

Should you keep tabs on your child's tablet and smartphone use?

- **Atisha Jain, Hindustan Times**
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A family of four is seated at the table next to ours. My mother marvels at how quiet the two kids are. The little girl in a pink frock and curly hair is perhaps two years old and the boy not more than six.

The parents are going through the menu, while the kids' heads are bent down. They're staring intently at something under the table – the girl at a tablet and the boy at a smartphone. This serene modern family scene is disturbed by a voice from the tablet, 'You scored a 200.' They're playing Temple Run – and the girl is rather good at it, it seems.

And so her mother cheers. And why not? Her baby's still in diapers, can just about sit up straight, but what digital prowess! Parents seems to be doing this kind of thing a lot, I've noticed – ooh-ing and aah-ing at their toddlers' touchscreen expertise.

When I was growing up, my parents taught me how to use the remote, the keyboard and the mouse. Touchscreens are different, a swipe makes the screen come alive immediately. It's like magic. Of course, children are instantly hooked!

My three-year-old nephew hates milk. But my cousin has found the perfect tool to distract him while she feeds him – her iPad. She switches on Angry Birds, and my nephew is instantly transfixed by the myriad colours. Mission accomplished.

It's common for parents to hand touchscreen devices to pacify children throwing tantrums. Pulp Strategy Communications, a digital and interactive marketing agency, studied 2,000 parents (who had children under the age of eight) for more than three months. They found that 88 per cent of these parents let their kids use their smart devices, while 12 per cent said their kids had their own.

There are more than 40,000 kids' games available on iTunes, and thousands more on Google Play. Many of them – like *ABC For Kids* or *Kids Math* – are educational. So this isn't all bad.

“I am grateful for the brilliance of educational apps that help children learn,” says Lata Vaidyanathan, veteran educationist and former principal of Modern School, Barakhamba Road, Delhi. “Not every school has good teachers, and not all parents have the time to dedicatedly focus on their children's education. At least now you can depend on a tablet for quality learning.”

Many learning apps are game-based, so children can actually enjoy homework. Eddy is a tablet specially designed for kids. It comes pre-loaded with 'learning apps' categorised by age, subject, and mapped to school curriculum. “We've tried to marry the good qualities of gameplay with education in Eddy,” says Bharat Gulia, founder of the Eddy tablet.

Not just are tablets fun and engaging, but they are an excellent learning medium too, says Radhika Suri, director of Inspire Education. “With tablets and iPads, parents can check if the child is making errors and then correct the child,” says Suri.

And owning an individual tablet helps the child learn at her or his own pace in a fun way. “There is no fear of ridicule from teachers or peers,” adds Suri.

As technology becomes ubiquitous, many parents want their children to adapt to this digital invasion.

Jasvinder Mahajan, the principal of Delhi-based kindergarten school Blooming Tree, believes that as children's lives are filled with media at younger ages, we need to take advantage of what technology has to offer. “Times have changed, and so should we,” she says. And thus, introducing smart classes and iPads and tablets for teaching is on the school's agenda.

The flip side

It might be fun for children, but to some parents this is a matter of concern. “There was a time when we would call out our [five-year-old] son’s name and he wouldn’t respond because he was glued to the tablet,” says Guwahati-based businessman, Anand Jain (49). “He would just keep staring at the screen.”

“Harshika [one-and-half-year old] would start wailing when we took the tab away from her. And she is otherwise a happy child who doesn’t usually throw tantrums,” says Gunjan Shah, 26, a consultant based in Kolkata.



Once kids have their own tablet, says Suri, parents complain that they have a hard time getting them to engage with anything else. “My son is two-and-half-year-old and he is no longer interested in playing with the Lego bricks or any other toy,” says Chennai-based homemaker Neha Patni (29). “He prefers playing *Candy Crush* on the phone or watching *Twinkle Twinkle Little Star* on YouTube.”

Toys are no fun because a talking doll can only talk so much, a tablet can do everything she can and more. But when your tablet is a toy, a friend and teacher – there’s a problem.

“The child might be learning to colour on the screen, or recognise shapes,” says clinical psychologist Dr Aruna Broota. “But can it be compared to experiential learning, like holding a crayon with the fingers, or feeling the texture of a block or smelling something? I think not.”

Besides, tabs can be detrimental in the long run, says Manpreet Kaur, the principal of GD Goenka School, Delhi, because they comprise a passive way of learning – a one way process – where the child only takes instructions from a digital source. “Teaching, on the other hand, is a continuous process where the child interacts with an adult,” says Kaur.

The overall time spent on the gadget is more important than the quality of the apps used. “More time on the tablet/iPad means less physical activity,” says Dr Vikas Taneja, paediatrician, Max Hospital. An hour spent on a tablet is an hour spent away from parents and family. The idea, after all, is to make the child a social being and not an isolated learner.

“Parents believe that playing games on iPads will improve their child’s hand-eye coordination. Or do wonders to their IQ. But what they forget is that in the process children lose social skills, which is imperative to succeed in the world,” says Dr Taneja.

After using the fast-paced *Temple Run* and hitting *Angry Birds* within a time-limit, children find themselves in a slower-paced life. On the tablet, they can forward scenes or exit from games they don't like, but there is no running away from real life.

“There is no choice in a class and that's where behavioural problems come up and they tend to lose patience. Their frustration level dips and this makes them violent,” says Dr Broota.

The verdict

There has been no body of research to date in India that has proved that tablet or the iPad makes toddlers smarter, or that it affects their development adversely. But then every new medium is invariably accused of affecting children adversely.

However every one – supporters of conventional education, modern tech-learning cheerleaders, doctors – agree that moderation is important.

“Some parents want to keep their child absolutely away from gadgets. I am not in favour of that,” says Suri. Because it is impossible to escape technology and its impact on our lives.

“But handing over tablets to toddlers as a formal tool in class, for them to use to learn their preliminaries – it is against their fine motor development, which is a child's ability to control their body movements,” says Vaidyanathan.

So what then is the perfect age for a child to be exposed to the wonders of technology? “Toddlers, definitely not. Pre-schoolers, no,” she emphasises. “I would say early-primary is not a bad place. They should learn to hold a pencil before a stylus.”

Parents need to restrict their children's screen time. The study by Pulp Strategy found that kids aged 5 and below are using mobile apps for a whopping 18-20 hours every week.

“A rationed exposure to technology is imperative. Irrespective of whether a child is given a tablet at two years of age or eight, s/he will pick it up instantly,” says Shaili Sathyu of Gillo Theatre Repertory. You don't have to be worried about your child being left behind in this very digital world. You should be concerned about their natural growth, she says.

A good start would be to ban gadgets on school nights and set limits on weekends. “Because it is so engaging,” says Suri, “so there is always the risk that children can get obsessed with technology.”

In an interview, Steve Jobs, the late CEO of Apple, on being asked if his kids love the iPad, said, “They haven't used it. We limit the technology our kids use at home.”

This should say something to parents who let children glow in the light of touch-screens.