

Careless and wrong

The supposedly beneficial early introduction to digital technology has disastrous consequences for children

by Michael Felten*



Michael Felten.
(Picture ma)

What *Karl Valentin* once said about art in general also applies to the art of being a father or mother: it is wonderful, but it also involves a great deal of work. On *World Parents' Day* – for which the UN has designated 1 June since 2012 – we could thank all young mothers and fathers for

their vital daily care and efforts. And we should be aware of one of the enormous challenges facing parents today: dealing sensibly with digital media – with young children, with adolescents, and not least with adults – with ourselves.

Last December, paediatricians in Berlin sounded the alarm: increasingly three-year-olds were reluctant to play, spoke very little, showed hardly any interest in their peers and did not really know how to interact with others. The experts suspected that such “virtual autism” also stemmed from parents handing tablets to their children too quickly, too early and too often – whether to keep them quiet on the train or at mealtimes, or because they felt they had to introduce their children to the modern world as early as possible.

The former is negligent, the latter misguided: child development does not take place digitally, but analogously – through real relationships, the direct perception of things, and through children's own understanding and reflection. Early exposure to digital technology restricts this. Tapping and swiping do not foster intellectual development.

The president of the *Professional Association of Paediatricians*, *Thomas Fischbach*, was already extremely concerned back in 2023: “When I see even toddlers being handed tablets and refusing to eat without their games and car-



The later children gain access to digital media, the healthier they can grow up. (Picture <https://kaboompics.com>)

toon series, it makes my hair stand on end.” Premature digitalisation is even more problematic because deficits in early childhood are almost impossible to make up for.

Young children who fall under the spell of screens too quickly, too early and too often are unable to grow and mature sufficiently through real play and genuine communication. And if the parents themselves are constantly glued to their smartphones, there is a severe lack of attention, linguistic role models and emotional connection. This not only impairs future social behaviour but also their ability to learn in the long term. These children then find it much harder at school to learn to read, do maths and think – even if teachers do their utmost to foster these skills.

Therefore: No screens for under-threes!

If you want to prevent your child from becoming virtually autistic, do not give them a tablet or mobile phone in their early years! Instead, talk to them a lot! For a young child, everything is fascinating. Of course, you'd like a bit of peace and quiet. But young children need years to understand the real world. Digital devices confuse them – indeed, they unsettle them in the process.

And you, too, should use your smartphone as little as possible when you're breastfeeding, eating together or going for a walk. Otherwise, you'll seem absent to your child – and that, too, can lead to serious developmental disorders.

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Needless to say, the problem doesn't simply disappear on their third birthday. The French psychologist *Serge Tisseron* has coined a rule of thumb based on the "rule of threes" in basic arithmetic: no television for children under 3, no games console of their own before 6, the internet no earlier than 9, and social media only from 12 onwards. With the *Leopoldina National Academy of Sciences*, the list can be extended further: No

smartphones at school until the age of 15 (before Year 11), and social media without age verification and parental supervision only from the age of 18.

The harmful influence of digital technology on development must be urgently curbed – and, as with all influences that carry the potential for addiction, restrictions, indeed bans, are simply the first step.

(Translation "Swiss Standpoint")