



Podcast 34: Episode 34: All Screens Aren't Created Equal...

The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly When it Comes to Screen Time and Young Children

(Part 1 of 2)

Episode notes: <https://prekteachandplay.com/podcast34>

- Kristie: Hey, solutionaries. This is Kristie, and the Pre-K Teach & Play Podcast. Episode 34 on screen time, is so good (and to be honest, so long), I had to divide it into two parts. And because the topic of screen time (especially when it comes to young children) is so complicated, I had to invite a crew of fellow revolutionaries to join me in the conversation. So, you'll meet them in Part One of this episode. And speaking of Part One, in this half, we raised the fact that there is no common definition of screen time, which has huge implications for all of those posts and policies devoted to this very hot topic. We also kicked the episode into high gear by sharing advantages as well as the downsides when it comes to our 24-7 access to screens. Well, spoiler alert, there are more and more downsides as we see it.
- Kristie: Then in Part Two, we dive into more of the practical stuff, what to do with conflicting messages. Like we want to limit screen time, but we also want children to have technology literacy skills. Oh, and by the way, the district just bought iPads for all preschoolers. We'll cover that and much, much more.
- Kristie: We also unpack a three-part framework to guide developmentally-appropriate decision-making when it comes to young children and their access to screens. Hope you learn as much listening as I did making this one!



Part 1 Content Begins Here

- Kristie: Hey fellow revolutionaries, this is Kristie. And today, I have this amazing group of other revolutionaries who are here to talk to us about this hot topic of screen time. So before we dive in and admire the problem for a bit and offer as many solutions as this amazing think tank can do in a short period of time, I want them to quickly introduce themselves so you know a little bit and can recognize their voices as we're talking. So, we're going to quickly go around the horn and let you know who all is involved in today's conversation. So Leslie, let's start with you.
- Leslie Nelson: Hi, I'm [Leslie Nelson](#). I'm a Title 1 Early Childhood Project Facilitator in [Clark County School District](#). We're a pretty big school district and we have a little over 400 early childhood programs. My background, my [dissertation, is actually on autism and curriculum and instructional technology](#), and I did it about the time of the release of the iPads. So, for me, when the iPad came out I was like, "Wow, shiny. I love it." And now I'm sitting here in this conversation.
- Kristie: Beth.
- Beth Tepper: Hi, my name is Beth Tepper and I'm an [Early Childhood Program Support Teacher for a CESA in Wisconsin](#). So, I support 21 districts across mostly a rural area, doing training and technical assistance for early childhood special ed teachers within districts and their collaborating partners. And I am part of this conversation because it's been an interest of mine for many years.
- Kristie: Perfect. All right, Ashley.
- Ashley Lyons: Hi, everyone. My name is [Ashley Lyons](#) and I am a parent of two young children with autism and medically-complex needs who are also twice exceptional. I am an all-but-dissertation Ph.D. candidate at [Kent State University](#) in Ohio, an adjunct, and a consultant in the field. I previously served as the [Division for Early Childhood Children's Action Network](#) Coordinator, Chair of the [DEC Policy and Advocacy Council](#), and as CAN Coordinator for the [Ohio subdivision of DEC](#). I recently moved both of my children out of the public school district into a full-time online school. So, there are multiple unique perspectives I have on this topic.



Kristie: Yes, thank you. Good. All right, Alicia.

Alicia Frost: Hi everyone. My Name is Alicia Frost. I am an early childhood teacher for the last 16 years. I've taught general ed, pre-k, special education pre-k. I was also a project facilitator in Clark County School District for two years. I currently live in the Boise area and am excited to start in an early childhood center next school year with teaching students ages three to five with identified disabilities. I'm excited to participate in this podcast because I worry that play and language, social interactions, and overall development are being negatively impacted by the overuse of screens.

Kristie: All right, Jolene, finish us up.

Jolene Chavez: Hi, I'm Jolene Chavez. I have been in the Clark County School district in Las Vegas, Nevada for 12 years, mostly as a preschool special ed teacher and currently a general ed preschool teacher. I have a seven-year-old with a Minecraft addiction. And I'm also trying to balance my own technology addictions, while helping my parents realize the impact of technology on my students.

Kristie: Yeah. So, if you haven't figured it out already, there are many, many issues that we can dive into. And so, we're going to start kind of in a big bird's-eye view of this topic called screen time. And then, we're going to kind of weigh in with all the things that are worrying us, things that we've seen, things that we've read, things that we've witnessed, and as Jolene mentioned, even things that we've noticed in our own selves versus somebody else.

And then as soon as we can, we're going to get to some solutions and offer up ideas, difficult conversations that we know you want to have but don't know how you can have them, what the policies should be that we need to see changes in, and so forth.

So, just quickly, when we started deciding that we wanted to talk about this, one of the first things that Ashley and I did was look across the literature to say, "Okay. Is there a common definition for this word screen time?" Because I kept seeing all of these Facebook posts and articles and blogs saying that children are getting developmental delays because of screen time. And so, the researcher in me wanted to know, "Okay, what's the independent variable and what's the



dependent variable?" Meaning, what is it that we're calling screen time and how are we defining the outcomes? And I knew in my gut that I was worried about screen time, but I was more worried that we didn't really get a handle on what do we mean by screen time.

The long and the short of it is there is not to date, or when this podcast comes to light, there is not a common definition of screen time. So, be cautious in our overuse of when we say, "I'm worried about screen time." Or "screen time causes..." Most of the research to date is correlational at best, though there's a growing body of research that shows we do need to be vigilant and concerned. But we're going to use a really broad definition of screen time. Basically, anything behind a screen. So that means your GPS, that means the ad that's running while you get gas. That's your television, your iPad, your smartphone, your laptop. All, I just, there's probably 20 other things I didn't list just now. But we're going to talk about all of those in totality, knowing that children interface with those in different ways from district-required assessments that must be completed on a computer, to using a laptop to play a game, to using a smartphone to maybe FaceTime with a caregiver who's deployed in another country.

So, we recognize that this a big, huge look at this notion of screen time. But then we hope that our conversation will break it down into more digestible pieces and parts.

So, we're going to have Leslie get us started with thinking a little bit more about something that she knows about screen time, either good, bad, or a hot mix. But just from her vantage point, what is she looking at, exploring, and wondering, noting that as we go around the horn again, each of us may look really small at what we mean by screen time, which could be iPads used to pacify challenging behaviors, to Ashley's children who are taking all of their education in an online environment. So, all right, Leslie, let's get started.

Leslie Nelson:

For me, it's a very gray area. Because as a teacher in the classroom, when iPods (and notice I said iPods) with cameras came out, I was teaching young children with autism, ages three to five. And I was actually able to do a research study in my classroom with one of my students who was having huge issues with transitioning, meaning her transitions could take from 15 minutes to three



hours just to go across campus from my classroom to the multipurpose room for lunch.

Leslie Nelson: When we started using iPods with her so that she could flip through the schedule at her own rate, her transitions decreased. She was able to use the technology to move herself in a transition in the same amount of time as everybody else in the class. It was a huge breakthrough for me. And then articles started coming out on blended learning. The iPad came out and it was like, "Wow, this is amazing. This is going to close the gap for our at-risk kids. The world is a better, brighter, happier place." Five, six years down the road, I land in the position of Project Facilitator and I'm seeing a lot more iPads in classrooms. I'm seeing iPads with headphones, which means that there's no other human interaction. It's just a kiddo on an iPad. And I'm seeing our students being dropped off and the parents taking a screen device out of their hands. So basically, the parent's phone, they take it out of their hands and the kid has a meltdown because they want that technology.

Leslie Nelson: So, now I'm on that flip side of that and going, "Oh my gosh, this is like antibiotics." It's great to heal a need but if you continually take antibiotics, when you actually do get sick, you're not going to heal. This year in my job, I should have been doing a lot of instructional coaching and I was providing more behavior support and it was specifically targeted to a small number of students. It seems that one of the correlating factors with those kiddos was that when they were not in the classroom, they were on a phone or they were on an iPad, even had some kids playing Halo. And I'm like, "Oh, that's rated for 17 and older." So, I'm seeing a lot of kids with inappropriate behaviors that are disrupting classrooms that outside of the school day have basically unlimited access to screens and it seems to really be impacting their self-regulation.

Kristie: Who else would like to say that your journey started off with like, "Oh my gosh, this burst of whatever in technology is going to be the be-all-end-all." Give voice to children, give ways to support learning that we've never dreamed of, and now are like wanting to bury them all.

Ashley Lyons: This is Ashley and I can say that I started the same way and then I went back to where she is right now as well. Like, "Oh my gosh, what's going on?" And I wouldn't say I've come full circle, but I've kind of come into a nuanced space between the two at this point where I feel like everything in terms of using



technology effectively needs to be thoughtful and contextual and that's where I'm really excited about having this conversation today.

Leslie Nelson: Ashley, I'm right there with you because the words that you used were thoughtful and...

Kristie: Contextualized.

Leslie Nelson: Yeah. So, when we really think about "what's our what?" for using that technology, it's a good thing. It's the same thing as I made with my antibiotic analogy. When you're really sick with a bacterial infection and you take an antibiotic, we need to do the same thing with that technology and help our parents to understand when the children are addicted to it and what happens when they come into the classroom. The ramifications of pulling them off of that technology when they come in the classroom.

Beth Tepper: Just going to agree that I started off gung-ho with technology as a teacher many years ago and just as well quickly started questioning the use of it. And it's extremely troublesome when I walk into a classroom- and this is a four-year-old kindergarten classroom- and start having a conversation with the teacher and all she wants is supports around technology. You know, "What are the best apps? What curriculum can I do through technology?" And we start a conversation, have some probing questions, and then she says, "I don't know how to teach through play."

Beth Tepper: So, I think that part of the problem is that some people do not understand the concept of play and what that looks like for young children. And that includes administrators and principals and other teachers. So pretty soon, this looks like a great thing because they don't understand play. And so, when you go back to thinking about play first, I think the technology piece moves away.

Jolene Chavez: Yeah. And I think I was the opposite because as technology started to be introduced to my classroom, I was already aware of the negative ramifications. It was kind of like, "Ooh, what are we going to do with this, and do I have to take it out of the box?" And I can see it turning into a negative tool, but everybody is so excited about it. How am I going to navigate what I'm being told to use or what is being purchased for my program with what gives me the not-so-great feeling in my stomach? My shark music, I guess.



Kristie: Yeah. Jolene, trace us back a little bit. What technology specifically do you remember being introduced and how did you already have kind of this concern?

Jolene Chavez: Well, I remember when they said that they were going to buy six iPads for our classroom. It was like, "Six? Oh, what? Are they okay?" I can play music on one of them. I can take data on another one. What am I going to do with the other ones, you know? I was noticing more that kids weren't doing anything without a phone in their hand. We were going on home visits to extremely, extremely poor populations, with again, something that was bigger than anything I had ever had in my house. And then we were noticing behaviors escalating. There were more and more challenging behaviors that seemed to be... We would have a behavior with a child who, "Oh, they have a disability. We need to address it, we need to work on it." But then it seems to be happening more frequently and we couldn't pinpoint, "Oh this is this or this is...", you know?

Jolene Chavez: I know that the research really isn't there yet to say it is because all of the technology, we are seeing more attention disorders. But the fact that they have increased simultaneously, it makes sense. And it's going to be interesting to see the longer we have the technology in our hands, what research is going to show us because I think we're barely touching the tip of that.

Leslie Nelson: In my position where I provide that instructional support, when I have teachers like Alicia or Jolene that we use as models in our district, they reach out to me and go, "This kid's having a behavior, I need help. I don't know what to do." And when I do go to help, we find out that the way the parents deal with the children at home is they give them either the phone or the iPad. So, the parents will say, "Well, they don't do this at home. We don't understand why they do this at school." And when I say this, I mean dumping shelves, throwing materials, physical aggression to other students, eloping from the classroom, screaming, violence towards staff.

Leslie Nelson: So, when we're seeing this and we turn around and we ask the parents, "So tell me what they're doing at home when they're not exhibiting these behaviors." For the three children that I can think of specifically, they're on an iPad or on a phone. So, if we give them that technology then they're not disruptive. What's the cycle? What's going on and how do we have those conversations? And if parents want to continue- or teachers, for that matter- want to continue to use the technology as a babysitting or a pacifying device, then how do those like



Alicia and Jolene who don't use that technology in their classroom navigate those behaviors for children who are used to being on screen times?

Jolene Chavez: And how do we communicate to those parents who are like, "We don't see this behavior at home"? And then when we tell them why they're not seeing those behaviors at home, it's hard. It's a mirror put up in front of us. You know? We don't have to look at our own behavior. I think it's like smoking. When they realized that secondhand smoke was bad for children because they were around it, this change slowly happened. But this is something that, "How does my phone use affect my child?" That is not being...it's hard to look at. And it's hard to say, "You know what? It gets me through a shopping trip."

Jolene Chavez: I was reading a lot about how not to judge the parents and how parents are feeling judged by any topic of this. And that's not the point, but the point is to see what those negative ramifications are, so we can be a little more reflective.

Alicia Frost: But I think that's it. Oh, this is Alicia. With the instances the students that Leslie is referring to. Sometimes, two of the families were families in chaos and had a lot of crisis going on. So, for the parents, that was just their way of escaping and making sure that their child was not a part of the chaos going on in the house. And unfortunately, it does have those ramifications where there was no self-regulation in our classroom. We still had toileting issues when he was almost five years old and those sorts of things. But knowing that there is so many families in crisis and chaos, trying to help teach them how to use those, because it has become a babysitter for many families.

Kristie: Yeah. So, let's talk about a couple of things for a minute. I want to for sure go back to what we all saw hope for, or still see hope for, in the use of technology. Because I think it's equally important to talk about the voice that it has given to people in terms of augmentative communication devices, or ways from a universal design perspective or from an interactive perspective, in terms of being able to FaceTime with people that aren't physically near. I want to come back to that there are some important advances, at least from my perspective, or maybe I want to invite that conversation. So I want to come back to that. I also want to talk a little bit more about what you guys have danced around, which is the correlates. There's a whole bunch of things.



Kristie: If I, as a caregiver, whether I'm a teacher or a parent or an aunt, if I'm dysregulated, that's going to be hard for my child with or without the interface of screen time. If I'm not intentionally teaching a young child self-regulation, that's an issue with or without the introduction of screen time. If I don't understand that young children come dysregulated and without good self-regulation skills because they're young. So, there's this sort of issue that is maybe magnified when we have screen time as another variable.

Kristie: So, I want to talk about those two things, you can go either way. You can either jump on and say where you've seen screen-time technology broadly as something that was effective, useful, opened the door. And then how screen time sort of magnifies an already difficult situation versus being the sole player.

Leslie Nelson: I want to highlight Jolene on this. Because even though she really doesn't want to use the screen part of the iPad for screen time, she's done a great job this year in using it to teach self-regulation behaviors for her kiddos. By using an augmented reality app, she was able to take the taxi solution cards that we use in our district for teaching young children self-regulation skills, and she created videos of what that skill looks like. So, if the taxi card said take turn or trade, then she had videoed two kids that were trading, and then the kids could take the iPad and they could hover over that trade card and see two kiddos trading a toy to see what that looked like.

Leslie Nelson: So, she stepped up and she took that to another level that was within her comfort zone and the kids were actually asking so that they could look and see what the different solutions look like in her classroom. She did it with some classroom rules as well. I think that's a phenomenal thing. I'll be working in a model program this year and we're 100% going to steal that idea from her so that when administrators and other educators are observing us, they can see that those screens are used in an appropriate manner.

Kristie: Yeah, and for anyone else who wants to totally steal that idea, don't worry, we'll put in the [show notes](#) all the links or how-tos to the way that Jolene made magic out of this.



- Jolene Chavez: For the record, Leslie had to teach me how to do all of that.
- Leslie Nelson: But it was your idea to use it in the way that you did it. So, you were just showing a different way to use technology and embrace the technology.
- Kristie: But a good example of the positive outcome that can come through the use. You could also argue that maybe the compilation or the aggregate time spent is going to be down the road a problem. But we were clear on how we were using the technology. It was there to teach self-regulation intentionally to support learners in a mode that matched their needs. Others, jump in, either what you see as the good part of this and/or where you're sort of seeing how it magnifies the downside.
- Ashley Lyons: So, and this is Ashley. In my personal experience as a parent with my younger son, Ian, who is eight years old, who had seen a... He's unique from other kids, I guess I would say. Or maybe the answer, what I really want to express here is that every child is different and everybody's unique. So when we're talking about screen time, there's really no one-size-fits-all answer. So, a lot of times I think as educators in the classroom, we will find that there are parents that are using screens to pacify their children, to engage them. Maybe they don't know any better. They don't understand how ineffective that is. That's true, that is happening.
- Ashley Lyons: But I think that I've also seen educators who have experienced that, who then go to the opposite extreme and say, "Well, I'm banning screen time from these kiddos."
- Ashley Lyons: And so, in the case of my youngest son, what happened is he's a child who tends to use screens, not for video games or those sorts of things. He likes to learn. He's a self-learner. He likes to teach himself things. And I would tell his team about that. But they had seen how he could also get distracted by screens. So they had put a ban on him having screens at all. And unfortunately, I understand where their perspective was coming from because they had absolutely experienced situations where the parents were using screens to pacify. And I think that they thought this must be the same situation at home. That's how it was being used. And that wasn't the case in that particular circumstance with that particular kid.



Ashley Lyons: And so, for me it takes me down this rabbit hole that when we're thinking about screen time and what does and doesn't work and thinking contextually about how to use it and how to implement it thoughtfully, that we still can't separate ourselves from the important point that in the context of education, that we have to have strong parental professional partnerships to find the right answer for each individual child.

Beth Tepper: And I totally agree, Ashley, and being one who has swung way over to the "No, no." And you can ask my children as they're raising my four grandchildren, how much I said, "No technology." I realized too, all of a sudden, they're going, "Grandma, you said no technology." And I'm the one when the child says, "How does a deer eat, or a giraffe eat" that I'm showing them a video of how the giraffe eats. So, but I think part of the concern I have too is if we tell parents we're using iPads or computers in the classroom and parents think, "Oh, they're doing it in the classroom, I'm going to make them even better by doing it a lot at home." There's way too much time on the devices and then we can get into some of the medical concerns with vision and all that other stuff, which is a whole other ball of wax.

Jolene Chavez: We have a lot of young parents coming in who...very young parents who use technology and their smartphones maybe to watch things that are appropriate for them not thinking that showing their children the same... mean, the things that our preschool students watch just makes our jaws drop. So, I've made a point of when I expand learning for a student, like they've never seen a violin. "Here, let's watch a video. Look, there's this woman who only has one arm playing a violin." And one of my students was just so amazed that he could see something like that on YouTube rather than the violent stuff he was used to watching. That we're using it for information and always explaining to them that when we do use it, this is why we're using it. Because there are many kids in our school who aren't going to see the fake Statue of Liberty more or less the real one.

Jolene Chavez: So, I mean, I've come to the point of, we're really using the iPad to expand their world and their views. But it's a fine line of teaching them why we're doing it and also teaching parents why we're using the technology and how we're using it.



Alicia Frost: Ashley had said that it's not a one-size-fits-all and I think that that is the key when we're going into a classroom. Oftentimes, when I would go into different classrooms as a project facilitator, there's a big old Smart Board there. And it's a whole group activity where everybody's just sitting there looking at a screen. But really making sure that it's individualized with the iPads. If you're at the block center and children are wanting to build a zoo, you can look up images of a zoo. And if we're reading information about animals, expanding and enhancing their learning.

Alicia Frost: So, by using iPads that way in our classroom, I do feel that it has been a positive experience. I was working with a student at the art center and he was using watercolors and we tried to look through books to see what pictures looked like with watercolors. And we couldn't find it in the book. So, I said, "*Oh, let's do some research on the iPad and see if we can look at different artwork.*" And so, I think, with that technology and making it individualized and meaningful and expanding their experiences and their knowledge on their interests, it is a helpful tool in the classroom.

The conversation continues with Part 2 at <https://preteachandplay.com/podcast35>