) may reduce background television during the day. While young children may look like they are ignoring the screen, the research

shows that it can still interrupt their play. Even if they are only looking up a few times, research shows that the complexity of their play decreases and parents' response time is slower. So perhaps part of the family media plan is that there is a several hour period (while the child is awake) that the television is turned off and it is just "play time." The American Academy of Pediatrics has developed an [online family media plan](#) tool to make this process easier.

Using Screen Sense Tools With Parents

I was wondering about how to work with parents who are not well educated and may not be able to understand this information or how to use the E-AIMS tool.

One approach is to do a brief demo with a parent. For example, ask them to show you which apps they are using or shows they are watching with their children or are interested in trying. Then use the E-AIMS to talk through the different elements of quality and make a decision of whether it is a good choice for children (or not). Referring them to PBSkids.org or CommonsenseMedia.org for additional information and support can be helpful as well. Online free [digital children's libraries](#) are another great resource. Research has actually shown that for under-resourced families, the gains for children are higher when they have access to high quality media resources. For example, children living in low-income families have been found to benefit most from programs like Sesame Street, Super Why, and other similar programs.

We work with low income families who use media as babysitters or as a safety plan so the child won't go outside where there is violence. How can we present this model to these families?

Screen time can certainly make sense as a safety plan, but there are ways that parents can provide media as a choice (in terms of securing safety) while balancing quality content when possible. Parents can also be more involved in children's media use, which can create opportunities for parent-child interaction and conversation. For example, parents might ask the child what is on the screen, ask what their favorite part or character is, or make an observation that connects the screen content to the real world. You can use the guidance above on the E-AIMS to help parents identify high-quality children's programming and apps (PBSKids.org is a great place to start, as is Commonsensemedia.org). You might also consider using [this infographic](#) from the *Screen Sense* series which provides parent guidance on how the adult's role is to guide children toward high-quality media experiences.

Awareness of, and Learning from, Screen Experiences

When does a child become aware of background media?

Children, even beginning in infancy, are always aware of background media because the sound effects, lights, and images lead to an "automatic orienting response" (meaning that children

automatically look up to see what's happening). Parents and caregivers often think very young children are not aware of background media because they look up briefly and then look away. However, even if children are only looking at the screen for 5% of the time, it is significantly interrupting their play.

When can children begin learning from media?

Research has shown that children can learn from screen media experiences, with adult engagement, support and guidance, from 6 months of age and onward.

Background Music

What is your opinion of background music?

We actually know from research that background music does NOT work in the same way as background television. Background music does not distract child away from their play. It *does* reduce some language input, but based on our research, it does not interfere with learning in the same way as background television does.

Screen Experiences and Children with Autism Spectrum Disorder

Is there any research on screens with children on the autism spectrum? I ask because often they have more difficulty learning from social interactions, and I've had many discussions with parents about using media to encourage and teach social skills.

Yes, there is a study which introduced a show called ["The Transporters"](#) by Simon Baron Cohen and colleagues, which featured trains with faces showing different expressions. This program was based on the fact that children with ASD often show a preference for the Thomas the Tank Engine program, perhaps because machines (including trains) are more predictable than human movement and behavior. Biological motion is unpredictable and sometimes hard for children on the autism spectrum to interpret. The research study found that after watching The Transporters, children with ASD were much better at face recognition, both when tested with a screen-based assessment and in real person-to-person interactions.