

INFANTS, TODDLERS, AND TOUCHSCREENS: A DESCRIPTIVE STUDY OF EARLY TOUCHSCREEN USE AND PARENT ATTITUDES

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ABSTRACT

Infants and toddlers are increasingly using interactive screen media such as touchscreen tablets,¹ yet little is known about the nature of this media use. The current ongoing study surveys parents of children 6-36 months about their child's use of touchscreen devices as well as their attitudes about media use. Overall, the majority of parents in our sample allow their child to use touchscreen devices, and most of these parents value educational potential when making decisions about their child's use of such devices. Future research should further probe parent attitudes and practices to inform recommendations for young child media use.

INTRODUCTION

- American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) discourages media exposure for children under 2 years of age²
- Interactive media use among young children is rapidly increasing
 - Use of a touchscreen device by 2 years increased from around 10% in 2011 to approximately 40% in 2013¹
- Little known about how and why toddlers use new technology
- The objective of this ongoing study is to provide descriptive data
 - Targets parents of children 6-36 months
 - Assesses nature of children's experiences with touchscreens as well as parenting practices and parental attitudes

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- RQ1: How often do infants and toddlers use touchscreen devices, and why do they use?
- RQ2: What are parents' attitudes towards early media use?
- RQ3: What factors drive parents' decisions about their child's use of touchscreens?

METHOD

Participants

- N = 134 parents of children 6-36 mos
 - Parent mean age = 31.0 yrs ($SD = 4.8$); 93.2% females
 - Child mean age = 22.1 mos ($SD = 10.3$); 45.5% females
 - Avg. parent education = 15.6 yrs ($SD = 2.3$)

Measures

- Online survey consisting of 106 questions including:
 - Parent and child media use
 - Reasons for child touchscreen use
 - Attitudes towards child's media use (10 questions, 5-pt scale, higher scores indicate more positive attitude)
 - Parenting approaches

Procedure

- Survey posted online using the survey software Qualtrics
- Recruitment flyer distributed online (e.g., parent groups, email)
- Parents answered about oldest child between 6 and 36 months
- Took approximately 15-30 minutes
- Given a \$10 Amazon gift card as a thank you

RESULTS

- 69.2% of parents in our survey allow child to use touchscreens
 - Mean age of first use was 11.2 mos ($SD = 8.0$)
- Of children who use touchscreen devices:
 - 46.1% of use is initiated by the child
 - 40.4% of use is initiated by the parent
- 72.2% of children who use touchscreen devices do so 2-3 times per week or more. See Figure 1.
- The most common reasons for child touchscreen use were to learn (73.9%) and for entertainment (66.3%). See Figure 2.

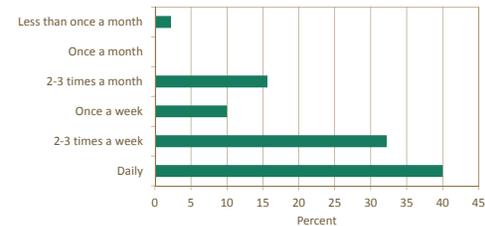


Figure 1. Frequency of child touchscreen use (N = 92)

- Reasons most frequently rated as *very important* or *essential* in choosing apps for their children were educational quality (94.3%) and use of app without help (81.8%)
- Attitudes towards infant/toddler media use were somewhat positive ($M = 29.3$, $SD = 6.7$). For example:
 - 66.6% *strongly disagreed* or *disagreed* that "Media exposure of any kind is harmful to infants and toddlers."
 - 56.1% *strongly agreed* or *agreed* that "It is impractical to avoid exposing infants and toddlers to media."
- The majority of all parents surveyed said they *never* or *rarely* (55.5%) struggle with questions about their child's media use.
- 77.9% of parents reported that their pediatrician has never spoken to them about their child's media use.

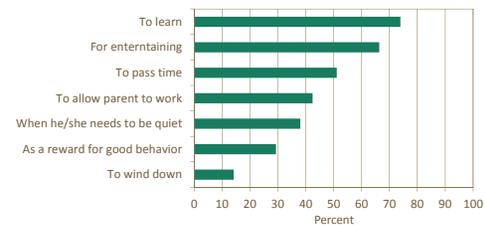


Figure 2. Reasons for child touchscreen use (N = 92).

CONCLUSIONS

These results begin to elucidate parents' attitudes towards media use by infants and toddlers as well as the practices they employ with their children. Overall, parents had a somewhat positive attitude towards early media use. The majority of families in our sample allowed touchscreen use, with an emphasis on learning potential. While DVDs designed for young audiences are often marketed as educational, the association between educational claims and content is modest.³ Likewise, many touchscreen apps for young users are marketed as educational.⁴ As with DVDs, it is likely that many of these apps are designed without reference to current science on learning and child development. If this is the case, the focus on educational potential emphasized by parents in our study may be misguided. Future research should further probe parents' attitudes and practices to better inform media use recommendations for children.

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