

Handheld screen time linked with speech delays in young children

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SAN FRANCISCO – As the number of smartphones, tablets, electronic games and other handheld screens in U.S. homes continues to grow, some children begin using these devices before beginning to talk. New research being presented at the 2017 Pediatric Academic Societies (PAS) Meeting suggests these children may be at higher risk for speech delays.

Researchers will present the abstract “Is handheld screen time use associated with language delay in infants?” on Saturday, May 6 at the Moscone West Convention Center in San Francisco. The study included 894 children between ages 6 months and 2 years participating in TARGet Kids!, a practice-based research network in Toronto between 2011 and 2015.

By their 18-month checkups, 20% of the children had daily average handheld device use of 28 minutes, according to their parents. Based on a screening tool for language delay, researchers found that the more handheld screen time a child’s parent reported, the more likely the child was to have delays in expressive speech. For each 30-minute increase in handheld screen time, researchers found a 49% increased risk of expressive speech delay. There was no apparent link between handheld device screen time and other communications delays, such as social interactions, body language or gestures.

“Handheld devices are everywhere these days,” said Dr. Catherine Birken, M.D., MSc., FRCPC, FAAP, the study’s principal investigator and a staff pediatrician and scientist at The Hospital for Sick Children (SickKids). “While new pediatric guidelines suggest limiting screen time for babies and toddlers, we believe that the use of smartphones and tablets with young children has become quite common. This is the first study to report an association between handheld screen time and increased risk of expressive language delay.”

Dr. Birken said the results support a recent policy recommendation by the American Academy of Pediatrics to discourage most types of screen media in children younger than 18 months. More research is needed, she said, to understand the type and contents of screen activities infants are engaging in to further explore mechanisms behind the apparent link between handheld screen time and speech delay, such as time spent together with parents on handheld devices, and to understand the impact on in-depth and longer-term communication outcomes in early childhood.

Lead author Julia Ma, HBSc, an M.P.H. student at the University of Toronto, will present the abstract, “Is handheld screen time use associated with language delay in infants?” at 10:30 a.m. It is available at https://registration.pas-meeting.org/2017/reports/rptPAS17_Abstracts.asp.

The Pediatric Academic Societies (PAS) Meeting brings together thousands of individuals united by a common mission: to improve child health and well-being worldwide. This international gathering includes pediatric researchers, leaders in academic pediatrics, experts in child health, and practitioners. The PAS Meeting is produced through a partnership of four organizations leading the advancement of pediatric research and child advocacy: Academic Pediatric Association, American Academy of Pediatrics, American Pediatric Society, and Society for Pediatric Research. For more information, visit the PAS Meeting online at www.pas-meeting.org, follow us on Twitter @PASMeeting and #pasm17, or like us on Facebook. For additional AAP News coverage, visit <http://www.aappublications.org/collection/pas-meeting-updates>.

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