

School District Policies for Social Media and Screen Time

Background

At the start of a new decade, the prevalence of social media and screen time is at an all-time high. Social media has changed not only interpersonal communications and cultural tendencies, but research is also showing high exposure is affecting brain development. Children are being exposed to electronic devices at very young ages, which is a concern for proper development and growth. A recent study that scanned the brains of children ages 3 to 5 found that those who used screens more than the recommended one hour per day had lower developmental levels in the brain's white matter, which is key to the development of language, literacy and cognitive skills.¹ Limiting screen time for children and adolescents is vital for proper development, which leads to future health and life success. This is a crucial focus not only for individual brain health, but for society as a whole.

The American Academy of Pediatrics² recommends:

- Children younger than 18 months should avoid use of screen media, other than for video-chatting. From ages 18 to 24 months, parents should choose high quality programming when introducing digital media and should watch with their children to support their understanding.
- Children ages 2 to 5 years should watch no more than 1 hour of high-quality programs per day. Parents should watch media with their children to support their understanding and apply to the world around them.
- For children ages 6 years and older, consistent limits should be placed on types and time of media use, ensuring that children have adequate sleep, physical activity, and other essential health behaviors.
- Parents should designate media-free times and locations and should have ongoing conversations about online citizenship and safety.

The Problem

The rise in digital media use in children is associated with risks such as “language delay, poor sleep, impaired executive function and general cognition, and decreased parent-child engagement, including reading together.”¹

Because there are no current policies on digital media use in schools, children are exposed to screens increasingly on their school’s campus. This further inhibits their social interaction skills, education, and mental health.³

Media plans for schools need to be developed so that there are guidelines for safe, appropriate and constructive media use.³

Policy Options

Currently, no specific recommendations regarding “consistent limits on the time spent using media, and the types of media” for children aged 6 years and older exist.² The AAP recommends developing a family media plan, taking into account the health, educational, and entertainment needs of all family members.² Pediatricians and other health professionals should, therefore, educate families during appointments regarding the advantages and disadvantages of media use, and promote adherence to utilizing a family media use plan to limit the amount of time spent using digital media.³

The AAP recommends that educators be informed about research findings in order to implement updated guidelines for safe and productive media use.³ District policies to limit and ensure safe and productive media use during school hours should be implemented, focusing on behaviors across social media platforms and establishing expectations and guidelines for teachers’ use of media.⁴ Schools can work to educate parents on the risks of excessive media use, track classroom screen time, set school rules regarding use of devices on campus, set up “screen-free weeks,” and utilize physical activity logs and others to promote engagement in other, technology-free activities.⁵

Policy Recommendation

Increasing research is showing that excessive screen time, including social media, television, video games and other internet browsing lead to a variety of psychological and medical health issues. These issues not only include attention problems and aggression in the school setting, but also increased risk for obesity, loneliness, depression, withdrawal and anxiety.⁶ The negative association between screen-time and behavioral issues is noted to be greater than any other risk factor including sleep, parenting stress, and socio-economic factors.⁷ This data is crucial for school districts to address so they can educate parents and families regarding screen-time usage and proper developmental brain development for their children.

School districts should implement district-wide policies to track and limit time spent utilizing media platforms during school hours according to developmental needs and recommendations set out by the AAP. School districts should educate families on these recommendations and should implement district-wide “screen-free” periods to promote balanced engagement in other healthy activities both during school hours and outside of the school day.

References

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