

Technology and Young Children in the Digital Age

A Report from the Erikson Institute

Summary

Children today are born into a world where technology is deeply integrated into the fabric of daily life. Parents use and depend on technology at work, socially, and in the home. But how do parents of the nation's youngest children think about and guide the use of technology during the early years?

In a new national survey conducted by the Erikson Institute, technology use by young children under age 6 was found to be almost universal. In this study of 1,000 parents across the country, the most current snapshot of technology use among children in this age group today, 85 percent of parents reported that they allow their young children to use technology. Television, tablets, smartphones, and computers were the most popular. More than three quarters of those surveyed said that they use technology along with their child on a daily basis for up to two hours.

Perhaps somewhat unanticipated, 86 percent of parents reported that they were satisfied with how their young children use technology, relating technology to benefits associated with child development and literacy. In fact, more than half of the parents said they believe that technology supports school readiness and impacts success in school.

Despite these perceived benefits, 72 percent of parents had concerns about technology use, specifically around too much screen time, inappropriate content, commercial messages aimed at young children, and how technology use takes away from time spent outdoors, enjoying active play, and whether it disrupts sleep.

Much like pediatricians, early childhood teachers are a trusted source of information for parents, our survey found. These two groups of professionals have a unique opportunity to educate parents around the best uses of technology during a child's formative years. Erikson Institute and its Technology in Early Childhood Center provide leadership to inform the national discussion about technology in early childhood. The new knowledge we generate and expertise we share supports the work of these and other early childhood professionals and offers parents the most up-to-date information to guide their choices.

Introduction

To better understand how parents of young children are responding to the digital age, Erikson Institute and its internationally recognized Technology in Early Childhood Center conducted a national survey to examine parental habits, attitudes, beliefs, and concerns about technology and its use. Erikson surveyed a nationally representative sample of 1,000 parents of young children under age 6. Of our total respondents, 45 percent were parents of children under age 3 and the remaining 55 percent were parents of children from ages 3 to 5. In all, 58 percent were mothers, 23 percent were Latino, 13 percent were African American, 84 percent were married or living with a partner, and 68 percent were employed full or part time.

Our survey results remind us that we live in a world where technology is all around us, and so how we choose to use it—for ourselves and for our young children—is an issue that will be with us from this point forward. At Erikson, our longstanding expertise in child development and our unique work focusing on the intersection between early childhood and technology allows us to support parents and professionals who work with young children, providing the best information to guide decisions and discussions about how adults can jointly engage with young children and technology to promote positive relationships, learning, and discovery.

What follows is a presentation of our 2016 survey findings along with tips from Erikson experts.

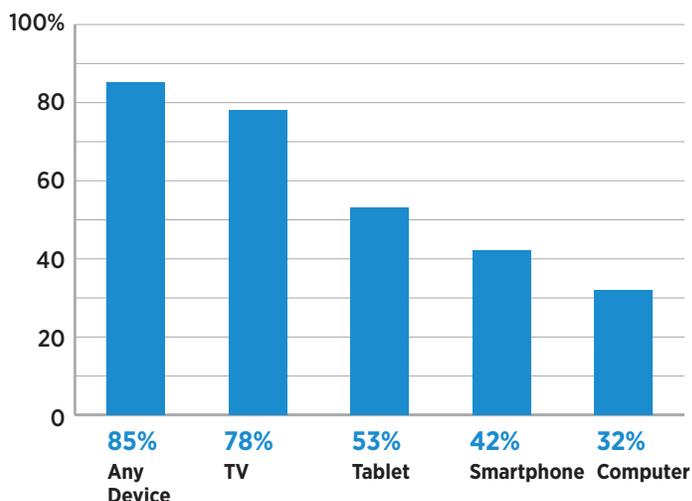
Technology in the Home

Televisions, computers, tablets, and smartphones are familiar fixtures in today's home environments. Regardless of a child's age, parents have a significant role in modeling healthy behaviors and habits of use, but with younger children especially, parents have more influence over how technology is introduced and used in the home.

Almost all of the parents who took part in our survey reported using technology on a daily basis at home for their own personal uses: 90 percent use smartphones; 85 percent watch television; 66 percent use computers; and 47 percent use tablets and e-readers. A significant number of respondents—86 percent—said they were satisfied with how they use technology with their young children in the home.

We then asked parents specifically about what technology their young children were allowed to access. By far, television was the most popular with 78 percent of all parents surveyed allowing children to watch television (68 percent of them with children under age 3, and 86 percent with children from ages 3 to 5). Tablets and e-readers were allowed by 53 percent of parents; smartphones by 42 percent; and computers by 32 percent. Overall, only 15 percent of the parents surveyed said their young children did not have access to technology in the home, and this differed by age: 25 percent of children under age 3, and 8 percent of children ages 3 to 5.

Technology used by children under 6, as reported by parents

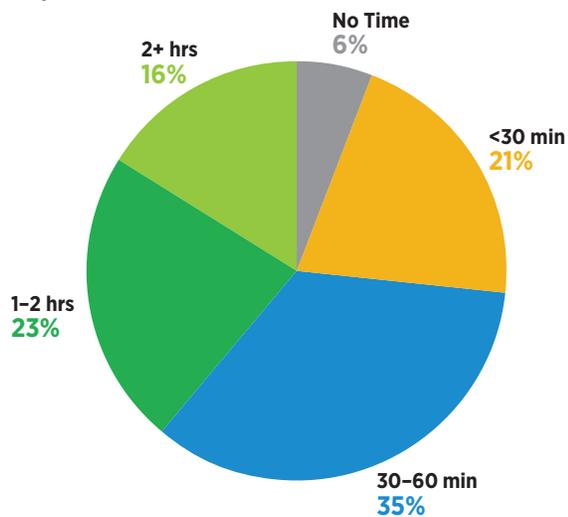


How Families Are Engaging with Technology

When parents use and experience technology with their young children, it can promote learning, build important relationships, and help model healthy habits and positive ways to interact with others, play, and learn. When parents and young children view screens together, it is also a way to monitor use and guide children toward more meaningful content through interactive exploration or activities that encourage creativity and discovery.

Nearly 84 percent of parents said their children use technology with them or another parent in the home. For those parents who said they personally engaged in technology with their children, 35 percent said they spend from 30 minutes to one hour a day and 23 percent said they engage from one to two hours a day.

Time parents spend using technology with young children each day

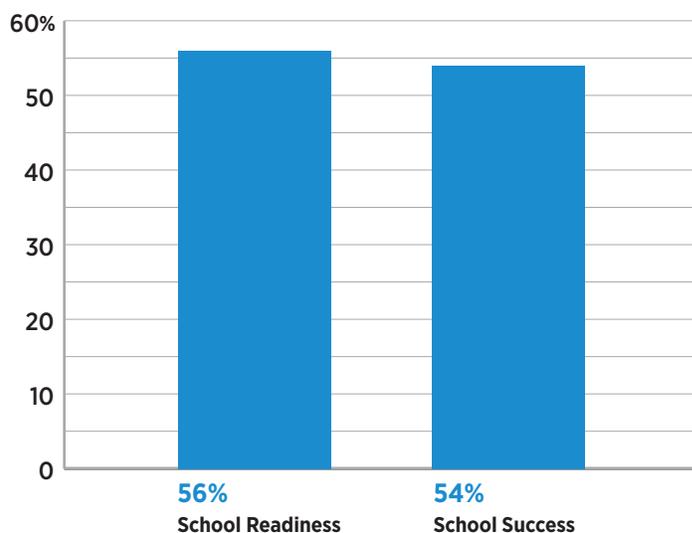


Most parents surveyed—62 percent—said they felt that technology had a positive impact on the time spent with their young children while 24 percent expressed negative associations with such technology use and 14 percent were unsure. Parents who reported negative feelings were largely those with children under age 3.

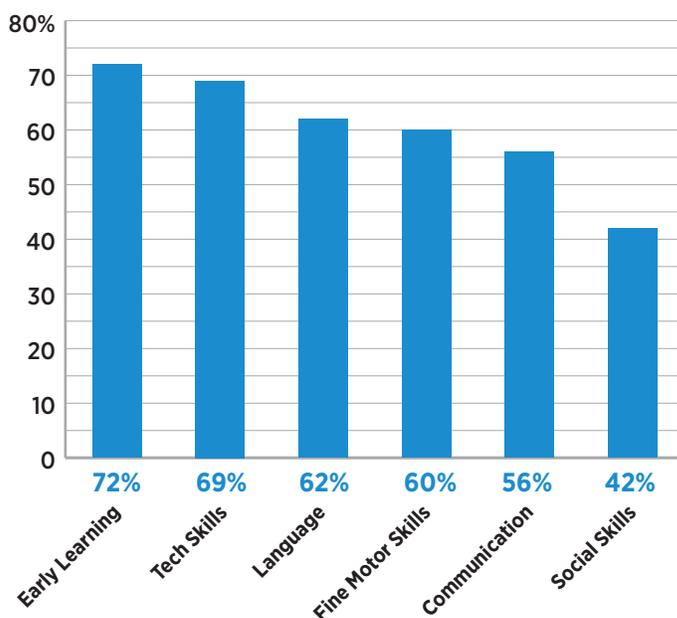
The Value of Integrating Technology in Family Life

In the survey, an overwhelming majority—86 percent of parents—reported that they are satisfied with how their young children access and use technology in the home, citing benefits such as early learning and positive development. In fact, 56 percent of parents believed that their child’s technology use promotes school readiness and 54 percent associate technology use with having an impact on success in school.

Parents perceived benefits on school readiness and success from technology use



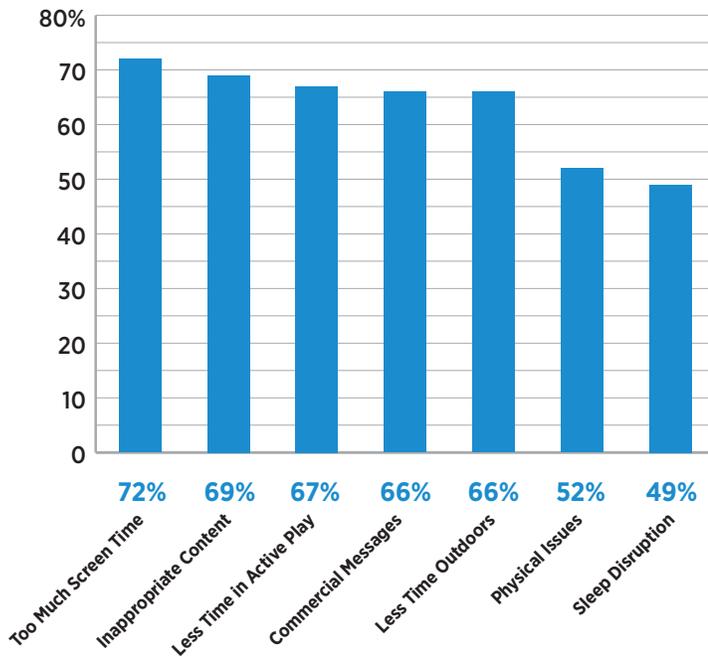
Parents perceived benefits associated with technology use



Parents also identified developmental benefits for their child: 72 percent see a benefit to early learning; 62 percent to language skills; and 69 percent to computer and technology skills. It is important to note that parents were discerning about the benefits, as only 42 percent felt that technology benefitted their child’s social interaction skills.

However, while embracing the benefits of technology, parents also expressed significant concerns about too much screen time (72 percent); inappropriate content (69 percent); and commercial messages aimed at young children (66 percent). Parents also had concerns about how technology in the home impacts a child’s time spent outdoors (66 percent); reduces active play (67 percent); and disrupts sleep (49 percent).

Concerns reported by parents about technology use for children under 6



Trusted Sources for Technology Advice

Where do parents look for answers as technology rapidly evolves all around us? Parents in our survey identified three groups of people they may already trust or professionals they consider to have expertise: Family members, including their own parents (39 percent); pediatricians (21 percent); and early childhood teachers (15 percent). Pediatricians were viewed as the ‘most trusted’ by parents of children younger than 3, those with higher levels of education, and those with higher household incomes. Parents of children ages 3 to 5 and those with higher household incomes were more likely to choose early childhood teachers as the most trusted.

However, only a small number of parents surveyed—36 percent—reported that their pediatrician had talked with them about technology use. For these parents, this conversation was quite meaningful as they were more likely to choose pediatricians as their most trusted source.

When parents were asked to rank each of these sources individually, 51 percent ranked pediatricians as the most trusted, followed by family members (45 percent) and early childhood teachers (38 percent).

The Way Forward: Parenting in the Digital Age

Through the leading-edge work of our Technology in Early Childhood Center at Erikson Institute, we share the most current knowledge on technology and young children with parents and early childhood professionals, combining what we know about child development and relationships with the most recent research and trusted, practical advice to help adults make informed choices while navigating the digital age.

We know from child development research and emerging evidence about technology use at young ages that when an adult and child explore and use technology *together*, it can result in positive experiences that promote learning and the development of healthy technology habits.

We also know that parents are the most influential role models for young children and technology use, so it is important for parents to be mindful of their own technology habits during a child’s formative years.

Tips from the experts at Erikson Institute’s Technology in Early Childhood Center

- Parents have many important roles in helping children use technology in healthy ways. Learning how to manage, monitor, and mentor around technology use for young children begins with paying attention to how adults use technology in the home.
- Relationships matter most in a child’s early years. Explore technology *with* your young children and take the time to discover together. Joint exploration promotes learning. Find interactive content that appeals to your child’s interests and let him or her learn how to make decisions about how to explore. Help your child tell a story or create art or discover a new topic using a camera, computer, or other device. Digital tools we use every day can be powerful tools for family engagement.
- Rethink screen time and manage its use. Young children have access to a variety of screen media today, but not all screens are created equal. Shift your focus from *how much* they watch to *what* they watch. Focus on the quality of the content and level of engagement and emphasize opportunities for interactions, relationships, and social emotional learning.
- Healthy technology use is about balance. Strive for a healthy balance of technology engagement with your children and for parent-child experiences that require no technology at all. Use technology to support the joy of learning—to engage, empower, and inspire your child.
- Manage your own technology use thoughtfully. Young children learn habits by watching the adults around them, so model healthy technology habits. Manage the impact on family time. It can include screen time but children also need family time without screens and digital devices. Plan to unplug. Ask, “What can we do together when we turn our devices off?” Encourage playtime, including outdoor time, when no technology is required.

About Erikson Institute

Erikson Institute is the nation’s premier independent institution of higher education committed to ensuring that all children have equitable opportunities to realize their potential. We uniquely prepare leaders in child development, social work, and early childhood education to improve the lives of young children and their families. We educate, create new knowledge, provide direct services, and advocate — because nothing matters more than a child’s early years.

Survey Methodology

This survey was conducted online in the United States by YouGov for Erikson Institute between August 18-29, 2016. For this survey, 1,000 parents with children under age 6 were interviewed. The respondents were matched to a sampling frame on gender, age, race, and education. The frame was constructed by stratified sampling from the full 2013 American Community Survey Sample collected by the U. S. Census Bureau.