

IS THERE AN APP FOR GOOD PARENTING?

If you've gone to a mall or family restaurant recently, it's likely that you have seen children playing games or watching videos on tablets. Whereas it used to be difficult to get children to behave in stores or at a restaurant, parents are finding that a tablet or smartphone can be an effective babysitter. Manufacturers have picked up on this trend and offer several tablets designed specifically for kids: Samsung has the Galaxy Tab 3 Kids Edition, LeapFrog sells the LeapPad2 PowerLearning Tablet, nabi provides the nabi XD and nabi 2, and ClickN offers the KIDS 7" tablet, to name just a few.

Producing and selling technology for kids has proven a profitable business. But when is it too much technology? The American Academy of Pediatrics and the Mayo Clinic both urge parents to not allow children younger than two years of age to interact with any device with a screen (television, computer, tablet), out of concern that it will have negative effects on children's brain development, including the threats of language delays and damage to their social, emotional, and cognitive skills.⁴² Furthermore, research has shown that increased "screen time" (defined as the number of hours children spend interacting with any device with an electronic screen) leads to increased risks of obesity, irregular sleep, behavioral problems, and impaired academic performance.

Despite such warnings, companies continue to produce technology products geared toward younger and younger children.⁴³ One of the latest is Fisher-Price's Newborn-to-Toddler Apptivity Seat⁴⁴—essentially a small chair for newborns, with a bar that hangs an iPad a few inches from the child's face. As might be expected, the introduction prompted a massive outcry from child advocacy groups,

such as the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood (CCFC), which filed complaints with the Federal Trade Commission about claims Fisher-Price has posted on its website, asserting that the chair in concert with a tablet actually helps babies' brain development.

Fisher-Price's response? It has added a "note to customers" on the product's web page. After suggesting that parents limit their children's screen time, it goes on to state, "we realize this type of technology in infant products isn't for everyone. That's why our Apptivity Seat is just one of more than a dozen baby seats we make, giving parents lots of choices with the options they prefer for their family's lifestyle."⁴⁵

Nor is the company alone in its efforts. With the 2-in-1 iPotty, CTA Digital suggests that parents affix their tablet to their children's potty training seats. Then the children can play with an app or watch a video while learning how to use the potty—often a challenging task for both parents and their children. Since its introduction, the potty seat has been extremely popular, becoming one of the company's top-selling products.⁴⁶

The offerings also do not stop at products. Mattel (the parent company of Fisher-Price) has developed a suite of iPad Apptivity apps, available for free to parents who buy the seat. The early development content shows high-contrast patterns, so babies' young eyes can follow them, and features soothing sounds of nature. For slightly older children, the app advances to introduce numbers and letters. Each visual presentation times out after 10 to 12 minutes.

On an even more advanced level, Netflix has expanded its line of self-produced content, beyond fan favorites such as *Arrested Development* or *Orange Is the New Black*, to include series for children.⁴⁷ By appealing to young consumers, Netflix hopes to increase the loyalty of the entire household, reasoning that parents are unlikely to cancel their subscription if Netflix is the only place kids can get the latest episodes of some of their favorite shows.

For parents, innovative products for children can be a lifesaver: They keep kids entertained, help with potty training, and offer a convenient distraction. Moreover, many parents today already rely heavily on tablets and other screens for their own purposes, making it difficult for them to avoid screen time for their children. In this sense, companies are merely providing the products and services that parents, and their children, want.



While parents may want devices that keep their children entertained, screen time at such a young age may be harmful to children's cognitive development.

Questions

1. Who benefits from products designed to give children and babies more screen time? Who is harmed?
2. Who has a greater ethical responsibility in relation to children and screen time: companies or parents? Present arguments for both sides.
3. What does Fisher-Price's "note to parents" on its website suggest about its corporate ethics policy?

Endnotes

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3. Claire Cain Miller and Somini Sengupta, "Selling Secrets of Phone Users to Advertisers," *The New York Times*, October 5, 2013.
4. Simon Dumenco, "Microsoft: 'Your Privacy Is Our Priority.' NSA: 'LOL!'" *Advertising Age*, June 7, 2013.
5. Matt Appuzo and Nicole Perlroth, "U.S. Relaxes Some Data Disclosure Rules," *The New York Times*, January 27, 2014.
6. Theodore Levitt, *Marketing Imagination* (Detroit, MI: Free Press, 1983).
7. Amy Harmon and Andrew Pollack, "Battle Brewing over Labeling of Genetically Modified Food," *The New York Times*, May 24, 2012.
8. Laura Parker, "The GMO Labeling Battle Is Heating Up—Here's Why," *National Geographic*, January 11, 2014; Stefanie Strom,