The iPad and other tablets have become so commonplace in our lives, it’s hard to remember a time when they weren’t around. Only in existence since 2010, the tablet has changed the way young and old interact with technology. Have you had the experience of touching the screen on your desktop computer after using the iPad and expecting it to react the same way? It has become nearly automatic to touch a screen to access information. When I began my teaching career in 1989, I entered a classroom equipped with a state of the art Apple II. My students with disabilities would immediately touch the screen to ‘make it go’ and it took many lessons for them to understand the relationship between the mouse or keyboard, and the screen. Fast forward to 2015, and my students’ initial way of interacting with technology is now a reality. From games to videos to communication, the tablet has it all. With the rise in use of tablets with babies and toddlers, families and educators are now looking at how iPad use affects development in our youngest learners.

Families love to see their children playing simple games or FaceTiming with Aunt Sara. It often buys busy parents a few minutes of quiet in an otherwise hectic day. Many a tantrum has been avoided at the grocery store, doctor’s office, or restaurant as a child happily engages with a favorite Sesame Street or Nick Jr. character. The app market for toddlers has exploded in the past few years with offerings that include learning letters and numbers, interacting with stories, and playing music. With my own children, I’ve seen the benefits of learning apps but the ‘zoning out’ as well. What does the current research say about iPads and young learners?

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop commissioned studies that found that “certain apps may improve children’s vocabulary and math skills. There is also evidence that in children with cognitive delays iPad apps can boost language use and social interaction.” In my work with children in the early intervention program, I’ve seen difficult to engage 2 year olds sign ‘more please’ to use the iPad consistently. By interacting with the child during iPad time, I’ve been able to encourage language, reinforce cause and effect, and move along to the Wheels on the Bus. For my students with physical disabilities, it often presents opportunities to be more independent. According to pediatrician Dr. Dimitri A. Christakis, children less than two years of age may benefit from screen time (30-60 minutes daily) if it is interactive. In the journal JAMA Pediatrics, Dr. Christakis states, “I believe that the judicious use of interactive media is acceptable for children younger than the age of 2 years.” Passive use of the iPad (such as videos) should be limited much as television viewing is for children under 2.

But what about what they’re missing? If young children are spending too much time with a tablet, what can happen? There is certainly concern from parents and educators that overuse of tablets with babies and toddlers delays or interferes with social, cognitive, and physical development. Young children are hardwired to seek interaction from loving caregivers. As engaging as a tablet may be, it cannot provide the human interaction a young child needs to develop cognitively and socially. In an article by Dr. Nan Anderson entitled “Is Your iPad Bad for Baby?” she expresses concern that “In fact, to the extent that screen-devices replace social play, reduce time available for creative thinking, and keep kids from active,
physical play those devices interfere with the development of essential brain capacities and unrecoverable intellectual skills." Children need social interaction to develop language, expand their imaginative play, and learn to solve problems together. An app can’t and shouldn’t replace the experience of playing with a new (human) friend. Another concern for social and emotional development is children who are given an iPad or tablet when upset may not learn how to calm down without it. Tantrums are a natural part of emotional development. Children need to learn to express frustration appropriately and to recover from distress on their own. If an iPad is used excessively to divert negative emotional responses, a child may not develop the skills needed for self-regulation.

What is a parent to do then? As with most things, moderation seems to be the key. The iPad or tablet is an amazing tool for young learners but should be part of a much bigger parenting ‘tool kit.’ Banging pots and pans, stacking blocks, and popping bubbles are time honored fun activities for young children and don’t cost much. Singing, dancing, and reading stories together are beneficial for both parents and children. Babies and toddlers want and need your love and attention. As with any toy or learning tool, engage with your child as he or she explores it. Expand on the app by pointing out different objects and labeling them along with your child. Get up and dance to a favorite video. Read along with an interactive story and make silly faces or voices to hold your child’s attention. And yes, sometimes when you need a few minutes of quiet, let your child explore the iPad on his or her own. Hopefully, when the time is up, you’ll both be ready to play and learn together!