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COVID-19 Pandemic Influence on Toddlers and Preschoolers' Screen Time

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Abstract : The average daily screen time (ST) has been increasing in children, even at young ages. This seems to be associated with a higher incidence of neurodevelopmental disorders, and as the time of exposure increases, the greater is the functional impact. This study aims to compare the daily ST of toddlers and preschoolers previously and during the COVID-19 pandemic. A questionnaire was applied by telephone to parents/caregivers of children between 1 and 5 years old, followed up at 4 primary care units belonging to the Group of Primary Health Care Centers of Western Porto, Portugal. 520 children were included: 52.9% male, mean age 39.4 ± 13.9 months. The mean age of first exposure to screens was 13.9 ± 8.0 months, and most of the children were exposed to more than one screen daily. Considering the WHO recommendations, before the COVID-19 pandemic, 385 (74.0%) and 408 (78.5%) children had excessive ST during the week and the weekend, respectively; during the lockdown, these values increased to 495 (95.2%) and 482 (92.7%). Maternal education and both the child's median age and the median age of first exposure to screens had a statistically significant association with excessive ST, with OR 0.2 (p = 0.03, CI 95% 0.07-0.86), OR 1.1 (p = 0.01, 95% CI 1.05-1.14) and OR 0.9 (p = 0.05, 95% CI 0. 87-0.98), respectively. Most children in this sample had a higher than recommended ST, which increased with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. These results are worrisome and point to the need for urgent intervention.

Keywords : COVID-19 pandemic, preschoolers, screen time, toddlers
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