10 Tips for Managing Kids' Tech Time

The average child age 8 and under in the United States uses more than three personal tech devices—such as a tablet, smartphone, or video game console—at home, according to a new poll of parents conducted by the American Speech-Language-Hearing Association (ASHA). With even the youngest kids now "connected" via such technology, it is important to remember to manage tech time so it doesn't overtake time for talking with children.

Talking to children in their first years of life sets them up for future academic success. The easiest and most effective way that children learn is simply by talking. Studies have proven the link between the number and variety of words a child hears and later academic achievement.

May is Better Hearing & Speech Month—a time to prioritize communication. Here are 10 tips for parents on how to manage kids' technology use to keep communication at the forefront.

1. **Create tech-free times**. Find at least one or two opportunities during the day—at the dinner table, for example—for everyone to disconnect. Mealtime is a prime opportunity for conversation. Make a commitment and have everyone check their devices at the kitchen door.

2. **Resist overreliance on technology to pacify boredom**. Fifty-five percent of parents worry that they rely on technology too much to keep their child entertained, according to the ASHA poll. Roughly half of parents say that they are using technology as a means to keep kids age 0–3 entertained. Remember that the best opportunities for conversation and learning are often found in situations that may be viewed as boring, such as while running errands or on a long car trip— particularly for the youngest children. While it may be tempting, try to resist the urge to immediately turn to these devices as a source of entertainment.

3. **Don't overestimate the value of educational apps**. Children learn best simply through talking, conversing, and reading. Technology is not the best way to teach, though it can reinforce and allow practice of skills under development.

4. **Make tech use a group activity**. While it is most often used on an individual basis, tech use can be turned into a group activity, such as while playing an online game. Talk about what you're doing!

5. **Consider whether young kids *really* need their own devices**. It is not uncommon for kids to have their own tablets or mp3 players. Many are designed and marketed specifically for kids. This may lead to more time spent alone with technology throughout the day. On the other hand,

devices designed for kids often offer additional features that appeal to parents, such as limited (kid-appropriate) content and extra security options, so this is a balance for parents to consider.

6. **Set daily time limits**. Certain devices can be programmed by parents to shut off after a certain amount of time, but you can also make a child aware of the time limit and keep track yourself.

7. **Be consistent in enforcing the parameters you set for tech use**. ASHA's poll found a majority of parents report setting limitations on their children's tech use. However, the reality of their children's tech use often doesn't line up with the set restrictions, by parents' own accounts. Moreover, adherence often seems to break down at ages 7 or 8 despite the rules parents say they set.

8. **Always practice safe listening, especially when using ear buds or headphones**. Misuse of this technology can lead to noise-induced hearing loss. Even minor hearing loss takes a significant toll academically, socially, vocationally, and in other ways, so prevent the preventable. Teach kids to keep the volume down (a good guide is half volume) and take listening breaks.

9. **Model the tech habits you want your kids to adopt**. Practice what you preach when it comes to tech time and safe-listening habits.

10. **Learn the signs of communication disorders**. This is important for all parents, regardless of their children's technology use. Early treatment can prevent or reverse many communication disorders. Parents should not wait to see if a child "outgrows" a suspected speech or hearing problem. If you have any question about your child's speech or hearing, seek an assessment from a speech-language pathologist or audiologist. Learn more at http://IdentifytheSigns.org.