Toddlers and preschoolers: 2 to 4 years

From ages 2 to 4 years, toddlers are learning a lot, becoming more talkative, wanting to master new things by themselves, and can finally understand some educational content on media. This is also a time of big emotions and learning how to manage them. These are the important developmental tasks that media shouldn’t crowd out.

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ask Yourself the 5 Cs</th>
<th>What You Can Do</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child</strong></td>
<td>At this age, you start to see differences in toddlers’ personalities - some being very impulsive and curious – others being shy and slow to warm up. Some toddlers are obsessed with media and demand it frequently, others have an easier time letting it go. Knowing how your child reacts to media helps you develop healthy boundaries around it.</td>
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<td>Who is your child, how do they react to media, and what are their motivations for using it?</td>
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<td><strong>Content</strong></td>
<td>Research shows that educational programs like PBS KIDS shows, Sesame Street, Blue’s Clues, or Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood can teach toddlers facts, healthy behaviors, and how to manage emotions. Try to work these high-quality shows into your child’s viewing. Although your toddler may like media such as YouTube with cartoons or influencers, try to keep that to a minimum – it may have a lot of marketing or poor role modeling. If your child watches YouTube, make a playlist of high-quality videos for them. Remember to turn off autoplay (so the algorithm doesn’t decide what they watch next!) AVOID: Apps/video games with aggressive content or in-app purchases.</td>
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<td>What is worth their attention?</td>
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<td><strong>Calm</strong></td>
<td>Hello, big tantrums! This is a crucial age for helping young children know their emotions and figure out how to manage them! The best way to do this is to: 1) try to stay calm yourself, 2) label what emotion you think they’re feeling (“It’s okay to feel sad/angry/frustrated”), and 3) help them calm down. It can be hard, but these are great opportunities for learning, so try not to distract them with a device any time they’re upset or bored. Keep screens for regular times of day or when you’re on a long car/bus/plane ride. Set calming bedtime routines that involve reading and snuggling. Point out to your child when you are doing ‘calm’ activities- role modeling really matters.</td>
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<td>How do they calm emotions or go to sleep?</td>
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<td><strong>Crowding Out</strong></td>
<td>At this age, screens may crowd out playing, moving their body, running around outside, exploring nature, looking at books, and chatting with siblings and parents. All of these activities teach social and brain skills that help set toddlers up for success in preschool and kindergarten. Set aside a little time each day to play, read, or get outside with your young child. AVOID: Letting your child have open-access to a tablet or phone.</td>
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<td>What does media get in the way of?</td>
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<td><strong>Communication</strong></td>
<td>Toddlers and preschoolers understand a lot more of our language, so this is a good time to talk to them about what they see in videos, ‘good’ and ‘bad’ behavior in characters, or advertisements. If your child is watching something interesting, talk about it. Do something related to the show or movie with your child.</td>
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<td>How can you talk about media to raise a smart and responsible child?</td>
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Family Media Plan

As parents of toddlers and preschoolers, the Family Media Plan serves as a valuable resource as you evaluate the quality of content consumed by your child. Key considerations at this stage include fostering diverse interests beyond media, finding calming techniques without relying on media, and ensuring that content stays positive and educational for your children.

Make a Media Plan for the whole family (parents too!).

The 5 Cs were inspired and built upon the work of journalist & author of books about media and children, Lisa Guernsey. The Three Cs were first described in the book Into the Minds of Babes (2007) and then Screen Time (2012) and Tap, Click, Read: Growing Readers in a World of Screens (2015).

About Us

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) Center of Excellence on Social Media and Youth Mental Health is dedicated to creating a healthy digital ecosystem for children and adolescents. Social media use starts during childhood and can play a significant role in the relationships and experiences that affect children and teens’ growth, development, and mental health. The Center provides resources and tools for parents, clinicians, teachers, and youth to learn how to better navigate social media and the online world. Visit aap.org/SocialMedia for more information and resources.

We’re here to help.
Explore our Q&A portal for answers to your questions about social media and youth mental health.

Funding for the Center of Excellence was made possible by Grant No. SM087180 from SAMHSA of the US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS). The contents are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily represent the official views of, nor an endorsement by, SAMHSA/HHS or the US Government.