Center for Living Health

Tips on How to Establish a Family Media Use Plan

For years, Dr. Michael Allen has touted the importance to his patients of limiting media exposure to children. From TV and video games, to smartphones to social media, our lives are dominated by 24/7 media exposure.

Now the American Academy of Pediatrics is backing his advice, with studies showing that excessive media use can lead to attention problems, school difficulties, sleep and eating disorders and obesity. They recommend that children and teens should engage with entertainment media no more than one to two hours a day, and that infants and children under age should avoid any media exposure. A child's brain develops rapidly during these first years, and young children learn best by interacting with people, not screens. A constant question we hear in our practice is "but how do we manage media use at home?" Many families have few rules around their children's media use and the digital age is the ideal time to initiate a change.

The American Academy of Pediatrics offers these tips on creating a Family Media Use Plan: While media consumption by itself is not the leading cause of any health problem in the U.S., it can contribute to numerous health risks, say experts. At the same time, kids can learn many positive things from "prosocial" media. The key is to teach children to make healthy media choices.

Tips for Parents on Making a Family Media Use Plan:
- Make a media use plan for your family. Take into account not only the quantity, but the quality and location of media use. Consider TVs, phones, tablets and computers. The rules should be written down and agreed upon by all family members.
- Screens should be kept out of kids' bedrooms. Put in place a "media curfew" at mealtime and bedtime, putting all devices away or plugging them into a charging station for the night.
- Excessive media use has been associated with obesity, lack of sleep, school problems, aggression and other behavior issues. Limit entertainment screen time to less than one or two hours per day.
- For children under 2, substitute unstructured play and human interaction for screen time. The opportunity to think creatively, problem solve and develop reasoning and motor skills is more valuable for the developing brain than passive media intake.
- Take an active role in your children's media education by co-viewing programs with them and discussing values. • Look for media choices that are educational, or teach good values -- such as empathy, racial and ethnic tolerance. Choose programming that models good interpersonal skills for children to emulate.
- Be firm about not viewing content that is not age appropriate: sex, drugs, violence, etc. Movie and TV ratings exist for a reason, and online movie reviews also can help parents to stick to their rules.
- The Internet can be a wonderful place for learning. But it also is a place where kids can run into trouble. Keep the computer in a public part of your home, so you can check on what your kids are doing online and how much time they are spending there.

- Discuss with your children that every place they go on the Internet may be "remembered," and comments they make will stay there indefinitely. Impress upon them that they are leaving behind a "digital footprint." They should not take actions online that they would not want to be on the record for a very long time.
- Become familiar with popular social media sites like Facebook, Twitter and Instagram. You may consider having your own profile on the social media sites your children use. By "friending" your kids, you can monitor their online presence. Pre-teens should not have accounts on social media sites. If you have young children, you can create accounts on sites that are designed specifically for kids their age.
- Talk to them about being good "digital citizens," and discuss the serious consequences of online bullying. If your child is the victim of cyberbullying, it is important to take action with the other parents and the school if appropriate. Attend to children's and teens' mental health needs promptly if they are being bullied online, and consider separating them from the social media platforms where bullying occurs.
- Make sure kids of all ages know that it is not appropriate or smart to send or receive pictures of people without clothing, or sexy text messages, no matter whether they are texting friends or strangers. • Check out a sample "Media Time Family Pledge" for online media use.
- If you're unsure of the quality of the "media diet" in your household, consult with your children's pediatrician on what your kids are viewing, how much time they are spending with media, and privacy and safety issues associated with social media and Internet use.

Additional Information:
• Children, Adolescents and Media (AAP Policy Statement)
• SafetyNet (AAP Internet Safety Site)
• The Impact of Social Media Use on Children, Adolescents and Families (AAP Clinical Report)
• Children, Adolescents, Obesity and the Media (AAP Policy Statement)
• Sexuality, Contraception, and the Media (AAP Policy Statement)
• Media Use By Children Younger Than 2 Years (AAP Policy Statement)