Healthy Habits for Digital Media

No doubt about it — interactive video games and the Internet can be excellent sources of education and entertainment for kids. But too much screen time can have unhealthy side effects.

That's why it's wise to monitor and limit the time your child spends playing video games, and being on the computer and the Internet.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that kids under age 2 have no screen time (this includes television), and that kids older than 2 watch no more than 1 to 2 hours a day of quality programming.

It's also a good idea to make sure kids have a wide variety of free-time activities like reading, playing with friends, and sports, which can all play a vital part in helping them develop a healthy body and mind.

Here are some practical ways to make kids' screen time more productive.

Video and Interactive Computer Games

- **Look at the ratings.** Video games do have ratings to indicate when they have violence, strong language, mature sexual themes, and other content that may be inappropriate for kids. The ratings, established for the Entertainment Software Rating Board, range from EC (meaning Early Childhood), which indicates that the game is appropriate for kids ages 3 and older, to AO (for Adults Only), which indicates that violent or graphic sexual content makes it appropriate only for adults.

- **Preview the games.** Even with the ratings, it's still important to preview the games — or even play them — before letting kids play. The game's rating may not match what you feel is appropriate for your child.

- **Help kids get perspective on the games.** Monitor how the games are affecting your kids. If they seem more aggressive after spending time playing a certain game, discuss the game and help them understand how the violence that's portrayed is different from what occurs in the real world. That can help them identify less with the aggressive characters and reduce the negative effects that violent video games can have.

Internet Safety

- **Become computer literate.** Learn how to block objectionable material.
- **Keep the computer in a common area.** Keep it where you can watch and monitor your kids. Avoid putting a computer in a child's bedroom.
- **Share an email account with younger children.** That way, you can monitor who is sending them messages.
- **Teach your child about Internet safety.** Discuss rules for your kids to follow while they're using the Internet, such as never reveal personal information, including address, phone number, or school name or location.
- **Bookmark your child's favorite sites.** Your child will have easy access and be less likely to make a typo that could lead to inappropriate content.
- **Spend time online together.** Teach your kids appropriate online behavior.
- **Monitor kids use of chat rooms.** Be aware that posting messages to chat rooms reveals a child's email address to others.
- **Find out about online protection elsewhere.** Find out what, if any, online protection is offered at school, after-school centers, friends' homes, or anyplace where kids could use a computer without your supervision.