The "Right Age" for Media

Doctors often give parents an age range for when a child might be able to walk, talk or leave the car seat behind. But what about watching Batman, signing up for Instagram or downloading a virtual makeup app?

When it comes to media exposure, specific numbers just don't work. More than age, it's about each individual child's maturity level and ability to communicate their questions, thoughts and feelings.

That's because mass media and social media establish societal norms that set up unrealistic expectations for kids — and the age at which kids can understand and process that varies widely.

What's real and what's not about media?

It's hard enough for adults to watch favorite TV characters land the perfect partner or dream job — or to scroll through someone's latest ideal vacation or party reel — without internalizing the insecurity those depictions can bring up. After all, our own lives don't look like that.

But most adults have the perspective to know that such images don't necessarily reflect reality. Kids don't have that insight yet, and that leaves them far more susceptible to associating gunfights with heroism or "likes" with self-esteem. Children need to be taught that what they see on a screen isn't the same as real life.

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Knowing the milestones

Is your child ready to hit some media milestones? Here's how to tell — and how to help them navigate and understand the media they'll encounter when the time comes.

1. Talk early and often about values

What the media represents as "normal" — whether it's ideas, attitudes or depictions of relationships — isn't always what everyone wants or enjoys. Media can offer an opportunity to talk about what those ideas, attitudes and relationships look like in your family.

2. Limit access

Once your child gets a smartphone or social media account, their view of the world widens. It's never a bad idea to set some limits, so your child can navigate this new realm in increments. Many companies offer parental control apps or software for any device, and sites like Common Sense Media offer age guidelines for media you're considering.

3. The two most important questions

The best way to assess your child's media-readiness is to ask yourself two questions. First, are you comfortable exposing your child to a particular movie, song, game or website without constantly monitoring them? If not, your child is not ready.

Second, are you comfortable answering any questions about sex, violence, abuse or self-destructive behavior that this media exposure might bring up? If not, then *you* aren't ready.

If you can answer "yes" to both of these questions, your child is the right age.

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