

Survey on television viewing and use of electronic screen products among pre-school children (2014)

Background

In view of the rapid development of the Internet and electronic screen products, such as televisions, computer games, e-books and magazines, computers and smartphones, there has been rising health concerns for children and adolescents using these products. To address the issue, the Department of Health (DH) convened the Advisory Group on Health Effects of Use of Internet and Electronic Screen Products in December 2013.

Objectives

In support of the work of the Advisory Group, the survey on television viewing and use of electronic screen products among pre-school children was conducted. It aimed to assess the prevalence, total screen time, associated factors and parental concern about television viewing and use of electronics screen products in pre-school children.

Methodology

It was a cross-sectional survey using a parent-filled questionnaire. Eligible parents were those with their children (12-month, 18-month and 48-month old) attended 30 Maternal and Child Health Centres from 11 to 17 January 2014.

Results

Overall, 1,428 questionnaires (86% response) were collected. Television (78.4%) was found to be the most popular electronic screen product used among the children with an average daily viewing time of 44.2 minutes (Table 1). In terms of median age, children started watching television at 8 months, watching DVDs at 10 months, using tablet personal computers at 16 months and computers at 24 months. The youngest age starting to use these electronic screen products was 1 month or below. Only 14 % and 12 % of the parents would always accompany their preschool children in using tablet personal computers and computers respectively, although 49% of parents said they would always accompany their children in reading. In children above 2 years old, 32% had total screen time more than 2 hours per day. The main reasons for use of screen media devices in pre-school children are for soothing, entertainment or learning.

Over 70% of parents agreed that overuse of screen media devices would affect vision, attention, language development as well as the time spent on physical activity and parenting. Eighteen per cent of parents never set any limits for their children in using screen media devices. For those who restricted on screen media use, the most common ways were

distraction (39.4%), reasoning (28.1%), setting rules (24.8%), taking actions to forbid (21.0%) and verbal accusation (20.1%).

The factors of having a television set in children's room and leaving television switched on were found to be associated with television viewing in children below 2 years old. Leaving television switched on and parental television viewing time more than 3 hours a day were associated with total screen time more than 2 hours per day in children over 2 years old.

Recommendations and Actions

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) discouraged the use of screen media for children below 2 years old and advised screen time less than 2 hours a day for other children¹. DH also released the Report of Advisory Group on Health Effects of Use of Internet and Electronic Screen Products which contained recommendations on the healthy use of the Internet and electronic screen products for children, adolescents, parents and teachers². Information leaflet will be published for parents to raise their awareness on the effects of electronic screen products on children's health and the importance of promoting children's all-round development.

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Table 1: Usage pattern of electronic screen products among preschool children

Type of electronic screen products	Prevalence of use (%)	Median age of starting (months)	Average daily viewing time (minutes)
Television	78.4	8	44.2
DVD	44.4	10	38.8
Tablet PC	38.4	16	31.6
Computer (including desktop and laptop computers)	33.6	24	31.8

¹ Committee on Public Education. Children, Adolescents, and Television. *Pediatrics* 2001;107:423

² Report of Advisory Group on Health Effects of Use of Internet and Electronic Screen Products (July 2014) www.shs.gov.hk/english/internet/health_effects.html