

# Concern over TV addict toddlers

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A GROWING number of toddlers are becoming couch potatoes, spending at least three hours a day glued to a screen, according to a Scottish government study that raises fresh concerns about the future mental and physical well-being of young children.

The rise of portable media — enabling children to watch programmes on tablets and smartphones — has been blamed for a sharp increase in television exposure among three-year-olds. The findings are a potential red flag amid scientific evidence that watching too much television in the early years can impair cognitive development. It has also been linked to childhood obesity.

The study, by ScotCen Social Research, the country's leading social research institute, found that between 2007 and 2013, the proportion of three-year-old children in Scotland who watched three or more hours of television at weekends increased “substantially” from 26% to 42%. “It’s a notable finding and a bigger jump than we expected,” said Paul Bradshaw, the lead researcher.

The proportion of three-year-olds who spent at least three hours glued to a screen on a weekday rose from 12% to 15%. Overall, the majority of three-year-olds watched television every day and the proportion doing so rose from 81% to 86%.

Scientists have warned of the “toxic” effects of high exposure to television in the early years. A Canadian study published in 2010 found that every additional hour of television exposure at 29 months had a profound effect on children by the time they reached nine

years of age. These included a 7% decrease in classroom engagement, a 6% decrease in achievement in maths, a 9% higher consumption of soft drinks, a 10% higher intake of sugary snacks and a 5% increase in body mass index.

The latest findings have emerged from a longitudinal study, Growing Up in Scotland, which was launched in 2005. Data collected on about 6,100 three-year-olds in 2012–13 was compared with the first tranche of data collected six years earlier on about 5,200 children of about the same age.

The aim of the research is to track the children into early adulthood to explore links

between the impact of family life and environment on their future mental and physical health. The findings are being used to influence government policy in health and education.

The study suggests that the rate of family breakdowns is steady, with about 20% of three-year-old children in both cohorts living in single-parent homes.

However, there is encouraging evidence that government campaigns to reduce smoking, to curb alcohol intake among pregnant mothers and to increase children’s exposure to books are working.

The proportion of expectant mothers staying away from

alcohol rose from 74% to 80% while the proportion of mothers smoking when their children were aged three dropped from 28% to 24%. There was an increase (66% to 69%) in parents who looked at books or read stories with their 10-month-old child every day or most days.

Studies have suggested that children’s exposure to television is far higher when “background” exposure is considered. One, published in 2012, estimated that children in America are exposed to nearly four hours of background television a day and children under the age of two had even greater exposure, at 5.5 hours of background television per day.

“The six-year gap between the cohorts does not sound big but in that time there has been a massive jump in access to portable media and that is perhaps reflected in the findings,” said Bradshaw. “Many children are watching television in ways they were not 10 years ago. That is not necessarily bad in itself, many programmes aimed at children are educational, but it is a trend we will keep a close eye on.”

A spokeswoman for the Scottish government, said: “Tackling inequalities is at the heart of this government’s agenda and this report suggests we are making progress in reducing health inequalities among children. This research highlights that differences in development start long before school and looks at what we’re already doing to reduce them. We’re pleased to see that more parents are reading to their babies. We will continue to monitor the impact of television viewing on other aspects of child wellbeing, such as weight and physical activity, in future Growing Up in Scotland studies.”



Too much TV in the early years has been linked to child obesity