

Is E-Reading to Your Toddler Story Time, or Simply Screen Time?

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By DOUGLAS QUENQUA



Credit Jessica Kourkounis for The New York Times

Clifford the Big Red Dog looks fabulous on an iPad. He sounds good, too — tap the screen and hear him pant as a blue truck roars into the frame. “Go, truck, go!” cheers the narrator.

But does this count as story time? Or is it just screen time for babies?

It is a question that parents, pediatricians and researchers are struggling to answer as children’s books, just like all the other ones, migrate to digital media.

For years, child development experts have advised parents to read to their children early and often, citing studies showing its linguistic, verbal and social benefits. In June, the American Academy of Pediatrics [advised doctors](#) to remind parents at every visit that they should read to their children from birth, prescribing books as enthusiastically as vaccines and vegetables.

On the other hand, the academy strongly recommends no screen time for children under 2, and less than two hours a day for older children.

At a time when reading increasingly means swiping pages on a device, and app stores are bursting with reading programs and learning games aimed at infants and preschoolers, which bit of guidance should parents heed?

Photo



Therese Madden and her daughter, Beatrice, 2, read “Clifford the Small Red Puppy” in Philadelphia.

The answer, researchers say, is not yet entirely clear. “We know how children learn to read,” said Kyle Snow, the applied research director at the National Association for the Education of Young Children. “But we don’t know how that process will be affected by digital technology.”

Part of the problem is the newness of the devices. Tablets and e-readers have not been in widespread use long enough for the sorts of extended studies that will reveal their effects on learning.

Dr. Pamela High, the pediatrician who wrote the June policy for the pediatrics group, said electronic books were intentionally not addressed. “We tried to do a strongly evidence-based policy statement on the issue of reading starting at a very young age,” she said. “And there isn’t any data, really, on e-books.”

But a handful of new studies suggest that reading to a child from an electronic device undercuts the dynamic that drives language development.

“There’s a lot of interaction when you’re reading a book with your child,” Dr. High said. “You’re turning pages, pointing at pictures, talking about the story. Those things are lost somewhat when you’re using an e-book.”

In a [2013 study](#), researchers found that children ages 3 to 5 whose parents read to them from an electronic book had lower reading comprehension than children whose parents used traditional books. Part of the reason, they said, was that parents and children using an electronic device spent more time focusing on the device itself than on the story (a conclusion [shared by at least two other studies](#)).

“Parents were literally putting their hands over the kids’ hands and saying, ‘Wait, don’t press the button yet. Finish this up first,’” said Dr. Julia Parish-Morris, a developmental psychologist at Children’s Hospital of Philadelphia and the lead author of the 2013 study that was conducted at Temple University. Parents who used conventional books were more likely to engage in what education researchers call “dialogic reading,” the sort of back-and-forth discussion of the story and its relation to the child’s life that research has shown are key to a child’s linguistic development.

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Complicating matters is that fewer and fewer children’s e-books can strictly be described as books, say researchers. As technology evolves, publishers are adding bells and whistles that encourage detours.

“What we’re really after in reading to our children is behavior that sparks a conversation,” said Kathy Hirsh-Pasek, a professor of psychology at Temple and co-author of the 2013 study. “But if that book has things that disrupt the conversation, like a game plopped right in the middle of the story, then it’s not offering you the same advantages as an old-fashioned book.”

Of course, e-book publishers and app developers point to interactivity as an educational advantage, not a distraction. Many of those bells and whistles — Clifford’s bark, the sleepy narration of “Goodnight Moon,” the appearance of the word “ham” when a child taps the ham in the Green Eggs and Ham app — help the child pick up language, they say.

There is some evidence to bear out those claims, at least in relation to other technologies. A [study](#) by the University of Wisconsin in 2013 found that 2-year-olds learned words faster with an interactive app as opposed to one that required no action.

But when it comes to learning language, researchers say, no piece of technology can

substitute for a live instructor — even if the child appears to be paying close attention.

Photo



A co-author of a recent study said, “What we’re really after in reading to our children is behavior that sparks a conversation.” Credit Jessica Kourkounis for The New York Times

Patricia K. Kuhl, a director of the Institute for Learning and Brain Sciences at the University of Washington, led a study in 2003 that compared a group of 9-month-old babies who were addressed in Mandarin by a live instructor with a group addressed in Mandarin by an instructor on a DVD. Children in a third group were exposed only to English.

“The way the kids were staring at the screen, it seemed obvious they would learn better from the DVDs,” she said. But brain scans and language testing revealed that the DVD group “learned absolutely nothing,” Dr. Kuhl said.

“Their brain measures looked just like the control group that had just been exposed to English. The only group that learned was the live social interaction group.”

In other words, “it’s being talked with, not being talked at,” that teaches children language, Dr. Hirsh-Pasek said.

Today, what Dr. Kuhl found is commonly referred to as the “Baby Einstein” effect, named for the popular video series that entranced children from the late 1990s to the mid-2000s, but was ultimately found to have a negative association with language development in infants. In 2009, the Walt Disney Company, facing the threat of a class-action lawsuit, [offered refunds](#) to people who had bought the videos.

Similarly, perhaps the biggest threat posed by e-books that read themselves to children, or engage them with games, is that they could lull parents into abdicating their educational responsibilities, said Mr. Snow of the National Association for the Education of Young Children.

“There’s the possibility for e-books to become the TV babysitters of this generation,” he said. “We don’t want parents to say, ‘There’s no reason for me to sit here and turn pages and tell my child how to read the word, because my iPad can do it.’ ”

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But parents may find it difficult to avoid resorting to tablets.

Claudia Raleigh, a mother of three children under 6 years old in Berkley, Mich., said she adhered strictly to the A.A.P. guidelines but found that she needed to distract her toddler, Teddy, during his sister’s swim class. “You know how hard it is to wait somewhere with a 2-year-old,” she said. “So that was his introduction to the iPad. It kept him from jumping in the pool.”

“I considered it a lifesaving device,” she said with a laugh.

The guilt, she added, did not linger for long. “I literally read to my kids every day since birth,” she said. “I’m over feeling guilty about a little screen time.”

Even literacy advocates say the guidelines can be hard to follow, and that allowing limited screen time is not high on the list of parental missteps. “You might have an infant and think you’re down with the A.A.P. guidelines, and you don’t want your baby in front of a screen, but then you have a grandparent on Skype,” Mr. Snow said. “Should you really be tearing yourself apart? Maybe it’s not the world’s worst thing.”

“The issue is when you’re in the other room and Skyping with the baby cause he likes it,” he said. Even if screen time is here to stay as a part of American childhood, good old-fashioned books seem unlikely to disappear anytime soon. Parents note that there is an emotional component to paper-and-ink storybooks that, so far, does not seem to extend to their electronic counterparts, however engaging.

“Lilly definitely has an iPad, and there are education apps she uses,” Amy Reid, a

publicist at CNBC, said of her 4-year-old. “But for her, there is nothing like the excitement of choosing her own book and bringing it home from the library.”