



“The New AAP Digital Media Guidance”

with Dr. Tiffany Munzer

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:00:00] Reach Out and Read where books build better brains. This is the Reach Out and Read Podcast. I'm your host, Dr. Dipesh Navsaria, a practicing pediatrician with degrees in public health and children's librarianship. I'm a clinical professor of human development and family studies at the School of Human Ecology, and a professor of pediatrics at the School of Medicine and Public Health, both at the University of Wisconsin in Madison. At Reach Out and Read, we dream of a world in which every child is read to every day. Our show explores how children and families flourish and thrive through a combination of individual well-being, confident parents, supportive communities, strong public health, and good policy. Join us here for thought-provoking conversations on these issues with expert guests, authors, and leaders in the field of early childhood health and literacy. Research shows that reading physical books together brings the strongest benefits to children. That's why we're happy to have Boise Paper, a responsible paper manufacturer, as the founding sponsor of this podcast. Through their paper with Purpose Promise, Boise Paper looks for ways to make a difference in local communities. Thank you to Boise Paper for investing in our Reach Out and Read community. Many of us are familiar with the concept of “the whole child,” an educational framework that recognizes that a healthy learning environment for children relies on a multitude of factors — which includes physical, mental health, socioemotional, and cognitive development.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:01:31] A similar framework is now being applied to a child's digital environment — that a child's digital health exists within an ecosystem, a digital ecosystem — concentric systems that shape children's relationships with digital media and its impact on well-being, which include a child's characteristics, family, school, medical, home, community, and societal influences. Managing these ecosystems can be challenging enough under regular circumstances. But as we'll hear, the process of commercialization of technology has outpaced families' access to supports that foster healthy development, caregiver-child relationships, and community well-being. And that makes it that much harder. The American Academy of Pediatrics has just released a new policy statement offering recommendations aiming to provide strengths-based solutions and promote a more child-centered digital

ecosystem. Our guest today is Dr. Tiffany Munzer. She's a clinical assistant professor specializing in developmental and behavioral pediatrics, and practices at the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital at the University of Michigan. Doctor Munzer is a lead author of the AAP's new "Digital Ecosystems, Children and Adolescents Policy Statement." Tiffany, welcome to the show.

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:02:48] Thank you so much for having me and for highlighting this topic that touches so many families and children.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:02:54] Indeed. So, we're going to get into the policy details and all in just a moment. But what prompted the need to revise this statement at this point?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:03:06] Yeah, what a great question! So, the last time these policy statements and technical reports have been written in 2016 — a lot has happened in the last decade, as you all know. We are lucky to have some more scientific evidence base to understand what are the unique contributions that children bring to the table around their digital media experiences. We're also lucky to have additional emerging evidence around parents' own contributions to their digital media ecosystems. And importantly, there's been a lot of work exposing the digital ecosystems and the design affordances within the digital ecosystem that could really affect children's well-being and families' well-being as well. So, we really have these three emerging areas of research that we wanted to highlight in this new policy statement.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:04:06] Indeed. The policy says that — given the influences of the digital ecosystems on children's experiences — that this whole question of media and children, you can't view it solely through the lens of just individual child behaviors or screen limits. Right? I mean, our old focus — which many listeners may remember — was on, you know, "two years" and "two hours a day" and all that business. And notably, that's not present in this anymore.

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:04:38] Yes, exactly. And, in part, because the digital ecosystem is really designed to be immersive, pervasive, and is commodified. And our usual strategies of recommending screen time alone are not meeting what families and kids need. And they're really — we really wanted this policy statement to support families, first and foremost. And a key part of supporting families includes the greater advocacy needs that shape the systems that families and kids are immersed in. And so, that's kind of why we highlighted the ecosystems surrounding families.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:05:23] Mhm. So — speaking of ecosystems — I mean, I'm thrilled to see the whole “concentric circles” of children and families and the ecosystems around them all coming into play here in this conversation. Can you explain to us what do we mean specifically by “digital ecosystem?”

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:05:46] Yeah, the digital ecosystem comprises things like television, the internet, social media, video games, and interactive assistants, and more. All of these components form a child's digital ecosystem that they're interacting with.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:06:02] Now, you used a few words just a few minutes ago that — they sounded dramatic, right? You said that the ecosystem is “immersive, pervasive, and commodified.” Can you say more about that?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:06:15] Yeah, sure. The current digital ecosystem is really intentionally designed, and it is really incentivized to promote children's attention, engagement, and use of digital media. And so, part of it is because of the incentive structures from the companies that are promoting certain behaviors that are designed to maximize children's attention and engagement on platforms. And sometimes, those incentive structures are misaligned with children's well-being and their needs.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:06:54] So I'm thinking, for example — as an adult here, even — a well-known language learning app that I use keeps sending me notifications about my streak, and wanting me to stay on, and earn more points, and move up on a leaderboard. It's those sorts of things that kind of are trying to capture children's attention as well?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:07:18] Yes, exactly. These are these attractive lures in apps that are often enticing us — they're beckoning us — to come back and play, or to play for longer, or to engage with their product for longer. And that time spent interacting with apps is really commodified. While those interactions are happening, data is often being collected on children and families. And so that data can be used or sold to other companies or used to better understand the user to tailor the experiences toward that particular user. I can share some more examples — including, you know, algorithms that might elevate content that could be outrageous, or highly commercialized, or risky. Those things sometimes attract a user to engage more with the content. We know that there are navigation constraints in apps that can make it hard for children to transition away from them. For instance, it's hard to find the “X” button on certain apps. And so, if you can't “X” out of the app, how are you going to stop playing? And so, there have been research studies that have actually examined low, medium, and high amounts of these

engagement-prolonging or persuasive designs in technology. And they found that kids who struggle with their own emotion regulation or their self-regulation — who have a harder time with it — those are the kids that really struggle with these higher amounts of persuasive design, or when there's more of these engagement-prolonging designs. So, it's really interacting with children's development in a way that might mismatch with what they need from their environment.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:09:05] You know, is it too extreme to say that it's actually looking for children's weak points and exploiting it?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:09:14] Well, I think they're psychologically designed using these principles, cognitive behavioral principles, to promote all of our engagement. And for children who might be developing their impulse control and self-regulation, it can be harder for kids especially — to have the innate autonomy to be able to say, "I'm going to stop playing and I'm going to go get my nine to 10 hours of sleep that I need." You know? Because it wasn't designed to be that way. And so, if we can reimagine the digital ecosystem in a way that promotes children's wellbeing — that is child-centered in its design — kids can get more out of it, and it will be easier for families to manage their children's digital environment.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:10:07] You mentioned some things that I think folks have heard a lot about, like algorithms. I think the latest hot topic is AI. Now, the statement does say that AI will be covered in a separate policy. Can you talk a bit about why that's being broken out separately?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:10:26] Yeah. So, artificial intelligence is really an area of emerging research and there's a lot to cover. It spans from, you know, the Algorithm that is driven by these artificial intelligence. It touches so many areas of a child's life. And so, we felt that in order to do it adequate justice, it needed to be its own policy statement. And the other piece is that the evidence really is evolving. We're learning more and more day-to-day on the impact of artificial intelligence. And we wanted a little bit more to be able to work with, to be able to provide a statement that's reflective of the nuance and the experiences of families as well. So, that's why it's a separate policy statement.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:11:17] As someone who's been a policy statement author, I also recognize that there's a point where there's only so much you can say in the within the word limits that they give us.

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:11:27] Yes, we're working against those word limits, for sure. We all want more words. That's what we want.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:11:34] Indeed. So, a lot of what's in the statement really talks about relational health, which is something we talk about a lot on this podcast. And you've explained a lot about how this is really about the whole environment around children, and how it interacts with them, and engages with them. There was a really deeply compelling line in the statement that said, "investments in the digital ecosystem have outpaced investments in human capital — such as paid family leave and third spaces, libraries, parks — that bolster relationships and community cohesion." Can you say more about that because that really grabbed me?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:12:23] Yeah. Well, we know that there have been — there's been an exponential investment from venture capital into these digital spaces. So, people are nurturing these digital spaces and growing these spaces exponentially. In the meantime, there have been, you know — investments in school, investments in children's extracurricular activities, and investments in childcare have been more stagnant. And so, those have not received the attention that we know families deserve and need, that children and families deserve and need, that we know to be promoting of those healthy early childhood experiences. And so, of course, when there's been a greater investment in the digital spaces that's going to lead families to these digital spaces, whereas a lot of these other important activities for children — like extracurricular activities or childcare — have become really cost prohibitive for families. And so, for a lot of families, it has not been a choice that they're actively making, but a systemic constraint that's forcing their hand to engage in this digital ecosystem. So, if we made part of this family supportive ecosystem better — we invested more time in families — then caregivers might be less stressed, and they might be less likely to resort to digital media as a source of entertainment for children. And so, children deserve these opportunities. We all know that families deserve these opportunities. And so, a really key piece of giving and understanding families' digital experiences is also understanding this backdrop that's happening with families as well.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:14:22] Sure. Yeah. There's just so many challenges to being able to, you know, make it easy for families to do the thing we'd like to see more of. And that again comes back to design and intention and all those sorts of things, as well. There's a challenge with digital media in that I think we often run afoul of talking to families in a way that's really about shame and guilt. You know, if your kid is in front of a screen, you must be an awful parent. And I even admit myself, if I walk into an exam room and I see a kid just glued to a screen. And my first little emotional, visceral reaction is like, "oh gosh, this kid is on a screen!" Right? But let's also keep in mind that this family is often there in an urgent care. It's an evening. They might have been waiting a long time. Our exam rooms are really boring and don't have

anything else for kids to do. Yes, a family would be well-advised to say, “bring the darn screen with us so that my kid doesn't start trashing the room because they're so bored and tired and hungry.” You know, what better choice do they have?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:15:36] Yes!

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:15:36] How can we talk about this in a way that's supportive of families and isn't about shame and guilt, because that's been our dialogue for too long?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:15:46] I mean, that's such a wonderful — I love how thoughtful! You know, you clearly understand the context of, you know, families' lives. And I think that is what pediatric caregivers do best — is that they really understand how children's kind of psychosocial world is designed, and they have a deep, trusting relationship with their families. And so really leaning on the relational piece is so important, you know. And we know that above and beyond kind of digital media effect sizes and the impact of digital media screen time on children's well-being. We know that these strong, connected relationships with their trusted caregivers all have stronger effect sizes for children's well-being. And so, I think when pediatric providers can hone in on the relational context and really promote that connection between a caregiver and their child, then they'll lay a lot of the groundwork for the digital media work, as well. So, I'll give a few examples around what I mean by that. For instance, we know that — when this is all a kind of cross-sectional, associational work — but I think it still provides a helpful lens for understanding kind of how important these relationships are.

But teens with stronger relationships — with strong, healthy relationships with their caregivers — they actually do better also in their digital media environment. And we know that joint media engagement, meaning when caregivers and children engage together over digital media, that's also associated with greater child and teen learning. And when we promote this early relational health as the base for a lot of these behaviors that we see at the very tip top — you know, the digital media behaviors that can make it easier for, you know, when kids or teens might see something online — they might be more likely to turn to their caregiver to be to talk through what they're seeing. And their caregiver can really help make meaning from what they're seeing online. So, these pieces are really important. And I think pediatricians know that deeply. And families like know that, too. And so, I think building out this relational world and helping support that relational world for families is really important — and one thing that I think pediatric providers just naturally understand how to do.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:18:23] Sure. That's helpful. Thank you. So, as in keeping with most AAP policy statements, there are quite a few recommendations that you folks did lay out, and you followed the ecosystem framework. So, policy, community, and individual-level solutions. Let's start maybe with the most micro. Right? How do we advise families in the exam room? And, if you did lead off with "The Five C's", which our listeners may recall from when we interviewed earlier this year Dr. Jenny Radesky. So, we've been through those in some detail, but there's some other elements in here, as well, about supporting caregivers as we've talked about. And another one, which I think a lot of families struggle with — using strategies for emotional regulation outside of digital media. Can you comment on that, because it is something that I do see families turning to when their child is fussy or upset?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:19:35] Yeah. So, the strategies for emotion regulation, I think, emotion — Learning how to regulate your emotions is a lifelong process, and there's no quick fix solution to when your child is throwing a tantrum. You know, sometimes you just have to wait the tantrum out. But I think a lot of families, you know, when they're feeling stressed from their long day at work, they just don't have the bandwidth, you know, to be able to offer other solutions. But I think pediatric providers can help identify other strategies for calming that might work for that particular child. So, asking like, what does your child like to do to relax — like what kind of things do they just gravitate towards naturally? So, those might be things like drawing or reading that families can leverage as something to help them cool down. They can leverage evidence-based emotion regulation strategies, such as the zones of regulation, which help children identify their own emotions and help them before they get into a zone that they're just oblivious to kind of logic and reasoning. So, help them cool down before they reach this red zone where anything you do is not going to help.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:20:52] One of the things that you have under recommendations for families also is about finding quality content. And there's a lovely graphic you actually have there with puzzle pieces about puzzles on how to choose high-quality content. Can you walk us through how might families think about this?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:21:12] Yeah. Sure. So high-quality content, you know, there's a lot of discussion around like, "what is high-quality content?" How can we help families identify it? You know, I think testing it out as a parent — you know, playing with your child for even like one or two minutes can help you. You know, as a parent with those parental instincts, you'll likely know and recognize what you like and what is going to be lower-quality content. But additional pieces to consider include whether that content promotes critical thinking. Is it just like a tap or a swipe, you know, around a letter or a shape?

Or is it encouraging a child to think more deeply and problem solve around things that might occur in their day-to-day life? That content might also have very pro-social themes, you know, about how — what — does it look like to work together as a team? What does it look like to resolve healthy conflict? And what does it look like to be like a good friend and to be kind? So those kinds of messages are really important for kids to hear early on. Other things that might encompass high-quality content include a child's sense of urgency in moving on to other activities. So, if that content is really sticky and tricky and makes it hard for your children to transition away, that might be a sign that it might be lower-quality content. And then, of course, high-quality content should lack commercialized, or violent, or age-inappropriate content. It should have more of a relaxing pace and not feel overly fast or frenetic, so that that content can sink in a little bit better for young minds, especially. And then it should be free of unwanted contact or negative interpersonal experiences that we know are not likely to promote healthy wellbeing for children.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:23:06] You know, there's a lot of surveys that parents are rightly concerned about their children being exposed to inappropriate content, violent content, etc. And then, there's always this talk about parental controls and filters and things like that. What's the current thinking about that?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:23:24] Yeah. So, I think that's a great question around violent content. And, of course, families should monitor and filter content from their children and encourage ongoing conversations around what their children are seeing — especially if they're seeing any distressing or scary or worrisome content. That should be really indication to kind of talk through it and even seek out psychological support, you know, if children are needing a higher level of support that the families feel like, "oh, I'm kind of out of my element here." Of course, talking to your pediatrician and psychologist can be helpful. But then, at a higher level, we really need to be ensuring that children are not exposed to violent or inappropriate content that's going to create these kinds of psychological distress for children. And so, part of that is increasing algorithmic transparency, so that we know what is shown to children and increasing our age assurance processes so that digital companies know when it's a child that's viewing or using their product, and so that they — that reduces the likelihood of them getting exposed to some of these less age-appropriate topics.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:24:45] Yeah. And that brings us to the next level of recommendations. Right? That there's only so much parents can do, and most parents are not capable of coding their own filters. And all that comes to the companies, right, about their design. And again, you folks lay out some

recommendations from them that you mentioned about knowing who child users are — you know, safety, privacy, transparency. And tell me what child-centered design looks like.

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:25:19] Yeah. So, I think child-centered design is like — it's an opportunity for us to reimagine what the digital ecosystem could look like for children. And we know as pediatricians that children's health and well-being should be prioritized over designs that might take their data or encourage excessive use or promote commercial content. And so, I think a big part of that is to collaborate early and often with children, you know, and families and to adequately test products for safety. You know, like we know that there's constant monitoring of these products over time, but there needs to be more investment in the initial design of the product so that it's really keeping in line with and respecting children's agency and keeping in line a priority on how children see and move through the world.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:26:17] Yeah, and you know those — this kind of goes backwards a little bit into talking about parents, and families, and children and all — but I think it's also connected with what you were just talking about. You also talk about this concept of doing a “swap out,” and you have some wonderful little graphics as well in the policy statement. Could you explain the swap out concept?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:26:40] Yeah. So sometimes, you know, when we're — as pediatricians — it sometimes feels terrible to be like, “no, don't do that!” You know? And so — instead of saying, “no, don't do that,” you know — swapping something out instead of digital media, finding something else to do that your child really loves and gravitates towards naturally and do a swap. So, exchange out the tablet for some other fun — like a fun craft, or a fun book that that child loves, or like a journal that they could draw out what they're seeing on digital media. And it can also provide an opportunity to continue the digital play into the real world and that kind of translation from the digital context to the real-life context. That's kind of the kind of thing that helps kids learn more deeply and to help the content sink in better, too. So, for instance, if kids are watching a video about trains, you can swap out the tablet that's playing the video with the trains with like an actual toy train that you guys build together and imagine together or play together.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:27:51] And then, the last layer of recommendations is, of course, for policy and policy makers to think about. And some are items we've mentioned about pro-social shared spaces — also, about addressing things you've talked about, like harmful content. But there was something else that we haven't touched on that I think also is more key for older children, teens. “Universal erasure” — could you explain what that is?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:28:21] Yeah. So, for teens — who, they are so curious and they love to explore their environment —there's a lot of kind of social and peer motivation for some of the content that they might be posting online. And they're also developing these kind of burgeoning self-regulation skills, as well. And so, it is — being able to post a picture online for teens is very friction-free. And so, it is just easy to press a button and post something that you might in a year later — or even 30 minutes later — it might not be something that you want online forever. And so, universal erasure laws really help support teens in that there's less permanence for teens' online content, and that they can have the ability to take down content or images that they post themselves or are posted about them in a timely manner.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:29:24] Yeah, I think there's a lot of adults who would shudder to think if social media and all had been around when they were teens — what they might have put up and are glad that it didn't exist. Right?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:29:35] Yes, the number of emo or moody comments that would be on my Instagram as a teen — like, thank goodness that was not an existence!

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:29:45] There we go! As I said, there's a lot of really lovely recommendations, and some other mnemonics, and bits of guidance around thinking about content and all. I encourage our listeners to read the policy statement — which, because of the length restrictions, it's not that long. And there's also associated material on healthychildren.org — the AAP's parent portal, that is even friendlier in many ways. To close here, what's the one thing that you would hope that listeners can take away from this whole conversation?

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:30:25] Gosh, the one takeaway that I would love listeners to gain out of this is that, you know, we've too long been focused on individual responsibility and screen time alone for kids and families. But there's an enormous layer of the digital ecosystem and the communities and policies that are shaping family opportunity that really need to be highlighted, that really need to be improved for families, so that children and teens can explore digital spaces that are filled with enrichment and community. And I think one last piece is that, really, these child-centered designs are achievable — they're better for society and they can lead to digital products that really promote children's health and well-being.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:31:17] Mhm. Yeah. I think it's very much all about putting humans and human relationships back into digital media and the thinking about it.

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:31:26] Yes, exactly. Couldn't put it better myself.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:31:31] Well, and I will say before we close here, I will always remember when you came to speak at the Reach Out and Read Wisconsin conference several years ago, now. And you shared an anecdote about being asked by someone what the best toy was for children and you — I think it was a reporter that might have asked you that — and you said, “well, parents are the best toys.” And that has always stuck with me as really centering the role of humans and human relationships in the world of children in so many ways.

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:32:09] Yes. Parents and caregivers do so much. You know, they're the toys, the secure base — the “everything,” you know, that support children. So, we really — I think parents and caregivers are amazing. And I think, as pediatric providers, we're so lucky to get to support them in this space.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:32:30] Indeed. Well, thank you to you and the whole authorship team for working on this incredibly important work. So many, so many questions people have about digital media — and I think this will give them an opportunity to reflect and be thoughtful about that wider, bigger picture for children and how we can use digital media to support and make their lives better.

Dr. Tiffany Munzer: [00:32:55] Thank you.

Dr. Dipesh Navsaria: [00:33:00] Welcome to today's 33rd page or something extra for you, our listeners. The conclusion to the AAP's policy statement that we spent so much time discussing today is short, but I think really gets to the point. It tells us, “children and teens deserve to explore digital spaces filled with enrichment and community. Extractive designs that commodify attention and disrupt interpersonal relationships are widespread but could be refocused towards children's well-being. Child-centered designs are achievable, better for society, and can lead to digital products that promote children's well-being.” I think that's really the point, isn't it? And that's today's 33rd page. You've been listening to the Reach Out and Read podcast. Reach Out and Read is a non-profit organization that is the authoritative national voice for the positive effects of reading daily, and supports, coaches, and celebrates engaging in those language-rich activities with young children. We are continually inspired by stories that encourage language literacy and early relational health. Visit us at reachoutandread.org to find out more. And don't forget to subscribe to our show wherever you listen to your podcasts. If you like what you hear, please leave us a review. Your feedback helps grow our podcast community and tells others that this podcast is worth listening to.

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