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Alarm sounded over wrong sort of screen time

■ Lucy Battersby

Too much time in front of a screen playing the wrong kind of computer games can delay a child's development or lead to serious damage in adults, according to new research of the impact of media and technology on the brain.

Lecturer at the Institute of Early Childhood at Macquarie University Kate Highfield said the right apps, games or shows could help a child's development or keep children engaged in activities for longer.

But her research found 85 per cent of the apps bought for children were just "drill and practice" games that asked them to repeat an action or remember simple facts. Such apps led to lower-level neural development and often included excessive rewarding that could lead to unrealistic expectations in children.

She recommended apps such as Art Maker, My Story, Explain Everything and Creatorverse, which require input from their young users.

Current health regulations suggest children under two years be allowed no screen time at all, including television, and children under five years less than one hour a day. Surprisingly, even adults should limit their screen-based entertainment to no more than two hours a day.

A mother of three children under six,

Melissa Marshall finds her children become passive or inactive when they spend too much time on a tablet or smart-phone. She likes to regulate their time spent in front of screens.

"Sometimes they can sit there and be absorbed with [the iPhone] and play for ages, not doing anything constructive," she says. "It's the same with television - it is about saying 'you have had enough of that, go outside or read a book'."

Mrs Marshall said she wondered if too much television or computer games damaged her children's brains, or her own, and felt there was a lack of information available to parents.

"These sorts of reports that are coming out [are useful], because they do help to remind you and give you some guidelines," she said.

"Even though generally we know where the limits should be, you feel bad if you use [technology] too much."

The new research will be presented at the Australian Council on Children and the Media conference in Sydney on Friday. It will include a presentation on internet gaming disorders and new research on the effects of violent media and gaming on the human brain.