

**RESEARCH SPOTLIGHT:  
FAMILIES AND DIGITAL MEDIA IN YOUNG CHILDREN'S LEARNING**

HARVARD FAMILY RESEARCH PROJECT :: HARVARD GRADUATE SCHOOL OF EDUCATION



**Harvard Family  
Research Project**

**Research Spotlight: Families and  
Digital Media in Young Children's Learning**

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**For questions or comments about this paper,  
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## Introduction

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How do young children access and use digital media? How are families engaging with their children's use of digital media? What is the impact of digital media use on child development? These and other related questions are examined in the entries that follow. As early childhood experts conduct more studies about young children's experiences with digital media, including television, tablets, and smartphones, practitioners who serve families can use research to guide family engagement in a digital media environment. The emerging research tells us that:

- Effective uses of technology and media are active, hands-on, engaging, and empowering for children;
- Carefully monitored screen time experience with quality content can benefit children over age 3, but excessive screen time harms healthy growth and development, regardless of content;
- Young children may benefit from computer use if appropriate software is selected;
- Children can learn through joint media engagement with parents, grandparents, siblings, and peers;
- Parents are more likely to consider the educational benefits of technology for their children than to consider the downsides.

Learn more about research findings and recommendations from the research briefs, reports, and other entries below.

This resource was created based on information contained in journal and report abstracts; inclusion does not equate with endorsement of the reports and/or articles. We welcome your suggestions for additional materials and reasons for choosing them. Contact us at [fine@gse.harvard.edu](mailto:fine@gse.harvard.edu).

## About HFRP

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Harvard Family Research Project (HFRP) is a leading national organization whose purpose is to shape 21<sup>st</sup> century education by connecting the critical areas of student learning. Our focus is on anywhere, anytime learning approaches that extend from early childhood through college and connect families, schools, out-of-school time programs, and digital media.

We build strategic partnerships to generate new thinking with policymakers, practitioners, and community leaders that stimulates innovation and advances continuous improvement in education policy, practice, and evaluation. Our research and tools provide timely, relevant, and practical information for decision making. Addressing issues of access and equity in children's learning and identifying meaningful, effective family engagement practices that reinforce success for all children are central to our work.

To learn more about HFRP's work in early childhood education, please visit: [www.hfrp.org/earlychildhood](http://www.hfrp.org/earlychildhood)

## Dilemmas of Practice: Children's Media Use in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

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**Guernsey, L. (2012).** *Screen time: How electronic media—from baby videos to educational software—affects your young child.* New York, NY: Basic Books.

[www.lisaguernsey.com/Screen-Time.htm](http://www.lisaguernsey.com/Screen-Time.htm)

Author and mother Lisa Guernsey examines the impact of television on children under the age of 5. Through interviews with parents, researchers, and media specialists, the author obtains straightforward advice on how parents can make sound choices about the use of media to enhance children's development. She advocates taking a "three-C approach" when making decisions about children's media engagement, by considering content, context, and the individual child.

**Vaala, S.E. (2013).** *Aprendiendo Juntos (Learning Together): Synthesis of a cross-sectorial convening on Hispanic-Latino families and digital technologies.* New York, NY: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center.

<http://www.joanganzcooneycenter.org/publication/aprendiendo-juntos/>

This report is an overview of the 2012 Hispanic-Latino Families and Digital Technologies Forum, organized through a partnership between the National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL), the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop, and the National Council of La Raza. Participants were leading scholars, policymakers, and practitioners dedicated to examining the unique issues that relate to digital media use by Hispanic-Latino families. The report provides background information on the challenges that Hispanic-Latino families face, discusses the potential effects of digital media on Hispanic-Latino children and families, and includes a synthesis of conversations at the forum and scholarly papers relating to the topic. Participants also examined the potential that digital media have to positively impact Hispanic-Latino communities and ways to encourage educational growth through digital media usage.

## Family Perspectives on Children's Media Use

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**Rideout, V. (2014).** *Learning at home: Families' educational media use in America.* New York, NY: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center.

<http://www.joanganzcooneycenter.org/publication/learning-at-home/>

This comprehensive study seeks to discover the amount of time children spend engaged with educational media, parents' perceptions of the content that their children engage with, and patterns of joint media engagement within families. Findings show that educational media use is more common in younger children than in older children and that joint media engagement does frequently occur, but that more information regarding the quality of this engagement is needed. The report concludes that, although some children are engaging with educational digital media, educational content can be strategically developed to better reach specific audiences, such as the Hispanic-Latino community.

Rideout, V. (2013). *Zero to eight: Children's media use in America 2013*. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.

<http://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/zero-to-eight-childrens-media-use-in-america-2013>

Highlighting the findings of a survey administered to parents of children ages 0–8, this report discusses how young children's exposure to and use of digital media have changed since a similar survey was conducted in 2011. The recent survey examined a variety of media and their uses, from books to television to mobile devices such as smartphones. Results show that, although children had more access to mobile media devices than they did in 2011, television still took up most of children's media time. Results also show that a gap between rich and poor students' access to mobile media devices still existed, but was narrowing.

Wartella, E., Rideout, V., Lauricella, A., & Connell, S. (2013). *Parenting in the age of digital technology: A national survey*. Northwestern University, School of Communication, Center on Media and Human Development.

[http://web5.soc.northwestern.edu/cmhd/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Parenting-Report\\_FINAL.pdf](http://web5.soc.northwestern.edu/cmhd/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Parenting-Report_FINAL.pdf)

*Accompanying Video Clip:*

Northwestern University, School of Communication and the Center on Media and Human Development, in collaboration with the National Center on Family Literacy. (2013). *Parenting in the age of digital technology: How families use media and technology in their daily lives*.

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jzLKJinY7Ko>

This study looks at family use of new digital technologies (e.g., iPads and smartphones), as well as older media platforms (e.g., television, video games, and computers), and the effect of their use on the family lives and parenting practices of the study participants. The study surveys a nationally representative sample of 2,300 parents with children ranging from newborn to age 8, and reveals 10 key findings that indicate that technology has not taken over more traditional parenting tools and methods. Results further show that parents' own use of technology shapes their household's media environment; parents do not experience much family conflict over the use of media; and parents are more likely to consider the educational benefits rather than the downsides of technology for their children.

## Research-Based Guidance for Practitioners and Parents

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Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media. (2012). *A framework for quality digital media for young children*. Latrobe, PA: Fred Rogers Center.

[http://www.fredrogerscenter.org/media/resources/Framework\\_Statement\\_2-April\\_2012-Full\\_Doc+Exec\\_Summary.pdf](http://www.fredrogerscenter.org/media/resources/Framework_Statement_2-April_2012-Full_Doc+Exec_Summary.pdf)

Designed for parents, practitioners, and media developers, this framework was developed from two roundtable discussions by early childhood professionals and media creators. The framework

outlines three guiding principles for responsible and quality digital media use by children ages 0–8 and five action areas for promoting these quality principles. One conclusion is that emerging research should focus on the ways in which digital media can influence formal and informal learning.

**Guernsey, L., Levine, M., Chiong, C., & Stevens, M. (2012). *Pioneering literacy in the digital wild west: Empowering parents and educators*. New York, NY: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center.**

<http://www.joanganzcooneycenter.org/publication/pioneering-literacy/>

In examining the role that digital technology can play in children's literacy development, this report by the Campaign for Grade-Level Reading, the New America Foundation, and the Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop notes that parents and practitioners need to be provided with support if educational technology is to reach its full potential as a learning tool for children. Findings indicate that parents and practitioners have little information regarding the effectiveness of literacy-focused apps in the marketplace. This report examines the products currently available and makes recommendations for future media use.

**Linn, S., Wolfsheimer Almon, J., & Levin, D. (2012). *Facing the screen dilemma. Young children, technology and early education*. Boston, MA: Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood. New York, NY: Alliance for Childhood.**

<http://www.commercialfreechildhood.org/sites/default/files/facingthescreendilemma.pdf>

How can early childhood educators make informed decisions about whether, why, how, and when to use screen technologies with young children? This report gets to the heart of these and related questions and offers advice for educators who want their early childhood programs to be screen-free as well as for those who wish to incorporate technology into their settings. According to the report, there is no evidence showing that screen time is educational for infants and toddlers, but there is some evidence that it may be harmful. Children over age 3, however, can benefit from a limited amount of carefully monitored screen time experience with quality content, but excessive screen time harms healthy growth and development, regardless of content. Ultimately, the report concludes, children benefit most from having a lot of time for hands-on creative and active play, time in nature, and face-to-face interactions with caring adults.

**NAEYC and the Fred Rogers Center for Early Learning and Children's Media. (March 2012). *Key messages of the NAEYC/Fred Rogers Center position statement on technology and interactive media in early childhood programs*.**

[http://www.fredrogerscenter.org/media/resources/KeyMessages-NAEYC-FRC\\_Position\\_Statement-Mar\\_6-2012.pdf](http://www.fredrogerscenter.org/media/resources/KeyMessages-NAEYC-FRC_Position_Statement-Mar_6-2012.pdf)

This position statement offers guidance on how early childhood programs can effectively utilize technology and interactive media to support the learning and development of children from birth to age 8. Effective uses of technology and media are active, hands-on, engaging, and empowering

for children, who must be provided with adaptive scaffolds in order to progress in skills development at individual rates. Technology and interactive media can also be used to support children's learning by expanding children's access to new content and new skills. Technology must be fully integrated into an activity or exploration, and made routine and transparent enough so that children will focus on the activity or the exploration itself rather than the technology. Furthermore, the use of technology requires early childhood teachers and administrators to have information and resources on these tools and the implications of their use with children. Thus, it is necessary for early childhood programs utilizing technology to maintain ongoing research and professional development.

**Takeuchi, L., & Stevens, R. (2011). *The new coviewing: Designing for learning through joint media engagement*. New York, NY: The Joan Ganz Cooney Center.**

<http://www.joanganzcooneycenter.org/publication/the-new-coviewing-designing-for-learning-through-joint-media-engagement/>

This detailed review of research focusing on joint media engagement presents a series of case studies that demonstrate the various challenges and successes in bringing families together around new forms of media. Research findings show that children will often initiate coviewing with their parents, and that children are more likely to respond to prompts in television shows when coviewing with others. The report includes a design guide that offers media producers recommendations for future media development that will enhance joint media engagement among children, parents, grandparents, and educators.