

Giving your child a screen may hinder emotional regulation, study says. Here's what to do instead

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December 12, 2022



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It's late, dinner is just now on the stove, your phone is ringing, and your child's tantrum begins. A little screen time almost always works to calm them down.

Tempting as it may be to hand them a smartphone or turn on the TV as a default response, soothing with digital devices may lead to more problems with emotional reactivity down the road, a new study has shown.

"Even slightly increasing a child's emotional reactivity, that just means it's more likely when one of those daily frustrations comes up, you're more likely to get a bigger reaction," said lead study author Dr. Jenny Radesky, a developmental behavioral pediatrician.

Researchers looked at 422 parent and caregiver responses to assess how likely they were to utilize devices for distraction and how dysregulated their 3- to 5-year-old child's behavior was over a six-month period, according to the [study published Monday in the JAMA Pediatrics](#).

Frequently using digital devices to distract from unpleasant and disruptive behavior like tantrums was associated with more emotional dysregulation in kids — particularly boys and children who were already struggling with emotional regulation, according to the study.

"When you see your 3- to 5-year-old having a tough emotional moment, meaning they are screaming and crying about something, they're getting frustrated, they might be hitting or kicking or lying on the floor. ... If your go-to strategy is to distract them or get

them to be quiet by using media, then this study suggests that is not helping them in the long term,” said Radesky, associate professor of behavioral sciences at the University of Michigan Medical School.

There are two problems with distracting with media: It takes away an opportunity to teach the child about how to respond to difficult emotions, and it can reinforce that big displays of their difficult emotions are effective ways to get what they want, Radesky said.

“I’m just going to show big emotions so we can stop what we’re doing, and I can escape this demand,” she said.

The study lines up with the current recommendations from the American Academy of Pediatrics, the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry and the World Health Organization that children ages 2 to 5 should have very limited screen time, said Dr. Joyce Harrison, associate professor of psychiatry and behavioral sciences at Johns Hopkins School of Medicine in Baltimore.

Harrison, who was not involved in the study, said that although there were limitations to the diversity of the participants, it was well designed and is supported by the existing research.

What else to do

Instead of distraction, Radesky recommends taking tantrums and emotional dysregulation as opportunities to teach children how to identify and respond to emotions in helpful ways.

“There is no substitute for adult interaction, modeling and teaching,” Harrison said.

Instead of punishing their expressions of frustration, anger or sadness with a time-out, Radesky said it can be a good idea to set up a comfy place for kids to collect their feelings — maybe something with beanbags or blankets or a tent.

The message should be: “You’re not being bad for having big emotions, you just need to reset. We all need to reset sometimes,” she added.

It can be helpful for caregivers to help kids name their emotions and offer solutions when they are responding inappropriately to those feelings, she said.

That could mean identifying that the hitting and crying is because a child misses their mom and then offering a hug and to go get a photo of her, Radesky added.

But sometimes talking about emotions are too abstract for preschool-age kids, and in those cases Radesky recommended using [color zones](#) to talk about emotions.

Calm and content can be green; worried or agitated can be yellow; and upset or angry can be red, using graphics or images of faces to help kids match what they're feeling with what color zone they are in. To reinforce it, adults can talk about their own emotions in terms of colors in front of their kids, Radesky said.

You and your child can go through the colors together and write down calming tools for the different zones, she added.

For the adults

Those teaching moments take a lot of work, but never fear — you don't have to do it perfectly every time, Radesky said.

Sometimes you will have the emotional reserves to walk through these feelings with your child, but sometimes you might only have the energy to offer a hug or wait out the behavior, she added.

“Step one is just parents taking care to notice when you are feeling that surge of your own emotion in response to your child's emotion,” Radesky said. “I can try to stay calm to show them their emotions aren't scary.”

What really matters is that the child sees that the adults in their lives are trying to understand what the feeling is, where it is coming from and how to help, she said.

Sometimes, watching media is an answer, but be selective. If you are going on a long drive or running a lot of errands and need to keep your child calm, it may be helpful to keep a child occupied with media, Radesky said.

And there is some content that can help teach emotional regulation when your tank is empty. Finding media that is aimed at speaking to children directly about emotions — like Daniel Tiger or [Elmo Belly Breathing](#) — can be like a meditation instead of distraction, Radesky said.

Raising children is a complex and sometimes overwhelming task, and no caregiver will be able to give their child everything they want to all the time, she said.

The study isn't saying to never distract a child with media, but rather to keep your go-to tools ones that encourage emotional regulation, Radesky said.

Read the article [online](#).