

Toddlers who use touchscreens may be more distractible

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Toddlers with high daily touchscreen use are quicker to look at objects when they appear and are less able to resist distraction compared to toddlers with no or low touchscreen use—according to new research from Birkbeck, University of London, King's College London and University of Bath.

The research team say the findings are important for the growing debate around the role of screen time on toddlers' development especially given the increased levels of screen time seen during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Lead researcher Professor Tim Smith, from Birkbeck's Centre for Brain and Cognitive Development, said: "The use of smartphones and tablets by babies and toddlers has accelerated rapidly in recent years. The first few years of life are critical for children to learn how to control their attention and ignore distraction, early skills that are known to be important for later academic achievement. There has been growing concern that [toddler](#) touchscreen use may negatively impact their developing attention but previously

there was no [empirical evidence](#) to support this."

To provide such evidence, Professor Smith's [TABLET Project](#), at Birkbeck's Centre for Brain and Cognitive Development, recruited 12-month-old infants who had different levels of touchscreen usage. The study followed them over the next 2.5 years, bringing them into the lab three times, at 12 months, 18 months and 3.5 years. During each visit the toddlers took part in computer tasks with an eye-tracker to measure their attention. Objects appeared in different screen locations. How quickly toddlers looked at the objects and how well they could ignore distracting objects were measured.

Professor Smith states: "We found that infants and toddlers with high touchscreen use were faster to look at objects when they appeared and were less able to ignore distracting objects compared to the low users."

Dr. Ana Maria Portugal, main researcher on the project points out "We are currently unable to conclude that the touchscreen use caused the differences in attention as it could also be that children who are more distractible may be more attracted to the attention-grabbing features of [touchscreen](#) devices than those who are not."

Co-investigator Dr. Rachael Bedford, from the Department of Psychology at University of Bath commented: "What we need to know next is how this pattern of increased looking to distracting objects on screens relates to attention in the real-world: is it a positive sign that the children have adapted to the multitasking demands of their complex everyday environment or does it relate to difficulties during tasks that require concentration?"

More information: Ana Maria Portugal et al, Longitudinal touchscreen use across early development is associated with faster exogenous and reduced endogenous attention control, *Scientific Reports* (2021). [DOI:](#)

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