Establishing Early Literacy Habits in a Profit-Driven Digital World

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Books are remarkable objects. They carry children into imaginary spaces and offer parents a familiar script to settle children down at night. Books challenge readers’ minds to stretch their attention span, pause and contemplate, and take others’ perspectives. Early book sharing is promoted by the American Academy of Pediatrics because of its clear impact on reading scores, which predict high school graduation rates.

Since the introduction of television, early childhood experts have wondered whether time spent in pleasurable but “minds-off” screen experiences displaces reading. Studies using time use diaries and surveys offered conflicting evidence but suggested that educational television was linked to reading. Studies using time use diaries and surveys offered conflicting evidence but suggested that educational television was linked to reading.

However, the digital ecosystem has changed dramatically in the past two decades. Children can find their favorite programs on demand in any room of the house or moment of boredom. Myriad digital products marketed to children provide engaging interactivity but often have low educational value and high advertising load. By algorithmically predicting what children might click on next, platforms are able to extend viewing time and make billions in profits.

With this engagement-promoting digital ecosystem in mind, updated research evidence about children’s reading and media habits is needed, particularly in developmentally sensitive windows when such habits are established. In this issue of Pediatrics, McArthur et al only assessed one dimension of media use: time. Now that media are engineered to engage young viewers through persuasive enhancements, more longitudinal research is needed that interrogates children’s reactions to mobile and interactive design: Are devices coming to bed and meals with them or being grabbed in the moment to calm a tantrum? When young children

engage with apps and videos, do they go on “autopilot” and expect to follow a frictionless feed, and how does that influence their more friction-full daily interactions with people and learning? Do they take a “minds-on” orientation to screen media, as they would a book? As the US government debates potentially increasing funding for children and media research (ie, Children and Media Research Advancement Act), these types of questions, and implications for the corporate responsibility of the companies designing children’s digital ecosystems, should be prioritized.

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