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Children are always astounded by technology and now use it more than ever before, but handing them your iPad may not be the best idea. Dev Goswami & Anindra Siqueira tell you how to help your children find the right balance

Children understand technology better than most adults, and in fact, they seem to have an innate grasp of it. Case in point: Last year, a five-year-old boy from San Diego, Kristoffer Von Hassel, found a way to access his father's Xbox Live account without entering the correct password, bypassing Xbox One's security. He inadvertently discovered a flaw in Microsoft's security — a move that got him credited as a security researcher by Microsoft. As technology becomes smarter and more engaging, children are spending an increasing amount of time using smartphones and tablets.

THE STUDY

A recent study conducted by experiential marketing firm Pulp Strategy, shed some light on how much time children actually spend on applications. The study found that children below five-years-old were using applications for a staggering 18-20 hours every week!

While this may not necessarily be cause for concern if you are a parent, you should set time limits to ensure that your children maintain a balance between mobile use and other activities such as their studies, hobbies, outdoor activities and time spent with their friends. Of the parents surveyed by Pulp Strategy, 97% owned at least one smart device and 88% of them gave their children their devices to use on occasion, while the remaining 12% said that their children had their own device.

The study also found that by the age of eight, 97% of children had used a smart device. However, only 23% of parents reported that their children were using the applications as learning tools — the remaining 77% used them to play games. Also, the average weekly use among children in the 0-5 age group was the highest — about 18-20 hours! However, this declined amongst children who are over five-years-old.

“Companies haven’t created smart phones for children, but the access to instant play and learning opportunities and potentially quiet time for parents, all contribute towards creating a secondary user, children, who have seeded an app-revolution of sorts,” says Ambika Sharma, MD, Pulp Strategy Communications. Children who are just five-years-old know how to access online app stores such as the Google Play Store and download the games that they want. So, it becomes important for parents to set boundaries. But, how do you strike a balance?

Maintaining a balance

Restricting your child’s smartphones access will only fuel rebellion. The following tips will help control their usage in a healthy manner:

- **Don’t buy it for them:** We won’t tell you what’s best for your child — buying them a smartphone is your call. However, it’s a good idea to refer to it as a shared family device, instead of buying it just for them. This may not help directly, but it will prevent your child from making statements that are hard to argue with such as ‘But, you bought it for me!’
- **Make it a reward:** This is one of the best tips to strike a balance. Instead of giving them a free hand with how and when your children use their smartphones or tablets, give them a certain number of hours during which they can use the device. Increase or decrease these hours as a form of reward or punishment for completing chores or homework.
- **Make it a challenge:** We love this tip! Simply set a lock on the device. The password should be the answer to a mathematical equation or a riddle, which they are required to solve in order to gain access to the device. It may not directly reduce how long they use it, but it will help them learn in the process!
- **Keep a tab:** There are several applications — free as well premium — which can help you track your child’s smartphone usage. You can download the ones that provide daily statistics or those with added features such as allowing the use of applications for only a certain period of time. Pick one that suits your needs and use it to effectively control how long your child uses the gadget.
- **Restrict access to application stores:** Both Android and Apple smartphones allow you to restrict access to the Google Play Store and Apple App Store through in-built mechanisms or third-party applications. This will ensure that your child doesn’t have the freedom to download every application that catches their fancy. This will make them come to you when they want to download an application, allowing you to check up on the features and decide whether your children should be exposed to the application or not.

Negative effects of overuse

It’s not just your child’s studies that can get affected if they spend too many hours playing games on smartphones or tablets. Overusing gadgets can damage their physical health as well as impede their development.

- **Physical injury:** This isn’t restricted to your hands; it could also result in shoulder and neck pain from bad posture, inflammation or nerve compression in the wrists, eye strain and dry eyes.
- **Poor social and personal skills:** Your child may be able to text faster than you, but spending too many hours playing with a smartphone or tablet can adversely affect their social skills. They may find it difficult to communicate and interact with peers face-to-face.

- **Increased obesity risk:** Spending too much time using a smartphone or tablet eats into their play time. Less physical activity leads to a higher risk of obesity.
- **Sleep problems:** Late-night use can impact sleep patterns, while texts or calls coming in after hours can affect your child's sleeping patterns even if they aren't using the gadget to read the texts or to reply to them.