

# Parents' opinions on parental mediation strategies used to instruct toddlers

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## Summary

Children's use of touch-screen devices begins in infancy, and by the age of one, children are active media users. There is little clear guidance as to how very young children can learn from touch screens and what should be the role of parental assistance. On the other hand, children's use of technology is affected by parental beliefs and that is why it is important to focus on infant and toddler studies.

Touch-screen devices have become an unavoidable part of our lives and also part of toddlers' and infants' everyday life. Studies with parents (Holloway et al., 2013; Rideout & Hamel, 2006; Suoninen, 2013) have shown that children's experiences with screen media start as early as 3 months and that children will become regular digital media users during the first year of their life, using screen media up to 2 hours a day. The media industry maintains that infant-directed video material can provide an opportunity to improve early learning through educational content that focuses on themes such as language, shape, colour, music, reading, and numbers, embedded in an engaging and perceptually salient video format (Courage & Howe, 2010).

Despite the optimism of media producers there is insufficient empirical evidence as to whether learning from the screen is beneficial or harmful to children. Scientists have different views on this subject. Children's ability to learn from the screen has been linked with the active participation of parents (Sims & Colunga, 2013) also from a lack of understanding of the symbolic medium: Infants do not know how depicted objects differ from real ones (Richert et al., 2011; Zack et al., 2009). Different studies (Anderson & Pempek, 2005; Barr, 2013; Zack et al., 2009) reveal that the infants' ability to transfer learning from screen to real-life situations is relatively poor and that is why infants and toddlers learn more from live personal interactions than from screens.

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Today's homes have gone through extensive changes. Personal computers, easy to use operating systems, gaming consoles and the internet have changed the media landscape of homes where 60% of Estonians are able to use touchable devices according to the Information System Authority's „*Touch screen user's security awareness and safe behaviour*” research (2014). Touch screen technology and tablet applications designed for young children fit well with early childhood pedagogy and the emergent fine motor development of children in the early childhood age range (Disney et al., 2013). According to Segal (2011), there is the growing evidence that spontaneous gestures affect thought and possibly learning, because embodied interaction with gestural interfaces involves more senses than traditional (mouse-based) interfaces and includes direct touch and physical movement, which helps retain the knowledge that is being acquired.

Livingstone and Helsper (2008) pointed out three types of parental mediation: active mediation (talking about media content while the child is engaging with the medium), restrictive mediation (setting rules that restrict use of the medium) and co-using/co-viewing (parent remains present while the child is engaged with the medium). Nikken and Jansz (2006) reported similar strategies. Nikken and Jansz (2014) added new types of mediation-supervising (supervising the child from nearby, allowing the child his or her freedom on the computer). Kalmus and Roosalu (2011) composed two extra indices of parental mediation: monitoring mediation (checking the computer later, to see which sites the child visited) and technical restrictions/solutions (filtering software; monitoring software). Parental mediation (interactions that parents have with children about their media use) is divided into six main types but three of them (active mediation, restrictive mediation and co-viewing/using) are the most common. According to this analysis, parents develop different views on monitoring children's online activities as their child gets older.

The aim of this study was to examine Estonian parents' opinions about the necessity of touch screen devices for infants and toddlers, including parental involvement during the child screen-play.

The target group consisted of children 0–3 years of age. A web based questionnaire was sent to pre-school directors. Out of 400 responses 50.7% per cent applied to girls and 49.3% per cent to boys. 91.5 per cent of the respondents were either a mother or some other female guardian and 8.5 per cent of them either a father or some other male guardian of a child.

The results of the study lead to the conclusion that parents let their children use touch screens because they saw it as educationally beneficial.

For those parents, tablets have a place in the development and learning in the home environment. Parents also use tablets as a babysitter to keep their children entertained. Equally, there are parents who do not allow their children to use touch screens at all. Some parents perceived a health risk to their children's eyesight and also the possible adverse effects to parent-child communication.

Young children watch audio-visual programmes, short clips of programmes and videos through *YouTube*; they mainly use a mobile phone or tablet computers for this purpose. Many parents of the youngest children need information about parental involvement i.e. how to supervise a child's use of digital devices. Parents are very interested in obtaining pedagogical advice, especially as regards educational and age-appropriate content, suggestions for managing children's tablets and advice as how to keep children safe online.

Some strategies indicated active and restrictive involvement, supervision and technical restrictions but further study is needed to investigate how parental involvement occurs in the age-group of two and a half to three year old children.

*Keywords:* infant, toddler, video-deficit, touch-screens, parental involvement