

Written evidence submitted by Speech and Language UK

Introduction

We welcome the opportunity to contribute to this inquiry and commend the Education Committee for providing a forum for this important discussion. At Speech and Language UK we appreciate that parents, politicians and educators are concerned about the potential impact of screen time on a child's development. At Speech and Language UK, we are working to help more than 1.9 million children in the UK who currently face challenges in talking and understanding words. Last year, we directly supported more than 80,000 children by designing tools and training for nurseries and schools and giving advice and guidance to families. Our two special schools help children with the most complex speech and language challenges to overcome them. We believe that speech, language and communication skills are fundamental to a child's development and ability to thrive. We want to ensure that help is given to those with lifelong speech and language challenges, but also that supporting children's spoken language skills is given greater prominence for all children, throughout their education, from early years to the end of secondary school. Through our research and the work we do in our schools, we know that screen time can impact a child's speech and language development.

Speech and Language UK Position

We agree with WHO guidelines, namely: children below 2 years of age should not be exposed to screen time, children between the ages of 2 and 4 years should not exceed one hour daily, and 2 h per day should not be exceeded in 5- to 17-year-olds. But the quality of the programmes being watched is also crucial, especially in younger children, in terms of language development. Educational programmes with a coherent narrative, age appropriate language, which label objects and speak directly to the child with opportunities to respond verbally (eg Sesame Street, Dora the Explorer) may be beneficial for older children but effect sizes are small. Care givers should ensure programmes are of high quality and where possible watched together. Evidence indicates that time spent watching together is decreasing with increased use of solitary tablet time rather than TV watched together. Watching together appears to provide an opportunity for care givers to use language, ask questions, label and extend child's language. Care givers scaffold or complement screen content. Furthermore, we believe that there is mounting evidence to suggest that interactive screens may diminish rather than enhance opportunities for parent-child interactions.

What we can say:

- most research found that excessive screen viewing affected children's language development, especially in younger children.
- Avoid content which is rapidly changing with an increased frame rate, flashing images and little language
- Choosing what your child watches is better than letting them choose
- Best of all is watching together and talking about what you are seeing

October 2023