

How do Children Play Nowadays? Habits and Strategies for Promoting Healthy Development

Como é que as Crianças Brincam Hoje em Dia? Hábitos e Estratégias para Promover um Desenvolvimento Saudável

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Palavras-chave: Criança; Desenvolvimento da Criança; Jogos e Brinquedos; Promoção da Saúde; Saúde da Criança

Dear Editor,

Childhood is a crucial phase for physical, cognitive, emotional, and social development. Numerous studies highlight the importance of play in promoting healthy development.¹⁻³ In today's digital era, selecting suitable toys and managing screen time presents a challenge.

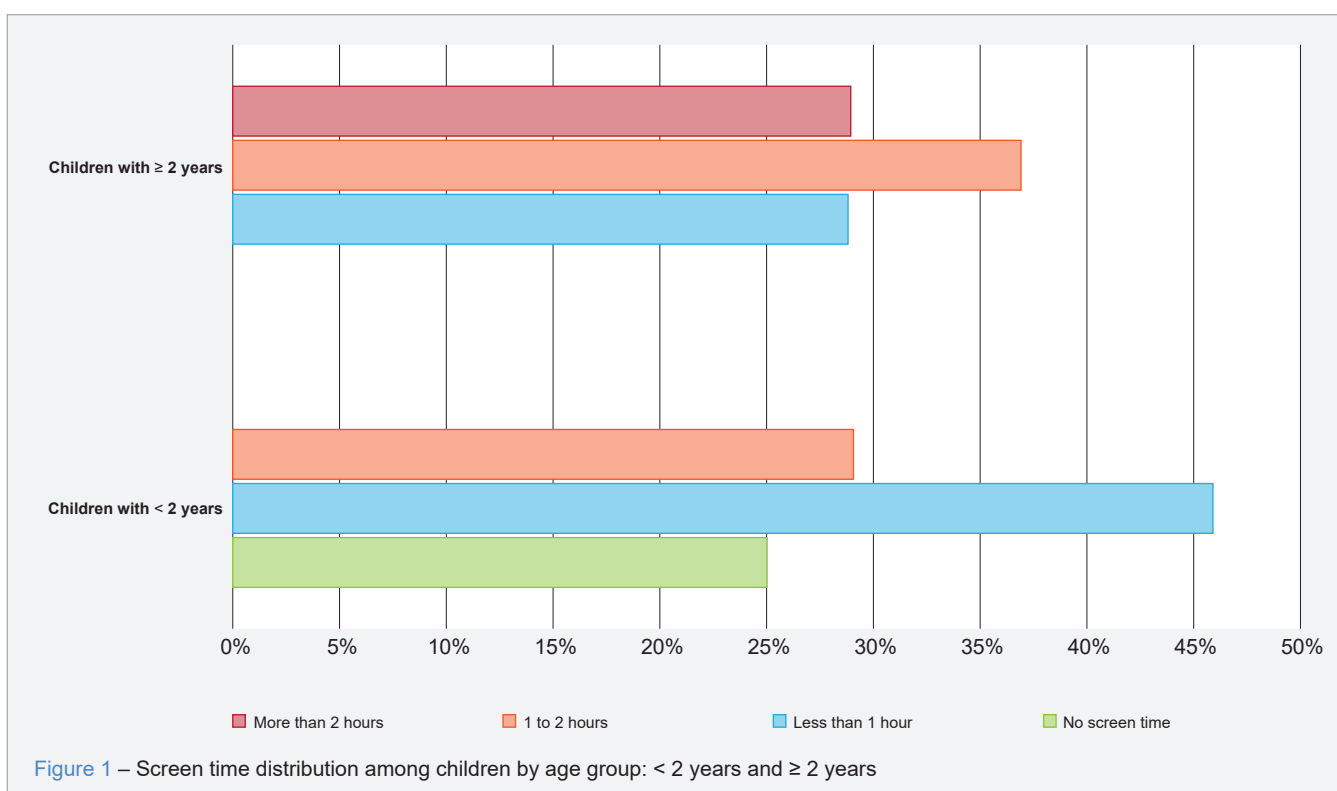
We conducted a study with the aim of understanding current play habits, assessing parental knowledge, and developing future community interventions. A survey was distributed to parents of preschool-aged children admitted to the pediatric ward of a tertiary hospital in Portugal over a six-week period in 2024. No ethics committee approval was required. The objectives and methods of the work were previously explained to the parents. The first question on the questionnaire was parental consent and the data was collected anonymously, without any possibility of identifying the children or their parents. The collected data was not sensitive.

The study included 65 children, with a well-distributed sample in terms of sex (52% female, 48% male) and age

(mean of 3.41 years; standard deviation of 1.80 years). Most children attended daycare (65%), while 22% were cared for by parents, and 8% by grandparents. Caregivers were predominantly in their mid-thirties to early forties, with 65% holding higher education degrees. Almost half (49%) of the children had no siblings.

The findings showed that 68% of children owned more than 20 toys, and 71% had toys with sensory-overstimulating features (e.g., sounds, lights, fast animations). Evidence suggests that fewer, simpler, and more versatile toys encourage longer playtime and foster deeper, more imaginative exploration.¹ Parental involvement in play is essential for bonding, modeling behavior, stimulating cognitive and language development, and problem-solving skills. Still, 45% of parents reported spending less than an hour per day playing with children, underscoring the need for strategies that encourage parental engagement and offer practical ways to integrate play into routines. Furthermore, 29% of children lacked access to outdoor areas, which is essential for developing motor skills, increasing physical activity, and promoting mental well-being and social interaction.²

Regarding screen time, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends no screen exposure for children < 24 months, and limits screen time for ages 2 - 5 to one hour per day of high-quality content, with parental supervision.⁴ In 2024, the Portuguese Society of Neuropediatrics (SPNP) published more stringent recommendations, advising against screen use for children < 3 years, except for supervised video calls, and limiting to 30 minutes per day of high-quality content for children aged 4 - 6 years, always under adult supervision. Furthermore, the SPNP advises



that screens should not be used at any age to facilitate meals, manage waiting times (that is, keeping the children entertained while waiting in a queue, a medical appointment or other similar contexts), or control tantrums.⁵ In our study, 73% of the children exceeded AAP guidelines recommendations (Fig. 1), raising concerns about the potential negative impact on cognitive and linguistic development, as well as an increased risk of obesity. In 51% of cases, consistent supervision was lacking. Screen time was more frequent among children with educated caregivers (88%), cared for by grandparents (80%), and with siblings (94%). Finally, parental knowledge assessments revealed some misconceptions: 25% believed that more toys led to better development, and 40% thought that overstimulating toys were more beneficial than simpler ones.

These findings underscore the need for community interventions. Potential strategies could include educational seminars for parents (pediatric hospitalization presents a valuable opportunity), collaborations with daycare centres, public awareness campaigns (through social media, podcasts or radio), and pediatrician/family doctor involvement during routine well-child clinics.

PREVIOUS AWARDS AND PRESENTATIONS

This work was previously presented in the form of a poster with discussion at *Congresso Nacional de Pediatria*.

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AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

MFS: Study design, data collection and analysis, writing of the manuscript.

ACP: Survey development, data collection, critical review of the manuscript.

MB: Critical review of the manuscript.

MAR: Study conception and design, survey development, critical review of the manuscript.

All authors approved the final version to be published.

PROTECTION OF HUMANS AND ANIMALS

The authors declare that the procedures were followed according to the regulations established by the Clinical Research and Ethics Committee and to the Helsinki Declaration of the World Medical Association updated in October 2024.

DATA CONFIDENTIALITY

The authors declare having followed the protocols in use at their working center regarding patients' data publication.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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