Screen Time in Early Childhood Contexts: Considerations, Controversies and Conversation

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ABSTRACT

The primary focus of this session is to review current research on the interaction of digital technology and young children, and then engage in a discussion about some areas of concern in considering screen time via digital technology with young children. Considerable controversy exists in terms of using digital technologies with young children, especially those preschool and younger. A major issue to be posed will be the controversy over what is meant by “screen time” and how tablets and mobile technology may have changed what “screen time” is for young children. This discussion will include how to involve early childhood educators in considerations about technology and what professional development needs they may have.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The definition and use of “screen time” in early childhood programs is becoming a bit controversial. The Environmental Rating Scales, used as a program assessment in many states, limits the amount of screen time children have as well as uses a conservative definition for screen time (Harms & Cryer, n.d.). Many child development experts are concerned about how screen time via digital technologies, rather than real and concrete materials, may interfere with the positive development and learning in the early childhood years (for example, the American Academy of Pediatrics, n.d. and Duch, Fisher & Harrington, 2013). This conservative definition does not seem to take into consideration the more active aspects of some of today’s digital media (for example, Kleeman’s differentiation of “lean forward” and “lean back” media, Kleeman, 2011). Technology options are moving far too quickly for research to be able to keep up, much less provide longitudinal studies that might provide a clear picture of the impact of screen time on young children’s development. Nor does it take into consideration the findings of current research that, recommended or not, very young children are engaged in significant screen time on a daily basis (for example, Wartella, Rideout, Lauricella & Connell, 2013).

Confounding the above data is the continued digital divide. Some families, especially those with higher incomes, are much more likely to have access to a variety of digital technologies, while poor families are much less likely to have access. Differences in how screen media are used with children also exist, with poorer families more likely to use television (screen time) as a reward than families with higher levels of income (Rideout and Hamel, 2006; Wartella, Rideout, Lauricella & Connell, 2013). What role do early childhood programs play in providing young children access to digital technologies so they are “not behind” the same way we consider programs such as Head Start and publicly funded prekindergarten programs supporting the school readiness of young children?
ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION

After a brief review of the current research related to screen time in early childhood contexts, the discussion will focus on three specific topics. (1) What does and should screen time mean for young children, and should we differentiate types of screen time? (2) How do we support in-service and pre-service early childhood teachers in thinking about screen time? (3) What types of professional development, be it college coursework or in-service professional development, is needed to support early childhood professionals in finding their own answers to how to use technology and screen time in their own programs?


