

### *About Deborah Hage:*

*Drawing on 50 years of experience, both as a parent of 14 foster and adopted children and as a reactive attachment disorder therapist, working with emotionally and behaviorally impacted children (resulting from early childhood abuse and neglect), Deborah specializes in coaching parents help their children adjust and heal from past traumas, overcome their fears, and effectively integrate into their new families and environments. As a lecturer, author, therapist and coach, Deborah has helped thousands of families overcome the impacts of past neglect, abuse and other traumas; providing the support and tools they need to create for themselves a happier and more connected life.*

*The ideas and interventions presented here have not been developed solely by Deborah. She has worked with numerous other therapists and parents over the years, notably Nancy Thomas, whose continued partnership and collaboration she appreciates.*

*To learn more about Deborah, her practice and her family, please visit [deborahhage.com](http://deborahhage.com)*

### Even Good TV/Internet is Bad For Kids

(Or as John Rosemond says, "How NOT To Raise a Gifted Child.")

by Deborah Hage, MSW

The relationship elements required to create a bond are simple and straightforward. They flow naturally between parent and child in a ceaseless rhythm. Reciprocal eye contact, movement, smiles, sweet food, and touch form the [foundations of creating attachment](#) between people. These interactions are initiated with mother-infant bonding and are extended to the classroom, the courtship dance, and friendship formation. Forming healthy attachments is critical to becoming an emotionally healthy adult with the ability to function fully in society. The problem for conscientious parents then becomes how to optimize attachment interactions and minimize activities that compromise the bonding process.

While the answer is complex and tied up in numerous day to day family interactions, one response must not be overlooked. The use of television and other screens must be closely and consistently monitored. The less time children spend in front of screens the better. It is not the content of television or the internet which compromises brain and personality development - it is the process of watching.

In a society tied intrinsically to sports, news and entertainment generated by the internet the decision to limit viewing is difficult to carry out in practice. Regardless of how difficult it is, it is still an important decision to make for numerous reasons. Some of those reasons are tied to bonding and attachment, some of them are tied to physical growth and development and some of them to intellectual and educational achievement.

### Bonding and Attachment

#### **Reciprocal Eye Contact**

Screen viewing requires intent visual attention, however there is no reciprocal response. As hard as those in front of the camera try to connect with their viewing audience by staring into the lens, they are doing merely that - staring in the direction the viewer can interpret as personal eye contact. They cannot actually make eye contact, only give the perception of it. Adult viewers easily discern this pretense. They know the person on the screen is not really talking just to them. Small children lack that discernment. They believe the character represented is actually talking just to them and they get caught up in what the character is saying to them - finding the words and actions to be warm and caring. The character on the screen is always fun and entertaining to be around, never asks them to pick up their toys, never tells them it is time to go to bed, in short, never makes demands on them. Contrast that character to the ones the children actually live with and who looks more attractive as a companion? When times get rough with their parents and siblings, where can a child find solace? In front of a screen, spending time with those they have been led to believe really care about them, thus

avoiding the hard task of working through their relationships with people who do not pretend to care, but actually care.

### **Reciprocal Smiles**

Smiles, laughter, joy and fun can be found in abundance in children's programming. However, they are not reciprocal. Rather than being engaged as a participant in creating fun times, the child is merely a spectator. Rather than learning how to entertain oneself, both as an individual or as a member of a group, the child's inner drive is dulled. The joy derived from being an observer of someone else's fun is superficial and short lived. It has no deep satisfaction.

### **Sweet Food, Lovingly Given**

A cotton candy stick shared at the circus with someone who loves you has a bonus. The sweet confection becomes connected in the mind and heart with the person you are sharing it with. When parents, during the course of a fun activity, give their child gooey food which would otherwise be considered objectionable, the fatty sugars take a detour on the way to the stomach. They go first to the brain and heart and fix a message in the psyche, which forever links goodness and light to the giver of the sweet gift. When the child eats a similar treat in the future the unbidden memory will intrude and the child will connect the treat to the presence of the loved one. Repeatedly stuffing oneself with soda, candy and potato chips during the course of an afternoon spent in front of a screen just goes straight to the stomach and creates fat.

### **Touch and Movement**

Obviously none of the receptors in the skin or the inner ear are aroused by watching screens. Since they are not being stimulated none of the chemicals in the brain which connect an activity to a pleasurable relationship with a person are released. In short, none of the bonding interactions are present while a child is staring at a screen. In terms of emotional development it is wasted time.

### **Physical Growth and Personality Development**

Children who are sitting in front of a screen are not practicing running, jumping, hitting a ball, or swimming. They are not learning the complex coordination skills which will enable them to enjoy participating in physical activity. Their muscles are atrophying. Watch a child stare to an online image. Not one competency skill is being exercised. Visual tracking skills, eye-hand coordination, gross motor skills, social skills, motivation, initiative, creativity, problem solving abilities are all inhibited. John Rosemond calls television watching a "deprivational experience for the young child" as it deprives the child of the opportunity to discover and delight in his or her own potential.

Writing, coloring, drawing all require increasing mastery of fine motor skills. These skills are not developed in front of a screen. They are achieved when young hands cut and paste, build with blocks, and assemble puzzles. When children play in the mud and fingerpaint they are increasing their tactile sensitivity, something screens cannot provide.

Screens also compromise the development of cause and effect thinking and value development. Characters on screen, particularly children who sass, talk back, lie to their parents are often not held accountable for their actions. Instead the laugh track kicks in. Programming frequently shows sexual activity with no sense of what happens in real relationships when people are promiscuous. Both the good guys and the bad guys engage in violence, however, the clear message is that it is OK for people who are right to solve their problems in violent ways. The philosophy of redemptive violence, that is that good people must become violent for the good of the people, is pervasive. The goal of screen content producers is to make money by attracting advertisers. Stories are not told because they have a message to tell, but because they have a product to sell. Whatever elements which need to be incorporated into the plot to keep the viewers attention through the commercials will be used. The commercials then depict the results which occur as a result of using their product in unrealistic and mind twisting ways. Advertisers spend enormous sums of money to determine which tone of voice, which colors,

which actions, which words will motivate people to buy. Children are not sophisticated enough to withstand the expertise of people who devote their lives to figuring out what will appeal to them.

When children are accustomed to watching screens, they become accustomed to being entertained. When parents take control of the screens the child does not initially know what to do, so bugs mom. Mom doesn't want to entertain her child and so after the constant barrage of "I'm bored", gives in and the child returns to the screen. When turning off the screens parents need to realize that the home environment will get worse before it gets better. However, once it gets better and the child begins to exercise all the physical and mental processes that were dormant, it will be very good indeed.

### **Intellectual and Educational Achievement**

The window of opportunity for children to become aware of their potential is very small - only the first few years of life. By the time a child enters kindergarten the bath of physical, emotional and intellectual stimulation determines the future direction of brain and personality development. If that bath is full of activity, colors, sights, sounds, movements, experiences and relationships then the brain and personality will continue on that track. If the bath is empty of experiences then the brain and personality development will continue on that track. Parents choose.

Eric Erickson wrote extensively about the stages of human development. He stated the developmental tasks of 3 and 4 year old children was "initiative and industry" because it is during these years that children are learning to entertain themselves in creative and engaging ways. When children become enraptured with screens instead of discovering and developing their own gifts they become functionally retarded.

Parents tend to assuage their guilt and rationalize that it is OK for their child to watch television because it is "Sesame Street". None of what the child is expected to derive from Sesame Street is so important that it can't wait until kindergarten. The reality is that Sesame Street is just as bad for children as other programming as it is the process, not the content which compromises a child's development.

Most of the learning and excitement to learn in the early years stem from the child's relationship with parents, first, and kindergarten teacher, second. Being able to turn to someone close at hand to have questions answered is a critical part of the initial steps of learning. Establishing trusting relationships with others and using them as a source of companionship and answers initiates a life long learning process for children. Screen time doesn't allow for specific, individual questions which arise from the child's experience. Those can only be answered by someone in the child's immediate environment. Using screens as a primary source of information means a child will only get what someone else determines the child will get and compromises the child's ability to seek information elsewhere. Any questions or thoughts which arise in the child while viewing are lost in the relentless stream of information which keeps flowing.

### **Eye Movement**

Watching screens requires that the eyes learn to focus on the same spot. While there is movement within the spot, the spot itself does not move from side to side or forward or backward. It remains static. Training the eyes to remain focused on the same point requires training which can be pleurably accomplished if the focal point is entertaining. This screen time gladly provides. However, reading requires an entirely different set of eye movement skills. Reading requires that the object being observed stays still while the eyes move across it. In order to learn to read the eyes must learn to move from side to side, up and down and in and out. These eye movement skills are developed by playing with puzzles, Legos, swinging on a swing set, going down a slide, whirling around on a merry-go-round, and jumping rope. None of these activities are compatible with watching a screen. The eye development skills required for screen viewing are exactly the opposite required for learning to read.

### **Creativity**

Books read in early childhood are amply illustrated to draw children into the excitement of the printed page. As

books become more difficult to read and the information in them becomes more complex to absorb there are fewer and fewer illustrations and the words must perform the communication work all by themselves. This they cannot do unless the brain is actively engaged, forming the pictures, filling in the sights, sounds, movements, tastes and colors. The brain must conceptualize the words on the page and create meanings for them.

Assembling puzzles, listening to stories being read out loud, creating colorful mosaics, drawing all give the brain practice creating order out of random sights and sounds and giving them meaning.

Watching screens, however, does not require that the brain perform any of those tasks. The individual behind the camera provides the color, action, tastes, sights, and sounds. Nothing is left to the imagination. The images move so quickly the brain can do little more than absorb what it has seen. Brains which have spent too much time in front of a screen do not have the creative processing ability to make reading entertaining and enjoyable. The child looks at a printed page and sees nothing but black squiggles. The concepts, energy, and excitement which can be generated when those squiggles are interpreted are lost to the brain deadened by screens.

### **Delayed Gratification**

Screen content has little connection to real life experiences. The stories are told in such a way that the problem is presented and solved within an hour. This is not representative of the problems faced daily which may take days, weeks, months, years to be resolved, if they ever are resolved. When the problems are resolved the solutions are not nearly so neat and tidy as seen on screens.

The rewards of hard work is a concept which is totally lost in screen viewing land. To the viewer everything looks easy. Hard tasks are accomplished during commercial breaks. While the child is being sold a box of cereal the heroes solve their problems and return.

### **Attention Span Development**

Screen images pass by the eye and change on average every 3 - 4 seconds. The child watching screens does not have to watch the same thing for more than 10 seconds before the entire color, action, personality content changes. In contrast, learning to read requires that the child be able to hold the focus on a black squiggle for much longer than 10 seconds before the skill is developed to decipher it more quickly. Not having the ability to do that, the child quits in frustration. Oddly enough, the more time spent in front of screens, the shorter the attention span.

### **When Can Screen Viewing Be Incorporated Into a Child's Day?**

Does the internet and screen time have to be an ogre in our child's lives? No. There is much to commend it and numerous examples of worthwhile programming. What is damaging to the child is not watching screens on occasion, but spending hours in front of it to the exclusion of other, more worthwhile activities. There are two key points to remember when assessing whether or not your children will suffer in the long run from watching screens:

One is that bonding and attachment are critical achievements for a healthy adulthood and that no bonding activities take place in front of a screen. When children are adopted or have had other breaks in the bond, parents are hard pressed to make up the lost time without having their child wasting it. The world presses in on all sides and makes every minute available between a parent and child of precious importance.

Two is the skills for physical and intellectual growth must take precedence over the entertaining qualities of the internet. Once a child is able to read and has learned the enjoyment of self-directed activity then the foundations of healthy development have been laid and there is less chance of lasting problems being caused by watching screens.

To not take control of screen time when its hazards are so clear is a form of child neglect which will not have ramifications for many years. At the time, peace in the family is assured. The price, however, will be paid in the future, when children are not as motivated and skilled to successfully tackle the responsibilities of real life as

they could have been. They have become "learning disabled" and their brain and personality development have been irreparably stunted.

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