

## How unsupervised screen time harms vulnerable preschoolers

by Gisele Galoustian, [Florida Atlantic University, USA](#)



For children ages 2 to 5, the American Psychological Association recommends no more than one hour of daily screen time. About half of young children in the U.S. spend more than two hours a day on screens during the week, with even higher use on the weekends. Credit: Florida Atlantic University

Early problems with language can have a lasting negative impact on social and emotional development. Building on this foundation, a new groundbreaking study from Florida Atlantic University and Aarhus University in Denmark tests the hypothesis that unsupervised, solitary screen time during early childhood increases the likelihood that language difficulties will lead to socioemotional difficulties.

The study, published in [Research on Child and Adolescent Psychopathology](#), found that pathways from poor communication skills and low productive vocabulary to later adjustment problems were particularly strong among preschool- and kindergarten-aged children who averaged at least 10 to 30 minutes of solitary screen time per day across the course of a week.

Study participants were 546 4- and 5-year-olds (264 girls, 282 boys) attending 24 population-based childcare centers across 13 municipalities in Denmark. Teachers completed assessments twice of child adjustment difficulties, such as conduct and emotional problems, over the course of about six months during a single school year.

At the outset, teachers administered standardized tests of child language abilities, including communication skills and productive vocabulary. Parents reported on solitary screen time, which was defined as the average number of hours per week that children spent alone

viewing handheld devices or television, excluding screen time supervised by or consumed with an adult.

Consistent with several previous studies, there were longitudinal associations from oral language problems to later adjustment difficulties. Across the six-month period, poor communication skills and high levels of solitary screen time separately predicted escalating emotional difficulties.

### **Solitary screens as a risk multiplier**

Unique to this study was the finding that solo screen time magnified problems arising from language difficulties. Associations from low productive vocabulary and poor communication skills to increases in conduct problems were strongest among children whose parents reported that their children were well above average in solitary screen time exposure.

"Unsupervised screen time forecloses opportunities for social engagement that might mitigate the behavioral risks that follow from language problems," said Brett Laursen, Ph.D., senior author and a professor of psychology in FAU's Charles E. Schmidt College of Science.

Laursen uses an [economics model](#) to explain the results. Economists define opportunity costs as losses attached to a choice. If an adult stays up late with a book, the opportunity cost of reading is a good night's sleep.

"The [opportunity costs](#) of solitary screen time can be particularly steep for vulnerable youth. Children have a finite number of free time hours in a day," said Laursen. "Every hour a child spends alone with a device is an hour they aren't engaged in social interactions that boost language skills. It is an hour not spent practicing the social and emotional skills required to build friendships. Screens don't demand compromise, sharing or dialogue—the exact skills that children with communication difficulties need to practice."

Young children learn language from in-person interactions—very little is acquired from video screens. Further, electronic media cannot replace the rich social experiences children gain from play and engagement with peers.

### **Why screens fall short for learning**

"Young children with limited language skills are already at risk for social and emotional challenges," said Molly Selover, lead author and an FAU doctoral student in psychology.

"There is little reason to expect that screens help children overcome the adaptive challenges posed by oral language problems and many reasons to suspect that they make matters worse."

Excessive screen use by young children is widespread: the [World Health Organization](#) recommends no more than one hour per day for children ages 2 to 5, yet a global review found that two-thirds of households exceed this limit. In the United States,

about half of young children spend more than two hours a day on screens during the week, with even higher use on weekends. Of course, both content and supervision matter.

### **Guidelines, content quality and co-viewing**

For children ages 2 to 5, the [American Psychological Association](#) encourages parents to limit screen time to no more than one hour per day and to co-view and interact with their children during this time rather than using the screen as a babysitter. They also note that the quality of the content on screens is extremely important, perhaps more important than the total amount of time spent viewing.

The authors say that high caliber content has documented benefits for children, especially as children get older. Unfortunately, when left to their own devices, many young children prefer fast-paced, brief and highly stimulating content, some of which may be age-inappropriate.

### **Implications for parents and caregivers**

"Electronic media are an integral component of the home learning environment; many children spend more time with tablets and phones than with toys, books and friends," said Selover. "Like other home environment risks, solitary screen time poses a unique peril to young children with heightened vulnerabilities. Adults tend to think of screens as pleasant distractions and may use them as convenient babysitters. But for preschool children with language vulnerabilities, unsupervised screen time is not benign—it can be an active barrier to well-being."

The authors acknowledge that their findings may not be popular. Screens are a ubiquitous part of everyday life. Nevertheless, they encourage parents to carefully scrutinize how young children engage screens.

"The findings matter because they show that an all-too-common environmental risk—elevated solitary screen time—can worsen behavioral and conduct challenges for children who face an already difficult developmental path," Selover said.

Study co-authors are Mary Page Leggett-James, Ph.D., an FAU Ph.D. developmental psychology graduate (now at Gallup), as well as Anders Højen, Ph.D.; and Dorte Bleses, Ph.D., School of Communication and Culture, Aarhus University.

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