Many preschool-age children use smartphones and tablets longer than recommended and parents often don't realize it, according to a new study.

The AAP recommends children in this age group spend no more than an hour with digital media and that the content is educational, nonviolent and viewed with a parent or caregiver.

Researchers analyzed survey data from 346 parents of children ages 3-5 years as well as data from programs that objectively track device usage. They reported their findings today in "Young Children's Use of Smartphones and Tablets," (Radesky JS, et al. Pediatrics. June 1, 2020, https://doi.org/10.1542/peds.2019-3518).

Roughly 35% of preschoolers in the study had their own device, and they used it for an average of nearly two hours a day, according to the study. Among the children in this group, 40.5% used their device less than an hour a day, 26.5% used it one to two hours, 12% used it two to three hours, 6% used it three to four hours and 15% used it four or more hours.

When comparing parent estimates of use to the objective data, roughly one-third overestimated and one-third underestimated the time spent on the device. Those who were inaccurate typically overestimated or underestimated by about an hour and were more likely to underestimate when their child used the device more than an hour a day.

"Participant recall accuracy of mobile device use may be low because exposure occurs in small bursts (less likely to be remembered than longer interactions) and parents may find it difficult to monitor content when children use handheld devices individually," authors wrote.

They said device monitoring programs "may be an important future data collection tool for pediatric, adolescent, or adult research."

The most common apps young children used were YouTube, YouTube Kids, internet browsers and searches, and streaming video services.

Some who shared devices with other family members also used apps with gambling and violence.

"Taken together these findings point to the need for pediatricians to be aware of their pediatric patients' device use," authors of a related commentary wrote, suggesting pediatricians discuss age-appropriate content and screen use guidelines with families.

They agreed objective measurements of screen time may be more useful than parent recall, although they acknowledged more information is needed on whether programs like those used in the study would be feasible for use in clinical practice.

Resources

- AAP policy "Media and Young Minds"
Media, Social Media

- Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on AAP media use guidelines
- Information for parents from HealthyChildren.org on creating a Family Media Plan