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CCFC
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We are writing to express our concerns about NAEYC's draft statement, "Technology in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8." While we appreciate the tremendous effort that has gone into crafting this document, we also believe that there is significantly more work to be done. NAEYC is the leading childhood professional organization in the country, and its recommendations will affect the lives of young children for years to come. Yet the current draft fails to objectively address the complex role that screen technologies play in the lives of children. In addition, the draft does not give early childhood educators adequate guidance for making important decisions about whether and when to introduce screen technology into their classrooms. In its current form, the draft paves the way for educators and child care providers to make uninformed and potentially harmful decisions about including screen technologies in their classrooms.

In the comments below, we describe our concerns about the current draft. We conclude with a list of recommendations for educators that we urge NAEYC to include in its final draft.

Our primary substantive concerns, which we will explain in detail, are as follows:

1. Early childhood educators should not be obligated to incorporate screen technologies in their classrooms.
2. The statement does not provide concrete guidance for helping early childhood educators make informed decisions about using technology with young children.
3. The statement does not recommend setting limits on children's screen time and therefore undermines the public health community's united efforts to reduce rates of childhood obesity and other problems by limiting the time children spend with screens.
4. The statement relies disproportionately on input by individuals and organizations with a vested interest in promoting screen technologies.



5. The statement does not address the surfeit of screen-based commercialism aimed at young children.
6. The statement does not distinguish between technologies and their relative merits and problems.

The following is a detailed discussion of these concerns:

1. The statement recommends—without qualification as to age, time spent, type of technology, or type of program—that early childhood educators are obligated to include technology in their classrooms to address the digital divide. The draft statement makes a blanket recommendation that “[E]ducators *must* ensure equity by providing opportunities for all children to participate and learn in an environment in which technology tools have been integrated”¹ (emphasis added). We see no evidence in the research that having screen technology in an early childhood setting provides any comparative advantage to young children who do not have access to those tools at home, or to children who do have such access.

The citation for the recommendation mandating technology in early childhood settings (Judge, Puckett, & Cabok 2004)² is an article that describes the disparities in the number of computers in poor schools compared to wealthier schools. Yet the article does not include data justifying the need for technology in early childhood settings.

There is cause for concern about the digital divide for older children and teens. There is no evidence, however, that it is essential for the very young to learn what the statement calls “technology handling skills.”³ We know that there is a vocabulary divide and a literacy divide that begin in early childhood. Yet we see little or no long-term evidence that screen technologies actually help children overcome these divides. Early childhood educators should not be obliged to include technology in their classrooms until and unless there is evidence that children are harmed without it—especially since including time with technology will take away from activities that have clearly demonstrated benefits for children. It is also worth noting that technology is often expensive to acquire and maintain for early childhood programs, where expenditure decisions often need to consider competing demands for resources needed to ensure children’s healthy growth and learning, such as professional development.

In addition, the statement gives guidelines for the selection of technology, but does not provide guidelines for choosing whether or not technology is appropriate in early childhood classrooms. While the statement gives a nod to considering *whether* to include technology in classrooms, there are no guidelines provided for how to make that decision. Nor is there any encouragement or justification for professionals making evidence-based decisions to forgo screen technology in their classrooms. By implication, this means that respected evidence-based programs such as outdoor classrooms, Waldorf schools and other play-based programs are inferior to those that use technology.

2. The statement tells early childhood educators to use their professional judgment to address all questions of technology use, but provides no concrete guidance to early childhood educators that will help them make informed decisions. NAEYC has an ethical obligation to provide early childhood educators with concrete advice about how to address the question of technology in the classroom. The statement provides no concrete suggestions for how to make informed decisions about technology in the classroom. It says that teachers should be “media literate” but does not define what that means. The statement implies that teachers should be familiar with how technology works, but true media literacy involves much more, including understanding media effects research, the funding sources of studies, and the business and economics behind screen technologies.

The statement recommends that “Developmentally appropriate practices must guide decisions about whether, when, and how to integrate technology tools into programs for infants, toddlers, preschoolers, and K-3 children.”⁴ But it does not identify exactly what “developmentally appropriate practice” is or even provide guidelines for creating developmentally appropriate practice. Nor does the draft provide any guidance for

teachers in evaluating the vast and often overstated marketing claims about the educational value of technology.

In short, it is unrealistic to expect early childhood educators to develop the vast expertise necessary to make informed decisions about the use of technology in early childhood settings. Furthermore, it is the role of NAEYC to synthesize research and use its position statements to guide practice. If NAEYC wants educators to make “informed decisions,” it must provide guidance on how to do so.

3. While the draft states that “[t]he health and well-being of children is a primary goal,”⁵ it effectively undermines the public health community’s efforts to limit screen time in the lives of children. These efforts are a response to documented links between screen time and childhood obesity, as well as other concerns about screen time and children’s well-being. The draft statement does not support the public health community’s recommendations that children under the age of two be discouraged from using screens and that limits be set for older children. In fact, the statement does not address the issue of setting time limits for young children’s use of screen technology.

Acknowledging the need to limit screen time—including computer-based and interactive technologies which keep children virtually motionless—is a vital step in reducing rates of childhood obesity. It is also consistent with recommendations in the peer-reviewed literature. For instance, an expert panel in the 2007 *Pediatrics* article, “Recommendations for Prevention of Childhood Obesity” states: “Evidence supports a strong association between limiting sedentary behavior (watching television and playing video/computer games) and preventing obesity.”⁶

Leading health organizations that base their recommendations on relevant science now consistently suggest that those who care for children, including caregivers in early education placements, abide by the American Academy of Pediatrics’ (AAP) recommendation of limiting older children to no more than one to two hours of total screen time per day.⁷

For example, *Preventing Childhood Obesity in Early Care and Education Programs*, a joint publication of the AAP, American Public Health Association, and the National Resource Center for Child Care and Education, advocates for strict limits on screen time in early education settings: “In early care and education settings, media (television [TV], video, and DVD) viewing and computer use should not be permitted for children younger than two years. For children two years and older in early care and early education settings, total media time should be limited to not more than thirty minutes once a week, and for educational or physical activity use only.”⁸ Similarly, in 2010, the White House Task Force on Childhood Obesity made the following recommendation: “Early childhood settings should be encouraged to adopt standards consistent with AAP recommendations not to expose children two years of age and under to television, as well as to limit media exposure for older children by treating it as a special occasion activity rather than a daily event.”⁹

Similarly, our nation’s leading health and child advocacy organizations, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, Food and Drug Administration, Health Resources and Services Administration, National Institutes of Health, Office of Disease Prevention and Health Promotion, and U.S. Department of Education, all currently have a stated goal to limit the screen time of children older than two years of age to no more than two hours per day, while increasing the number of children younger than two years of age who are not exposed to screen time at all.¹⁰

The statement recommends to early childhood educators that the health and well-being of children must be a guiding principle in choosing technology for the classroom. But by failing to call for limits on young children’s screen time in early childcare settings and at home, the statement undermines gains made by the important and urgent work of the public health community to address childhood obesity and other health issues for which excessive screen time is known to be a factor.

Therefore, it is our recommendation that the position statement incorporate a statement of principle along the following lines:

“NAEYC recognizes the central importance of supporting the whole of healthy child development—cognitive, social, emotional, and physical—and joins with the public health community and the White House in recommending that children under two be discouraged from spending time with screens and that screen time for older children should be limited.”

4. The draft states that its recommendations are “grounded in the research on child development, teaching and learning, and in the evolving knowledge base about safe, effective, active, and developmentally appropriate uses of technology and new media.”¹¹ Yet, the statement’s recommendations and justifications rely disproportionately on institutions and professionals with strong ties to industry and/or have a vested interest in increasing the amount of time children spend with screens. The statement also leaves out significant supporting evidence from peer reviewed journals on the importance of limiting children’s screen time.

We urge NAEYC to live up to its reputation for objectivity and include research that raises concerns about the impact of screen technology on young children. The draft fails to cite numerous studies that document the need to limit screen time as a vital step in preventing and treating our nation’s epidemic of childhood obesity. For example, as noted above, the 2007 *Pediatrics* article, “Recommendations for Prevention of Childhood Obesity” states, “Evidence supports a strong association between limiting sedentary behavior (watching television and playing video/computer games) and preventing obesity.”¹²

It is particularly worrisome that the draft fails to incorporate research demonstrating that children are spending too much time with screens in early childhood settings. In the 2011 *Journal of Pediatrics* study “Preschoolers’ Total Daily Screen Time at Home and by Type of Child Care,” researchers state that preschoolers average more than four hours of screen time per day (5.5 hours per day for children in home-based care). The study concludes, “Preschoolers’ cumulative screen time exceeds recommendations and most previous estimates... Efforts to decrease screen time in homes and home-based child care settings are needed.”¹³ The failure to reference this paper and many others reporting health risks due to overuse of screen technologies is a glaring omission and undermines NAEYC’s efforts to craft a statement “grounded in the research on child development, teaching and learning, and in the evolving knowledge base about safe, effective, active, and developmentally appropriate uses of technology and new media.”¹⁴

The current draft of the technology statement relies heavily on individuals and institutions that have a vested interest in increasing the amount of time children spend with screens. The draft’s mandate that early childhood educational settings must include screen technologies is based on standards set by the International Society for Technology in Education, an organization that receives significant funding from companies with a financial stake in convincing educators to incorporate technologies in early childhood settings.¹⁵

The final technology statement should certainly include both the views of proponents of incorporating technology in early childhood settings as well as the views of those who are concerned about the impact. We urge NAEYC, therefore, not to rely so disproportionately on those who have a financial stake in promoting screen technologies to young children. Ultimately, the statement should evaluate the research—including noting any relevant funding sources—upon which proponents of technology and those who urge caution base their claims, and offer clear and evidence-based justifications for any recommendations.

5. The statement makes no recommendations for helping early childhood educators address screen-based commercialism in their classrooms or in the lives of children they serve.

The unprecedented convergence of unfettered commercialism and ubiquitous, miniaturized, and sophisticated screen technologies is a factor in many of the public health and social issues facing children today, including childhood obesity,¹⁶ eating disorders,¹⁷ precocious sexuality,¹⁸ youth violence,^{19 20 21} family stress,²² materialistic values²³ and the erosion of children’s creative play.^{24 25} Given that most children are inundated with marketing messages during their time out of school, it is critical that early childhood programs provide the time and space for children to develop without being subject to commercial entreaties, particularly since young children are particularly developmentally vulnerable to advertising.

Because most screen technology for young children is used to promote other products and/or media—either through direct appeals, character licensing or promotions at fast food venues—a push to include screen technology in classrooms will almost certainly result in an increase in classroom commercialism. For example, the current draft cites Microsoft’s Kinect as a technology that encourages children to move. Yet Kinect has also been used to promote fast food; Burger King recently included “Kinectimals” in its Kids Meals.²⁶

The technology statement should include clear recommendations for how to help early childhood educators limit screen-based commercialism in their classrooms. By omitting studies documenting the harms of commercialism, and by making no recommendations about limiting commercialism in early childhood settings, the current draft fails to offer guidance to educators to address some of the most pressing problems facing children today.

6. Aside from broad definitions of passive and interactive media, the statement does not distinguish between technologies. Talking to grandparents on Skype or looking at pictures on digital cameras does not have the same effect on children’s health and well-being as watching movies or playing video games featuring commercial characters. By omitting discussion of “passive media,” the statement will contribute to the excessive use of television in childcare settings.

By lumping all so-called “interactive” technologies together, the draft statement does a disservice to children and to child care educators trying to make responsible decisions about what to use and not use in their classrooms. Many electronic toys, media, and gadgets aimed at young children inhibit, rather than promote, creative play. They are marketed as both interactive and educational when, in fact, they require little more than pressing a button, clicking a mouse, and a series of preprogrammed choices.

Furthermore, we strongly urge NAEYC to include a discussion of television in this technology statement. The staggering amount of time spent watching television in early childhood settings is well documented.²⁷ If NAEYC fails to address the use of television and other passive media in childcare settings, an important opportunity to reverse this troubling trend will be missed.

We recommend that NAEYC include the following recommendations:

- Early childhood programs serving children under the age of two should include no time with television, videos, computers programs, electronic console books, phone apps or digital games.
- All early childhood programs should avoid the use of “passive” media, including television, DVDs, and watching videos on computers.
- Given the documented links between screen time and childhood obesity and other health and social problems, all early childhood programs and educators should work to reduce the amount of time children spend with screens.

We stand by our initial recommendation that preschool settings for children over two should include little or no screen technology. We recognize, however, based on the draft statement that NAEYC is unlikely to make that recommendation. Therefore, we urge NAEYC to encourage child care providers to take the following points into consideration as they make the important decision about whether to introduce technology into early childhood settings serving older children:

- How much time are the children in your charge spending with screen media outside of their classroom? The total amount of time children spend with screens at home and in child care programs should not exceed recommendations by the public health community of 2 hours per day.

- What will time spent with digital media replace? It's got to be something—there is only limited classroom time. Will it replace time children spend engaged in activities proven to promote brain development, learning, health, and social and emotional competence: creative play, interaction with loving adults, social interaction with children, active play?
- How truly “interactive” are the media you plan to use with children? Does it help children construct unique meaning? Is the activity truly creative? How much of the activity is generated by children? Does it consist primarily of preprogrammed choices?
- Many of the media products for children are designed to sell them on something—from junk food to other media products. Is the iconography based on popular media characters?
- Remember that what’s appropriate for young children changes as they grow and develop. Infants and toddlers have needs that are different than preschoolers, and the needs of preschoolers are different from seven- and eight-year-olds.
- We hear a lot about evidence-based practice in early childhood education. Is there evidence that screen technology is beneficial to young children? Is there evidence that the screen technology you’re using has been proven to be beneficial to the age of the children with whom you’re working?
- What values are promoted by the media content you select? For instance, many social networking sites for young children mainly promote shopping online.

Given the powerful role NAEYC plays in influencing early education around the country, we urge you to adopt these recommendations and to incorporate the concerns we have listed in the final version of your 2011 statement, “Technology in Early Childhood Programs Serving Children from Birth through Age 8.”

Sincerely*,

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