

Screen but not heard: kids tap into digital age

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A QUARTER of three-year-olds with internet access go online every day, a ground-breaking study into the use of digital media by children has revealed.

By the age of five, almost half the children who use the internet each week spend at least part of every day online.

By eight, they are also regularly playing with gadgets such as iPods, iPads and video games, as well as watching television, taking their total daily exposure to digital media to about eight hours.

The Sesame (Street) Workshop and Joan Ganz Cooney Centre's report, *Always Connected: The new digital media habits of young children*, found that in the United States there has been a massive shift in the way children aged 11 and under are growing up.

The study found two-year-olds spend more time watching television than children aged over six, but as they reach school age children spend an increasing amount of time using digital media, creating a generation whose early years were filled with electronic gadgetry.



Archie, 10, and sister Thea, 6, have been using computers since they were three years old. Photo: Ken Irwin

Australian child behaviour experts say the US study reflects a similar trend here, and that anecdotal evidence shows more children are using the internet and other digital devices regularly and for longer periods than before.

Australian Communications and Media Authority (ACMA) cyber safety program senior advisor Rosalie O'Neale said while local research into young children's use of digital media was limited, there was no question it was increasing.

A 2009 ACMA study found children aged 8-11 used the internet 4.1 days a week on average, for 1.3 hours a day, but Ms O'Neale said this figure would be far higher today.

"What they say in this [Sesame Workshop] report is absolutely true," Ms O'Neale said.

"I think globally kids are spending much more time online and as things like the iPad become more ubiquitous, you'll see little kids who aren't even walking using them for game playing.

"If you have a very small child they will be reaching for your phone or whatever device you've got to play with it and explore with it because that's what children are like. They are curious and want to see what's going on."

Melbourne mother Sonia said her children, Archie, 10, and Thea, 6, were using computers from about the age of three.

"They're instantly keen on screen-based entertainment," she said.

"My view is that I don't see access to the internet as threatening their use of books or television. Sometimes you can use it as a reward ... if they do their homework then we'll let them mess around with a game."

Sonia said she tried to restrict her children's use of gadgets such as iPods and Nintendo DS to no more than an hour a day.

According to the Sesame Workshop report, about 80 per cent of children aged up to five who use the internet do so at least once a week.

Children aged 5-9 average 28 minutes online daily. This time increases rapidly as children grow, with the report finding that children aged 8-10 spend about 5.5 hours a day using media but are actually exposed to almost eight hours because they use multiple media simultaneously.

ACMA's Ms O'Neale said it was logical that children aged from about eight were using digital media more frequently.

"Eight is a critical age in a child's life in terms of their emotional development and with the availability of connected gadgets it wouldn't surprise me that they are consuming media in different ways," she said.

ACMA believed young children's increasing use of digital media was good for broadening their learning experiences but parents needed to be aware of the potential risks to their children using the internet.

The Sesame report also carried warnings for parents, especially with regard to television exposure for infants.

It found that children aged 2-5 watch more television (including DVDs and videos) overall than children aged 6-11. This may be due to the children in the older group being at school for at least six hours a day.

But the Sesame report points out that the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends children aged under two avoid watching any television at all, and parents should limit the viewing time of older children to no more than two hours a day.

"Most parents today believe in the positive value of technology and use it themselves, so children may be more likely to be exposed at younger ages," the report states.

"It's also likely that many parents choose to use media as a way to occupy their children, even those who are very young, while they engage in household tasks. Media use by preschool and school-age children is not necessarily a bad thing, but it doesn't have to be mindless, either."

Interestingly, the report found that even in an era of widespread electronic-screen exposure, print remained a constant in children's media diets, although it varied dramatically according to age. About 90 per cent of children aged 5-9 spend about an hour each day either reading books to themselves or having them read to them by an adult.

This story was found at:

<http://www.smh.com.au/technology/technology-news/screen-but-not-heard-kids-tap-into-digital-age-20110604-1fmee.html>