

MANAGING MEDIA IN EARLY CHILDHOOD (BIRTH TO 5 YEARS OLD)

Kids change more during this period than any other time. For the first two years, their world is all about interacting with caregivers and siblings and physically exploring the world around them. By age three, they begin to understand general rules about the world and their own identities. They also do a lot of pretend play where they “try on” different roles, including those of their parents or guardians and other adults in their lives.

Helping Young Kids Explore Media Safely

Starting around age two, children can begin to explore media. The goal is to build healthy, guided habits.

There are four main strategies to help kids do that. We can:

Curate our kids’ media experiences;

Control who can access our kids and their data;

Co-view media with our kids;

and be our kids’ media **Coaches**.

CURATE

Avoid screen media as much as possible for the **first two years**: children under two have little or no understanding of the separation between media and reality and **get no benefit** from screens, except reading ebooks with caregivers and video-chatting with people they already know offline.

If kids under two do watch or use screen media, select content that doesn’t have tie-ins to toys or other products. Follow it up by talking about the content with them or by reading a book, singing a song,

playing a “make-believe” game, or otherwise engaging them on the same subject.

For kids aged **3-5**, you can make child accounts on streaming services or video sites like YouTube and subscribe to good quality channels. Some also let you make playlists of videos for your kids to watch: YouTube Kids and supervised experiences on YouTube let parents handpick channels, turn search on or off and create custom playlists tailored to their child’s needs.

Parents can select age-appropriate, slower-paced educational content from trusted educational channels. Educational media intentionally designed to model imaginative behaviors (such as children engaging in pretend play) can stimulate imaginative and pretend play immediately after viewing. Carefully chosen programs can also teach social-emotional skills, such as perspective-taking and cooperation.

YouTube Kids provides a safer, contained environment with content specifically designed for early learners, reviewed through both automated systems and humans. You can subscribe to channels that you trust and make sure Autoplay is turned off so you can choose each video your child watches. (To do this on a computer or TV, look for Autoplay at the bottom of

the watch page and select Autoplay OFF. On a mobile device, tap the three horizontal dots and tap Autoplay OFF.)

Keep in mind that **actively coviewing** media with kids is strongly associated with better learning outcomes. You can find more details on the best ways to do that below.

CONTROL

At this age children don't recognize the networked nature of the internet. They see apps and websites as unconnected tools. Choose platforms that have strict advertising guidelines which prohibit ad personalization and age-sensitive ad categories, as well as clickable ads or ads that link to external destinations.

CO-VIEW

Coviewing with young children (**ages 3-5**) can be a very positive experience. One study found that for first-grade children, a moderate amount of media use was associated with the most gains in language – so long as they were co-viewing that media with a parent. (Dore, R. A., Logan, J., Lin, T. J., Purtell, K. M., & Justice, L. (2020). Characteristics of children's media use and gains in language and literacy skills. *Frontiers in Psychology*, 11, 2224.)

Co-viewing at this age has three primary elements:

- Identifying what they're seeing or experiencing
- Defining unfamiliar words and concepts
- Making connections with their own lives.

Encourage small children to ask questions about what they see in content and to share their opinions and reactions. Choose media that allow them to identify familiar things such as children, cars, pets, and so on.

Between two and five children start to compare media representations and their own lives and to answer questions about media. By around three or four, they will be able to draw on some obvious features of media works. By age six they will usually be able to think about who made a media work, but not yet analyze their choices in making it.

You can ask them questions that prompt media literacy thinking like:

- “Who is telling the story? Are they the same as the person who wrote the story?”
- “How does this story make you feel?”
- “Is this real or made up? How do you know?”

Look for books that highlight digital media literacy concepts, like *Chester* by Melanie Watt, *The Paper Bag Princess* by Robert Munsch and *The True Story of the Three Little Pigs* by John Scieszka and Lane Smith. Call out and counter stereotyping when you encounter it in media, including books. You can show them how families on TV or in books do – and don't – resemble your family or their friends' families

At this age, children are most likely to be frightened by things that have a scary appearance or characters who are in danger. Visual realism doesn't affect how likely they are to be scared: they are just as scared of animation or computer graphics as film.

They don't understand conventions like dream sequences and take each moment in media in isolation: seeing a character in danger will be just as frightening if the character is rescued later, and a scary character will not be less scary if they are shown as being silly or unthreatening later.

Physical reassurance like snuggling or hand-holding is the most effective way of helping kids this age who have seen frightening or disturbing content.

COACH

As they reach age **3-5**, kids begin to learn rules and social norms. They become more able to use technology independently, especially touchscreen or voice-operated devices, but are still learning to self-regulate time and transitions between activities.

By the end of this period they should be able to understand that while we can't always control our feelings, we can control how we react to them. Parents and siblings are still the main influence, rather than peers. Thus, parents can start introducing healthy device habits such as watching together, setting clear screen-time limits using built-in parental controls, and encouraging breaks.

It's also important to model good tech use, including strategies for managing conflict online. This includes helping kids recognize and name their feelings. Parents set the tone for digital wellbeing. Narrate your choices with them, such as "Let's take a break now," and show them how to use devices responsibly. Don't use screens to comfort kids or regulate their emotions.

Model positive gender roles. Kids who believe

in traditional gender stereotypes are more likely to engage in harmful and dangerous behaviour throughout their childhood and adolescence. One of the biggest influences on how kids think about gender is whether they've seen a male caregiver doing housework like cooking or cleaning.

Make household rules that include the different times and reasons different media tools are allowed. Encourage creative play with digital toys.

Additional Resources

[Co-Viewing With Your Kids](#)

[Dealing with Fear and Media](#)

[Family Guidelines for New Tech Devices](#)

[Four Tips for Managing Your Kids' Screen Time](#)

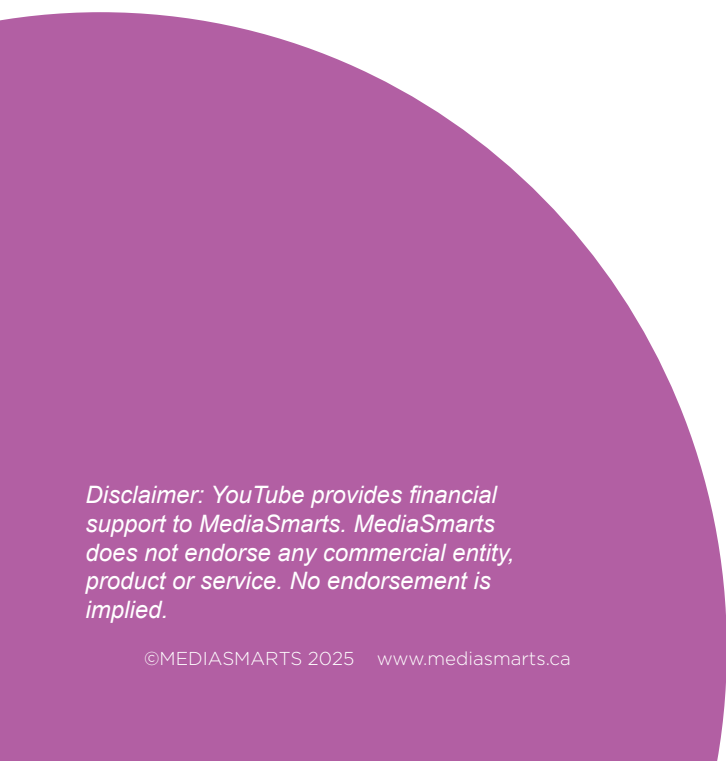
[Helping Young Kids Get a Healthy Start with Devices](#)

[Talking to Kids About Advertising](#)

[Talking to Kids About Gender Stereotypes](#)

[Understanding the Rating Systems](#)

[Using Parental Controls](#)



Disclaimer: YouTube provides financial support to MediaSmarts. MediaSmarts does not endorse any commercial entity, product or service. No endorsement is implied.