

Using Media Effectively with Young Children and Virtual Visitation

Part Two: Using Media Play with Young Children - Developing a “Screen Sense”

While sheltering at home, families have become more reliant than ever on “screens,” TV, computers, and other media. In part 2 of *Using Media Effectively with Young Children and Virtual Visitation* the second installment of our new webinar series COVID-19: The New Normal, Dr. Rachel Barr focuses on how parents can navigate the digital media world with their toddlers and how media can be a useful tool for parents to support the intellectual, educational and emotional development of children. Digital play, where adults and children interact around media is a way to build connections and avoid isolation. Dr. Rachel Barr has spent more than 25 years researching how children interact with media and shares information and practical tips to help parents make the most of screen time with small children.

The information below provides a snapshot of the key takeaways from this webinar presentation and highlights the core components of developing a “screen sense,” which Dr. Barr describes as a way to harness the potential of technology to enhance learning and development for small children.

Understanding the 3 C’s

While there are a number of elements to consider when deciding on a plan for screen use with small children, Dr. Barr encourages parents to pay special attention to the individual needs and interests of each **child**, the quality of **content** being presented, and the **context** for the screen time

Child- Every child is unique and has a different set of skills, abilities, strengths and interests so the use of screens will likely be different for every child. It’s important to pay attention to how your child responds to content and follow their cues. While small children can learn from screens, it is not easy and requires parental support and engagement to reinforce transfer of learning. Remember:

- Screen skills develop slowly over time.
- **Transfer of learning** is critical; parents are key to helping small children overcome the transfer deficit through engagement and narrated learning.
- Children need lots of opportunities for **imitation** and **repetition** to support transfer of learning.

Content- It is very important to be mindful of the quality and focus of media content small children are exposed to. Violent and scary content (even the news) has been shown to negatively impact children, even when it is just playing as background content. Content should be educationally focused and is most effective when it helps a child connect the dots between the screen and the real world. Remember:

- **High quality** children’s **educational** programming is best.
- Low quality children’s entertainment and adult-oriented programming can have negative impacts on children.
- Background media is not benign.

Context- Taking a passive approach to media learning with small children is ineffective. In fact, background media interferes in children’s play and learning and is associated with poorer parent-child

interaction. Joint media engagement between parents and small children is critical to make early media learning meaningful. Remember:

- The context of media exposure contributes to **early learning success** as much as content
 - Turn off background tv
 - Be as **interactive as possible** (digital play, games, activities)
 - Use **repetition** and **imitation** to aid learning
- **Parental engagement** helps children learn through media by providing;
 - Structured and **narrative teaching**,
 - Emotional support, warmth and **responsiveness**,
 - Joint visual attention cues to **connect 2D and 3D information** and concepts.

Using the E-AIMS to Select Content

The science of learning applies to digital media and can inform our choices around screen time for small children. Educational media should include high quality content and support the ways we know children learn best. Using the E-AIMS framework is a great way to evaluate digital content. According to the framework, content should be:

Engaging- The screen content is interesting and fun. The media has a learning purpose with few built-in distractions. Consider:

- Is there a **learning goal** or story as part of this screen experience?
- Does the interactivity relate to the learning goal or **is it distracting?**

Actively Involved- The screen experience is “minds on” and designed to activate your child’s involvement in some way – like ask your child to do something new or mentally challenging. Consider:

- Is my child really **thinking about** and **participating** in the content?
- Is the content or game so familiar that my child is on autopilot?
- Is my child being **challenged (but not frustrated)** by the experience?

Meaningful- The screen content is relevant to the child’s life, like familiar settings and situations (taking a bath, going to the park, petting a dog). Consider:

- Does the content of this experience reflect everyday life and things my child is familiar with?
- Does the content use my child’s current knowledge to build up to more complex ideas and skills?
- Does the content include too many imaginary or complex elements that my child is unfamiliar with?

Social- The screen content encourages social connection between the parent and child or child and peers. Parents play/explore/talk about media experiences with their children or children play along with other players virtually. Consider:

- Does this experience encourage my child to participate by speaking or responding within the game?
- Does this experience encourage my child to interact with me as we play together?