

# Hooked from Birth

Promoting Structural Change and  
Avoiding Parental Shame in the Battle to  
**Reduce Early Childhood Screen Time**

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**fairplay**<sup>™</sup>  
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# INTRODUCTION

Parents<sup>1</sup> are stressed. In an era of intense polarization, there is perhaps no feeling or experience that transcends our divisions more than the constant stress felt by parents from all walks of life. Single parents, younger parents, socio-economically disadvantaged parents, and mothers tend to feel stress even more acutely.

The ubiquity of stress among parents might seem obvious or unimportant, but it's crucial to understanding the pervasiveness of **one of society's most urgent and complex problems: an excess of digital device-use in early childhood - more commonly known as "screen time."**

When overworked, exhausted, or saddled with competing demands on their time, parents often use screen time to occupy their children. Sometimes it's so the parent can get work done around the house or have some down time. Other times it's used to keep a child occupied during car trips or as a reward for good behavior. Some parents, worried about preparing their children for the future, turn to screen time to help "educate" their young ones. In these and so many other instances, the pressure that parents feel pushes them to put a screen in front of their child. In the moment, this decision can seem harmless or even beneficial.

But the research is clear: excessive screen time in young children, particularly those five and under, is damaging, sometimes profoundly so. **Screen time can have detrimental effects on young children's learning, language development, social-emotional skills, and more.** Even passive exposure, such as to background television, can negatively impact interactions between children and caregivers, leading to reduced language learning opportunities. Excessive screen use is associated with sleep disturbances, executive dysfunction, and an increased risk of anxiety and depression later in childhood. Prolonged sedentary behavior linked to screen time may even contribute to long-term health risks.

So on one hand we have suffering parents, who depend on child screen time to mitigate their own stress, and on the other hand we have suffering children, who absorb the long-term harms of that screen time. It might seem, when making

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**1** In this white paper, we use the term "parent" because it is how our survey respondents identified. However, we acknowledge that children are cared for by a range of primary caregivers, including guardians, relatives, and other supportive adults. The term "parent" is used inclusively here to represent all those adults who play a primary role in a child's life.

decisions about screen time, that we're forced to choose between these two suffering groups.

But there is a third entity in this dynamic – a somewhat invisible player whose immense influence is too often overlooked or underestimated. This third party is the cohort of global technology companies, often referred to as Big Tech.

**Big Tech companies, driven by profit, exploit parents' best efforts and reliance on screen media.** They make children vulnerable to harm starting from birth by falsely marketing apps as “educational” and employing manipulative design tactics that capture children's attention.

These companies regularly scam parents and kids by making wild, unsupported claims. For example, most media for young children that is labeled “educational” is not backed by any research to support that designation. In fact, there is a lot of research that suggests this content is not beneficial at all.

While parents are of course responsible for their children's day-to-day activities, **larger systemic and profit-driven forces are influencing the quality and quantity of screen time for young children.** Policymakers, meanwhile, have been unable or unwilling to keep up with new technologies, and have failed to enact policies that would make screen time safer and more enriching for children.

Against this backdrop, organizations dedicated to promoting children's well-being and combating the harms of digital technologies must find the most effective way to communicate with parents. Persuasion is never as simple as providing data, statistics, or facts. Strategic communication must take into account audiences' conflicting needs and feelings, the tug of war between head and heart, the systemic challenges facing families, and the complex emotional and psychological dynamics at play when parents are making daily choices for their children.

This white paper shares key takeaways from the research, polling, and message-testing that we conducted to inform how best to communicate with parents about issues of screen time for children five and under. It then proposes a narrative framing that we believe is the most persuasive path to generate deeper awareness and policy change on issues of early childhood screen time.

Despite the clear challenges, including the pervasiveness and allure of digital screens in our lives, we believe that **proactive, compelling, and consistent communication can change the way parents view technology, inform the decisions they make for their kids, impact policymaking, and help generations of children avoid lasting harm.**

# UNDERSTANDING THE RESEARCH

First, let's establish a baseline of what academic research says about the effects of childhood screen time. We have divided the research conclusions into seven categories that demonstrate the indisputable negative impacts of screen time on kids, while also pointing to some of the challenges of raising awareness of these impacts and producing healthier real-world behavior and policies.

## 1 Lack of Evidence That Screen Time Benefits Young Children

Despite extensive research into the impacts of screen time, there is little evidence that any amount of screen time provides benefits for children five and under and no evidence that screen time provides benefits for children under two. Early exposure to screens can lead to delayed language acquisition and lower vocabulary. It can also impede the development of self-soothing skills, limit social learning, and lead to an overdependence on screens for emotional regulation. This reliance on screens to soothe or regulate is habit-forming and leads to more difficulty for children to disengage from screens – a challenge exacerbated by the fact that children's media is often specifically designed to keep them watching or clicking.

## 2 Health Experts Agree on Limits

There is consensus among global health experts<sup>2</sup> that screen time should be limited for children five and under: children under two years old should not have any screen time<sup>3</sup>, with the exception of video chatting with adults like grandparents or other loved ones, and children ages two through five should have less than an hour of screen time per day.

## 3 Young Children Get More Screen Time Than Is Recommended

Our recent poll of parents of young children in the United States and Canada showed that 75 percent of infants and toddlers (ages newborn to two years old) and 79 percent of preschoolers (ages two to five) exceed the recommended amount of screen time for their age. This excessive screen time has been shown to have developmental, emotional, and physical impacts on young children.

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the [Canadian Paediatric Society](#), the [World Health Organization](#), and the [American Academy of Pediatrics](#).

<sup>3</sup> The American Academy of Pediatrics further specifies that "children 18–24 months of age can learn from high-quality educational media, IF their parents play or view with them and reteach the lessons."

A recent report from Common Sense Media provides further evidence that young children, especially those from lower income families, are spending more time in front of screens than is recommended by experts on child development. The report finds that children from lower-income households spend nearly twice as much time with screens than those from higher-income households. Children under two years old average a little over an hour each day, and two- to four-year-olds spend over two hours each day. Kids ages 5 to 8 use screens for about three and a half hours daily. All of these numbers far exceed the recommended amount for each age bracket.

## **4 Physical and Mental Health Effects**

Excessive screen use has been associated with mental health and behavioral challenges in young children and can lead to an increased risk of anxiety, attention challenges, sleep disruption, and depression. Screen time in early childhood is also linked to atypical sensory processing like increased sensitivity to light and sound or taking longer to respond to auditory cues like being called by a parent or teacher. Prolonged sedentary behavior linked to screen time may also contribute to long-term health risks, including obesity and delayed gross motor skills (like walking, jumping, and riding a bike). Research has also shown that excessive screen time can impede the development of fine motor skills (like drawing and writing) in young children.

## **5 Advertising and Platform Design Contradict Recommendations**

Many parents rely on screen media that is labeled for children with the assumption it is designed with their child's age and expert recommendations in mind. However, both the advertising and the design of children's media and digital platforms often directly contradict recommended limits. There are popular shows, for example, that are explicitly advertised as being suited for babies, an age at which no screen time is recommended. Baby sensory videos, another example, are available on YouTube for up to four hours in length and are advertised as promoting brain development, eye coordination, curiosity, focus, and memory. However, these claims are not backed up by research.

Furthermore, shows targeted to preschoolers are often packaged in "compilations" on YouTube and other platforms – a strategy that increases views and ad revenue. These platforms encourage autoplaying for longer than the recommended hour limit for children ages 2-5. With autoplay, the transition from one video to the next is nearly seamless and can lead to children watching screens for hours on end.

Even so-called “educational” content is often deceptive. While many games and programs are labeled as educational, most lack any research or expert review to support those claims. In fact, there’s a lot of research that shows even “educational” shows and games can be harmful to young children. One study analyzed 100 apps for educational quality and concluded that most were low quality. Another paper found that more than 90 percent of apps marketed as educational contained advertising, and about half of educational apps required children to pay money to access the full gameplay experience.

## **6 Content Targeted for Children Is Designed to Hook Them**

Beyond advertising, many companies employ manipulative design tactics to influence children’s behavior. A 2022 study found that of 33 apps used by 160 3- to 5-year-olds, 80 percent contained manipulative design features. Manipulative design features lead children to prolong their use of screen media and include things like infinite scrolling and autoplay, intermittent rewards, and bright colors and fast cuts. Companies have learned through internal testing that manipulative design features boost user engagement and increase time on the platform. These design tricks disproportionately occur in apps used more by children from low-income families, leaving those children at higher risk of screen dependence. So, it’s no surprise that Common Sense Media found that children from households earning less than \$50K per year spend twice as much time using screen media as children from households that earn more than \$100K per year.

## **7 Evolving Research and Future Considerations**

The rapid evolution of digital media has outpaced research, making definitive conclusions on certain outcomes challenging. Longitudinal studies are now emerging to better understand the long-term effects of screen exposure, particularly in different socioeconomic contexts.

What is clear, however, is that research into the impacts of screen time have largely focused on how parents and children can take individual responsibility to change habits, rather than the pervasive manipulative design that Big Tech has brought into homes across the world.

So while there is consensus that screen time in early childhood can be harmful, more resources should be put toward preventing these harms by studying the manipulative designs and outsized impact of Big Tech in children’s media.

# WHAT PARENTS SAY ABOUT SCREEN TIME

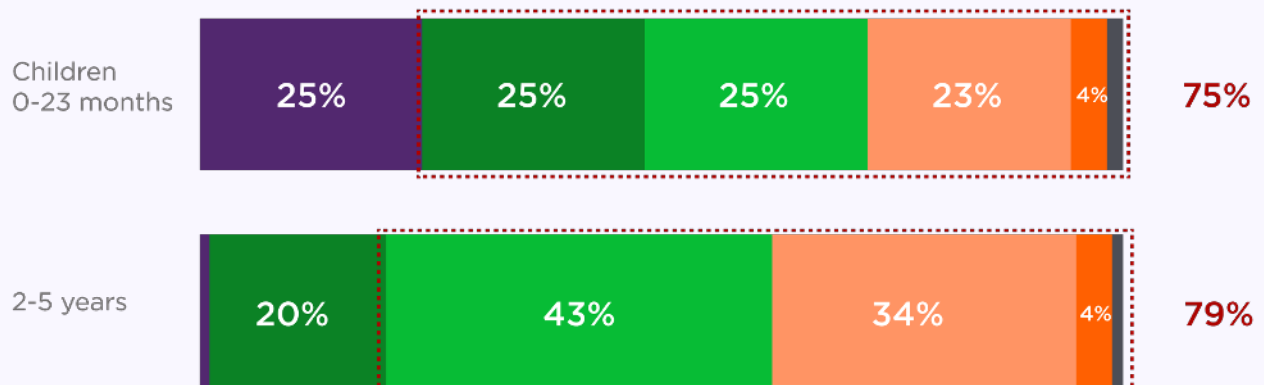
The research on screen time becomes exponentially more valuable once it is internalized by parents, who make crucial daily choices for their children. In order to reach parents and help them understand the true impacts of screen time, we must first meet them where they are. To understand where they are, how they feel, what they know, and what they believe, we conducted a poll among parents of children aged five and under in the United States and Canada.

Our polling of parents revealed numerous insights about childhood screen time, beginning with the unsurprising but foundational fact that **a majority of young children across ages have at least some screen time**, with usage increasing as kids get older. Key takeaways and data points from our polling are as follows.

## How much screen time per day do your children 5 or younger get?

No screen time | < 1 hour | 1-2 hours | 3-6 hours | 7-10 hours | 11+ hours

% exceeding typical recommended amount



**Parents report that children five and under are receiving more than the recommended amount of screen time.** Based on numbers reported by parents, 75 percent of children under two and 79 percent of children ages 2-5 are getting more screen time than is recommended by experts.

**Screen time serves multiple purposes for parents: to occupy, entertain, and educate their children.** We asked parents when they allow children five or younger to use screens. They told us: when parents are working or completing household tasks (46%), during unstructured free time (45%), and in the car or during travel (40%). We asked parents to share the main reasons they allow children five or younger to have screen time. They told us: for educational purposes (60%), for entertainment (60%), and to keep them occupied (50%).

**Parents project confidence about managing their children's screen time.** A plurality of parents (48%) are very confident in their ability to manage their children's screen time. However, the other half of parents (52%) are either only somewhat confident or not at all confident about managing screen time. And even as a majority of parents (68%) say their children are getting the right amount of screen time, a quarter (26%) of parents believe that their children five and under are getting too much screen time.

**At the same time, parents are conflicted about the use of screens.** Over half of parents (52%) are concerned about the impact of screen time on their young children. Their top concerns are behavioral changes, reduced attention span, exposure to inappropriate content, and less interest in non-screen activities. While concern about the impact of screen time is widespread, it is not very intense; most of the parents who are concerned about screen time are only somewhat concerned. Just 11% of parents say they are very concerned about the impact of screen time.

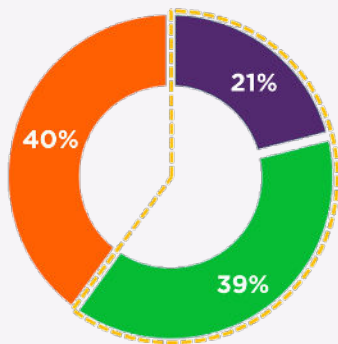
**Parents are also largely in agreement that apps, games, and other platforms are designed in a way to manipulate their children (67%).**

**Despite reservations and concerns, screens are integrated into parenting.** Over half of parents (52%) believe that screen time is essential – as opposed to neutral or harmless – to help their children learn and prepare them for school. A plurality of parents (41%) believe that managing screen time has made their parenting experience easier rather than harder.

## Views on Screen Time

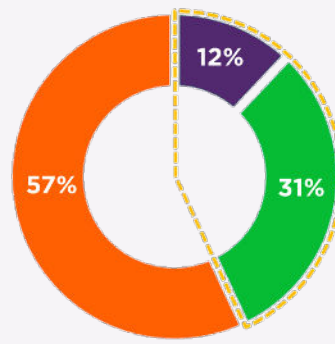
Harmful | No Benefits | Essential

Infants  
(0-18 months)



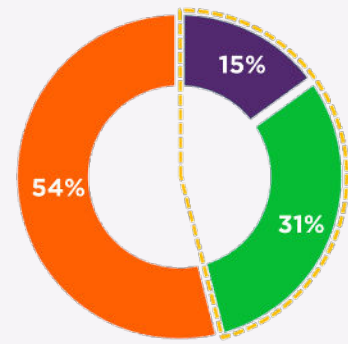
Harmful + No Benefits: 60%

Toddlers\*  
(19-23 months)



Harmful + No Benefits: 43%

Preschoolers  
(2-5 years)



Harmful + No Benefits: 46%

\*Small sample size; results directional

**(HARMFUL)** Screen time for my child(ren) 5 or younger is harmful because it takes the place of activities with proven benefits.

**(NO BENEFITS)** Screen time for my child(ren) 5 or younger is harmless entertainment, but has no added benefits like helping them learn.

**(ESSENTIAL)** Screen time is essential to help my child(ren) 5 or younger learn and prepare them for school

**Demographic differences reveal different screen time patterns.** Parents reporting higher screen time tend to be single and have a household income of less than \$50,000 a year. Parents who report no screen time for at least one of their children tend to be white, college-educated, and more comfortable financially. Single parents, Hispanic parents, and parents of infants are among those who say they are the most confident in managing screen time. The parents who are most likely to say screen time is essential are Black parents, AAPI parents, and parents who feel confident in managing screen time.

**Parents' views on screen time shift dramatically as their children grow slightly older.** Parents of infants<sup>4</sup> are most likely to have a neutral or negative view of screen time, while parents of toddlers view it as essential. When parents allow screen time also varies by age. Parents of infants and toddlers allow screen time while they are working or completing tasks, while parents of preschoolers allow screen time during unstructured free time. The most common reason parents allow screen time for infants is to keep them occupied, whereas for toddlers it is for educational purposes, and for preschoolers it is for entertainment.

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**4** For this research, infants are defined as children aged 0-18 months, toddlers are defined as children aged 19-23 months, and preschoolers are defined as children aged 2-5 years.

# WHAT PARENTS HEAR FROM MAINSTREAM AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Take a close look at the messages that parents are receiving from the sources of information that they turn to everyday, and you find a complicated story. Parents are receiving mixed messages, which poses a challenge for organizations wishing to educate parents about the realities of screen time.

The dominant narratives in mainstream and social media<sup>5</sup> on children's screen time fall into three key categories:

## **Screen Time as a Developmental Risk (Prevalent Concern)**

Media overwhelmingly warns about the negative impact of excessive social media use for school age children and teens. But there is a less-prominent but equally prevalent concern, which is reflected in the media, about the harms caused by screen time on any platform for young children. Studies highlight links to behavioral issues, developmental delays, sleep disruption, and reduced parent-child interaction. Public health recommendations, such as Sweden's ban on digital media for toddlers, reflect a growing concern that early exposure to screens may hinder cognitive and social development. Parenting blogs and social media forums amplify worries about tech dependence.

## **Balanced and Intentional Use of Screen Time (Moderate View)**

Some experts and parenting advocates acknowledge risks but argue that quality matters more than quantity and not all screen time is harmful. For example, educational apps, co-viewing, and interactive experiences can be beneficial. The "digital nutrition" analogy (comparing screen time to food, where some content is healthy and some is "junk") suggests that moderation and parental engagement are key. Some pediatricians, like Dr. Michael Rich, emphasize context over restriction, urging parents to focus on what children are watching and how they engage with it rather than just counting minutes. Among these more moderate experts, the discussion around screen time is shifting from strict limitations to fostering mindful and intentional use, recognizing both risks and benefits.

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**5** For this research, we analyzed news media like Parents.com and The New York Times, parenting blogs like Scary Mommy, and social media. A more complete list of references is in the appendix.

For example, many parents who consider themselves cautious about childhood screen time nonetheless encourage their children to spend time watching shows like Ms. Rachel that are seen as an easy way to educate kids. However, while digital media may be effective at teaching kids things that require rote memory - say, learning their ABCs - they do not equip young children with the skills that are most crucial for development in the first five years of life. These skills, like social learning, emotional regulation, and fine and gross motor skills, are more important at this age than anything that can be memorized.

The “consume with moderation” approach ignores the tremendous lack of research indicating any benefits of screen time and the studies that show its negative impacts. And yet this approach is often more appealing for parents who are stressed and feel screen time is an essential tool in their toolbox.

## **Guilt, Judgment, and the Reality of Modern Parenting (Cultural Debate)**

Mommy bloggers and parenting influencers highlight the social pressures surrounding screen time, with some parents feeling judged for limiting it, while others argue that adults’ own screen habits contribute to the issue. Some parents admit to using screens as a practical tool for childcare, balancing work and daily responsibilities, despite warnings from experts. A cultural divide exists between strict anti-screen advocates and those who see screen time as an inevitable part of modern childhood.

## **Mixed Messages and Individual Burden**

Overall, an analysis of the media landscape reveals that parents are receiving mixed messages about how best to approach screen time with their children. While research strongly warns against excessive screen time for young children, there is a growing movement advocating for mindful, intentional screen use rather than outright bans. Parents face increasing pressure to navigate these conflicting messages while balancing real-world parenting challenges.

Meanwhile, these conflicting messages all place the burden of screen time management on parents, while the role of Big Tech in excessive screen use goes largely unmentioned. There are few resources available that outline how to reduce the harms of screen time for children by advocating for structural change.

# HOW TO TALK TO PARENTS

One thing is clear: the information that parents are currently receiving is not providing them with the tools they need to effectively limit screen time for their young children. Moreover, parents do not receive enough honest information about Big Tech's role in undermining healthy development for their children and in making parenting harder. We tested an array of messages with parents, and their reactions offer valuable insights into how best to share information about early childhood screen time with caregivers.

Below are the messages we tested. The first batch are positively framed messages; these are affirmative and not alarming, tapping into parents' aspirations rather than their fears. The second batch - negatively framed messages - warn parents about the dangers of screen time.

Despite the clear challenges, including the pervasiveness and allure of digital screens in our lives, we believe that **proactive, compelling, and consistent communication can change the way parents view technology, inform the decisions they make for their kids, impact policymaking, and help generations of children avoid lasting harm.**

## Positively Framed Message Text

Label	Message
<b>First Teacher</b>	Parents are their children’s first teacher. While there is lots of chatter about how some screen time can help your children learn and get ahead, what little ones really need is YOU. Screen time doesn’t compare to a loving relationship with a parent and lots of real-life play.
<b>Brain Development</b>	Research shows there is no better time to create a strong foundation for lifelong learning than the first five years of life. It’s during this period the brain develops most rapidly. What matters most for healthy brain development are positive back and forth interactions between caregivers and young children
<b>Before Screens</b>	Children have been happy and thriving long before there were screen-based activities to occupy their time. Experiences like back-and-forth interactions, outdoor play, chores, and even boredom are critical to the brain development of children aged 0-5 years old.
<b>No Shame</b>	Parenting comes with challenges, and screen time is no exception. There’s no shame in needing a break — what matters most is making intentional choices that support your child’s well-being. Small changes, like prioritizing face-to-face play or family time, can have a big impact.
<b>Parent Choice</b>	While parents should decide how much screen time their children have, companies are using manipulative features to make it harder for kids to disconnect. It is important that parents have easy-to-use tools to set screen time limits without interference from companies.
<b>Practical Tips</b>	Reducing screen time can be easier than you think. Start with simple steps, such as setting a timer for screen use, having a tech-free zone in your house (like the dinner table), or introducing family play time.

## Negatively Framed Message Text

Label	Message
<b>No Substitutes</b>	Screen-based activities shouldn't take the place of real-world interactions with real people and real-world, child-led play.
<b>Manipulative Design</b>	Companies that design screen-based activities focus on getting more clicks and keeping kids glued to their screens, not on how they affect children.
<b>Short Term</b>	Screens might seem like they make life easier, but they create long-term problems for children's brain development, socialization, learning, and other necessary life skills.
<b>No Screens</b>	Outside of video calls, research says there is no amount of screen time that is healthy for children under 24 months. Parents should completely avoid screens for their children up until 24 months.
<b>False Claims</b>	Most media for young children that claims to be educational have no research to support those claims, and in fact, there is a lot of research that suggests this content is not beneficial at all. Companies regularly scam parents and kids by making wild, unsupported claims.

We found that all of the above messages, positively and negatively framed, are broadly popular – at least 71% of parents consider each message to be a convincing reason to reduce the amount of screen time children are getting. **But parents are more receptive to positively framed messages.** Among the 11 messages we tested, the top four – “First Teacher,” “Brain Development,” “Before Screens,” and “No Shame” – all used positive framing to make the case to parents about screen time. **Not only were these the top messages among parents overall, but they were the top messages across nearly every key demographic subgroup.** “First Teacher” in particular resonates broadly, and is the top message among parents of infants and preschoolers, mothers and fathers, and across age, race, and ethnicity.

Only one message with a negative framing – “No Substitutes” – rounds out the top five. This message, which focuses on the value of real-world interactions over screen time, performs the best among parents with a household income of \$100,000 or more and those who view screen time as harmful.

We also conducted an experiment that rotated the order of the messaging categories so some parents received positively framed messaging followed by negatively framed messaging, and vice versa. **Those who received the negatively framed messages first saw a drop in confidence levels that we weren’t able to reverse,** even with the positively framed messaging. The impact of this negative priming was particularly pronounced among young parents, parents with a child who has a disability, and Hispanic parents. **Conversely, those who got positively framed messages first were able to absorb the negatively framed messaging without adverse impacts on their confidence.**

# HOW PARENTS FEEL ABOUT REGULATION OF BIG TECH

The data we have presented so far shows that we must enlist parents in the movement to reduce screen time, without making them feel pressure or guilt. One key opportunity is to harness their energy toward advocating for public officials to demand better from Big Tech.

Big Tech companies make children vulnerable to harm, starting by falsely marketing apps as “educational” and employing manipulative design tactics that capture children’s attention and increase screen time. These companies also regularly employ manipulative design tactics; apps targeted to children are designed to keep kids glued to the screen and get more clicks, with little, if any, regard for how these features affect children’s well-being.

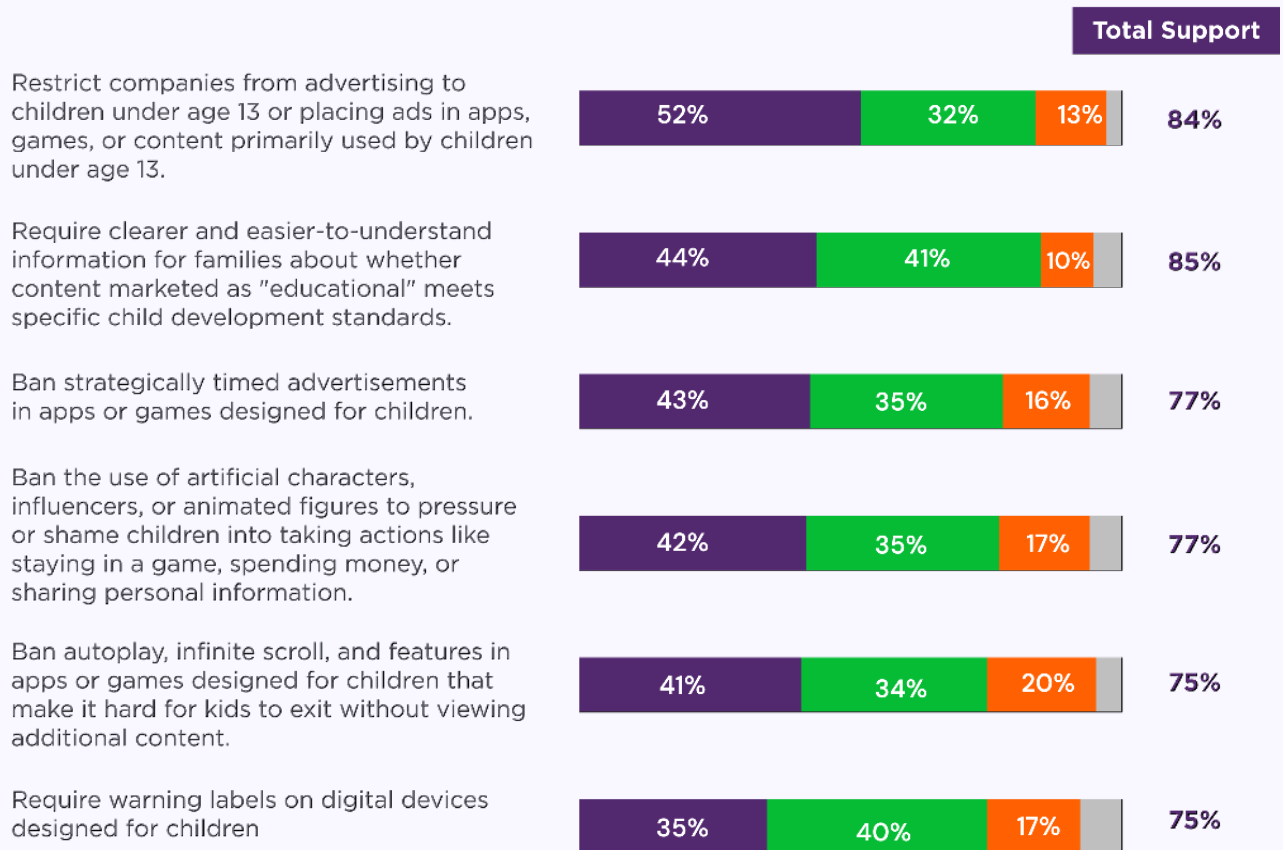
Our polling found that majorities of parents across political party lines want to see these problems addressed at a structural, regulatory level. **Nearly three in five parents agree that elected officials should pass regulations making it easier for parents to manage the amount of screen time children get.** They express support for a range of policies including restricting companies from advertising to children under 13, requiring clearer information about what constitutes an “educational” label on content, and banning strategically-placed design features that aim to hook a child to their screen.

**Big Tech companies, driven by profit, exploit parents’ best efforts and reliance on screen media.**

They make children vulnerable to harm starting from birth by falsely marketing apps as “educational” and employing manipulative design tactics that capture children’s attention.

# Policy Regulations

Strongly support | Somewhat support | Oppose | Not Sure



Even parents who initially say that elected officials do *not* have a role in managing childhood screen time are still broadly supportive of the specific policies we tested: restricting advertising for kids under 13; providing mandatory information on educational content; banning strategic ads, pressuring characters and manipulative designs; and requiring warning labels.

**Parents across the board are supportive of the regulatory policies we tested, especially mothers, Hispanic parents, parents of toddlers, parents who are childcare insecure<sup>6</sup>, and those who are very confident in managing screen time.**

<sup>6</sup> For this research, childcare insecure parents are defined as parents who cannot afford childcare or do not have enough childcare programs in their area (63% of parents).

# A NEW NARRATIVE FRAMING

The research and polling described throughout this document paint a complex but essential picture of the current communications landscape when it comes to screen time. It also offers a path forward. Drawing on this research and polling as well as our own expertise in early childhood screen time, we have developed a new narrative framing. Below, we offer three key ways to frame conversations about early childhood screen time use with parents.

Building messaging within these frames will allow messengers to meet audiences where they are, connect, educate, and persuade them. By communicating within these guidelines, organizations can generate the awareness and understanding needed to protect children from the lasting harms of excessive screen time.

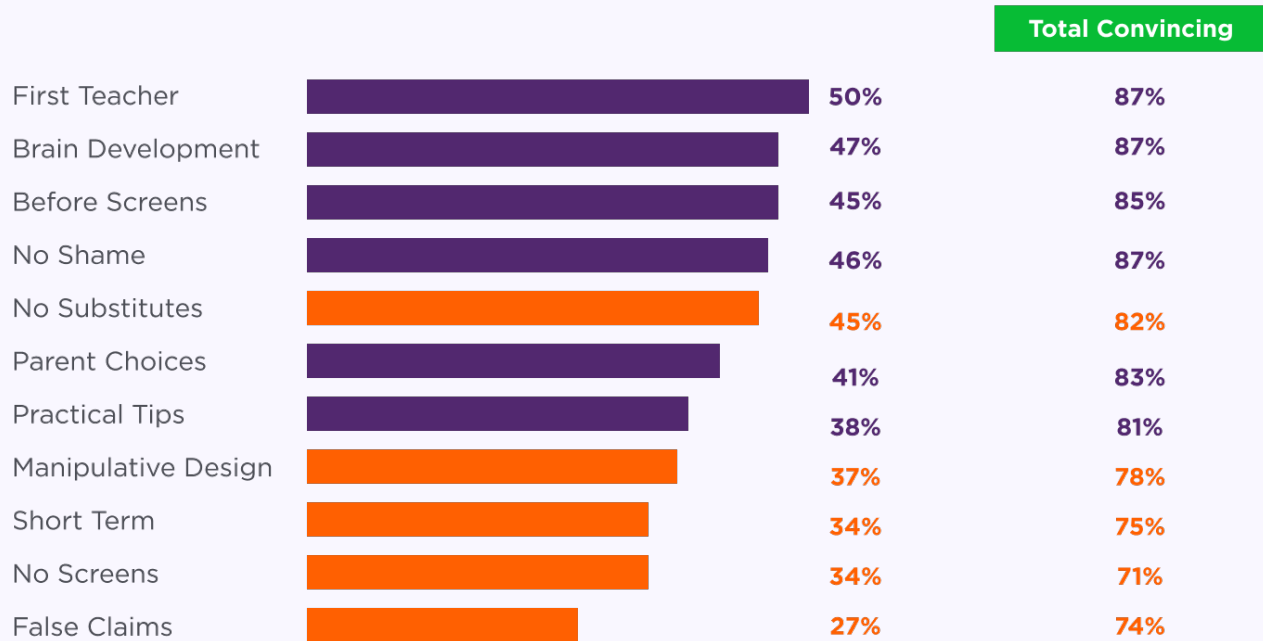
## Lead with the Positive

When engaging with parents on the issue of screen use among children five and under, it is most effective to draw on positively framed messaging about screen use. It is also essential to communicate Big Tech's deceptive advertising practices and manipulative design, but beginning with positively framed messaging is the most effective way to open the door to those issues. Polling shows that **positively framed messaging elicits stronger reactions and is more convincing to parents.**

# Screen Time Messages

% very convincing

Positive Message | Negative Message



The top positively framed messages center on parents being their children's first teachers and highlighting the importance of the first five years of life for brain development.

[First Teacher] Parents are their children's first teacher. While there is lots of chatter about how some screen time can help your children learn and get ahead, what little ones really need is YOU. Screen time doesn't compare to a loving relationship with a parent and lots of real life play.

[Brain Development] Research shows there is no better time to create a strong foundation for lifelong learning than the first five years of life. It's during this period that the brain develops most rapidly. What matters most for healthy brain development are positive back and forth interactions between caregivers and young children.

While negatively framed messages highlighting the harms of screen time are broadly convincing for parents, that feeling is slightly less intense than with

positively framed messaging. **When using these more negatively framed messages in communications that may reach parents, it is helpful to pair them with positively framed messages that reinforce parents' ability to do what is best for their children.**

Another positively framed message that performs well:

[Before Screens] Children have been happy and thriving long before there were screen-based activities to occupy their time. Experiences like back-and-forth interactions, outdoor play, chores, and even boredom are critical to the brain development of children aged 0-5 years old.

This message addresses the false perception that screens are essential, without fear-mongering or focusing on the negative impacts of screen time.

## **Acknowledge Challenges and Avoid Shaming**

While speaking about screen time issues, it is crucial to acknowledge the stress and challenges facing parents and avoid messaging that could be interpreted as shaming parents for their choices around screen time.

Polling revealed that parents across the board (67%) report feeling stressed and that a plurality (41%) feel that screen time for their kids makes the parenting experience easier.

Polling also showed that messaging that relieves parents of shame related to screen time performs very well among parents.

[No Shame] Parenting comes with challenges, and screen time is no exception. There's no shame in needing a break — what matters most is making intentional choices that support your child's well-being. Small changes, like prioritizing face-to-face play or family time, can have a big impact.

**Grounding any messages in an acknowledgement of how difficult it is to parent is an effective way to build trust and shared understanding before launching into other messaging.**

## **Focus on Structural Changes**

As messengers acknowledge the degree to which parents feel stressed and avoid language that either shames or places unrealistic expectations on caregivers,

they should pivot to messaging that focuses on larger, structural issues affecting children’s screen use and away from placing individual accountability.

It is notable that of all the positively framed messages tested, the lowest-performing concerned “practical tips” for parents:

[Practical Tips] Reducing screen time can be easier than you think. Start with simple steps, such as setting a timer for screen use, having a tech-free zone in your house (like the dinner table), or introducing family play time.

Parents are stressed, and they feel they are doing the best for their families. And while they are ultimately responsible for the day-to-day activities of their children, parents are facing systemic and profit-driven forces that make it extremely difficult to control the quantity and quality of screen time their children have. Content for young children is often created not with their development in mind, but with the goal of keeping them glued to the screen for longer. Big Tech employs manipulative design tactics that capture children’s attention and ultimately increase screen time, creating an unfair fight for parents who are trying to do what is best for their children. Moreover, most media that is labeled “educational” for young children is not backed by any research to support that label.

Meanwhile, policymakers have been unwilling or unable to regulate the Big Tech companies that are causing this chaos and harm among children and families. Regulations could help parents who want to reduce screen time and ensure that any screen time children do have is less harmful and more enriching for children.

**Reminding caregivers that the responsibility for screen time harms lives outside of their individual choices relieves them of any ingrained shame and can help motivate them to take action.** Talking about the responsibility of Big Tech and regulators creates a call-to-action while avoiding placing the blame for these harms directly on parents.

# CONCLUSION

The dangers of early childhood screen time are indisputable and well-documented in extensive research. Yet the messaging landscape is muddy, and parents themselves are conflicted, often expressing contradictory feelings and opinions. This confusing environment is ultimately leading to excessive screen time for young children and a lack of accountability for the Big Tech companies responsible for manipulative design tactics that exploit parents and children.

Enlisting parents in the movement for healthier screen time policies and practices will be a challenge, but changing minds, behavior, and laws is never easy. It is, however, essential to preventing further harm. Armed with this research and narrative guidance, organizations dedicated to children's well-being and healthy development can pursue their missions with fresh confidence and a new set of messaging strategies.

Today's children, and tomorrow's too, deserve to live lives unencumbered by the harms caused by excessive screen use. By communicating with care and intention, we can win the hearts and minds of parents and policymakers and build a better world for our kids.

# APPENDIX

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# Our Mission

Fairplay works to enhance children's well-being by eliminating the exploitative and harmful business practices of marketers and Big Tech.



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