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Screen Media Exposure in Early Childhood and its Relation to Children's Self-Regulation: A Systematic Review

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Self-regulation, the ability to regulate thoughts, emotions, and behavior to control goal-directed activities, shows rapid development in the years comprising infancy, toddlerhood, and preschool ages. Early self-regulation skills predict later academic achievement and socioemotional adjustment. Studies suggest that one of the factors associated with the development of young children's self-regulation is their use of screen media (Hu et al., 2018; Nathanson & Beyens, 2018). In the current study, we aimed to provide a systematic review of the relationship between children's screen media exposure and their self-regulatory skills for children younger than age six. We aimed to investigate whether children's self-regulation is related to their screen time and the content they are exposed to on screens and whether screen exposure in infancy (< age 2) is particularly detrimental to self-regulation. We searched the ERIC, PsycINFO, PubMed, and Web of Science databases and identified 39 relevant articles. Our review of these articles showed that screen time in infancy is negatively associated with self-regulation, but findings are more inconsistent for later ages suggesting that screen time does not adequately capture the extent of children's screen media use. We further found that background television and watching adult-directed content are negatively related to children's self-regulatory skills, whereas watching fantastical content has immediate negative effects on children's executive functions. We suggest that future studies should take the content and context of children's screen media use into account and focus on parent and home-related factors.