

Understanding Child Media Use for Sensory
Regulation: Research by the UNC FaMLab on
Media Sensory Curation and Family Media
Conflict



Kristen Harrison, PhD
Hussman School of Journalism and Media

Who am I?

**Richard Cole Eminent
Professor, UNC**

Media psychologist

Autistic adult (Asperger syndrome)

Parent of 3, 2 with autism diagnoses

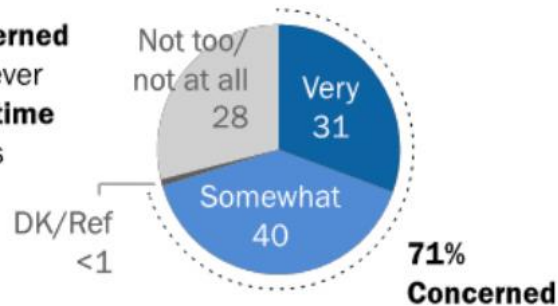
**Board member, Autism Society of North
Carolina, Orange/Chatham Counties**



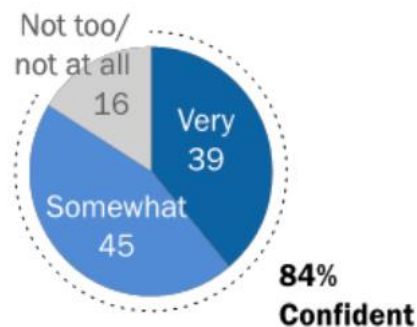
A majority of parents are concerned that their child might ever spend too much time on screens and have reached out to doctors for advice about this

% of U.S. parents of a child age 11 or younger who say ...

They are __ **concerned** their child might ever spend too much time in front of screens



They are __ **confident** in their ability to **know** how much screen time is appropriate for their child



*Based on parents of a child age 5 to 11.

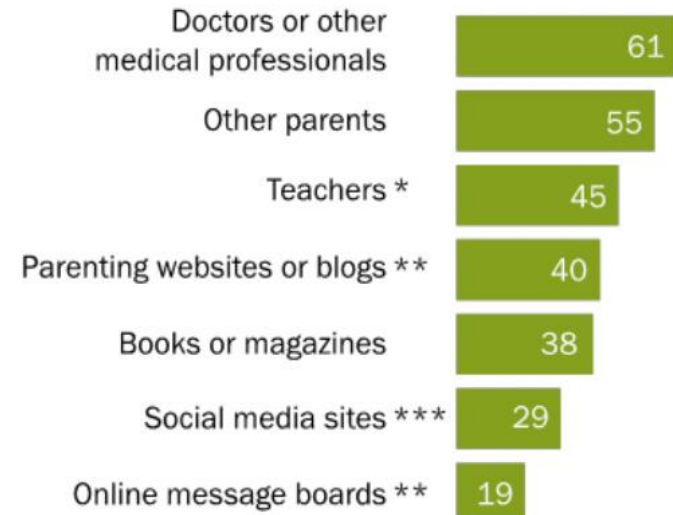
**Based on internet users.

***Based on social media users.

Note: If parent has multiple children, they were asked to focus on one child when answering this question. Those who did not give an answer are not shown.

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They ever get **parenting advice or information** about screen time from ...



Explaining children's attachments to screen media



**FAMILY & MEDIA
LABORATORY**

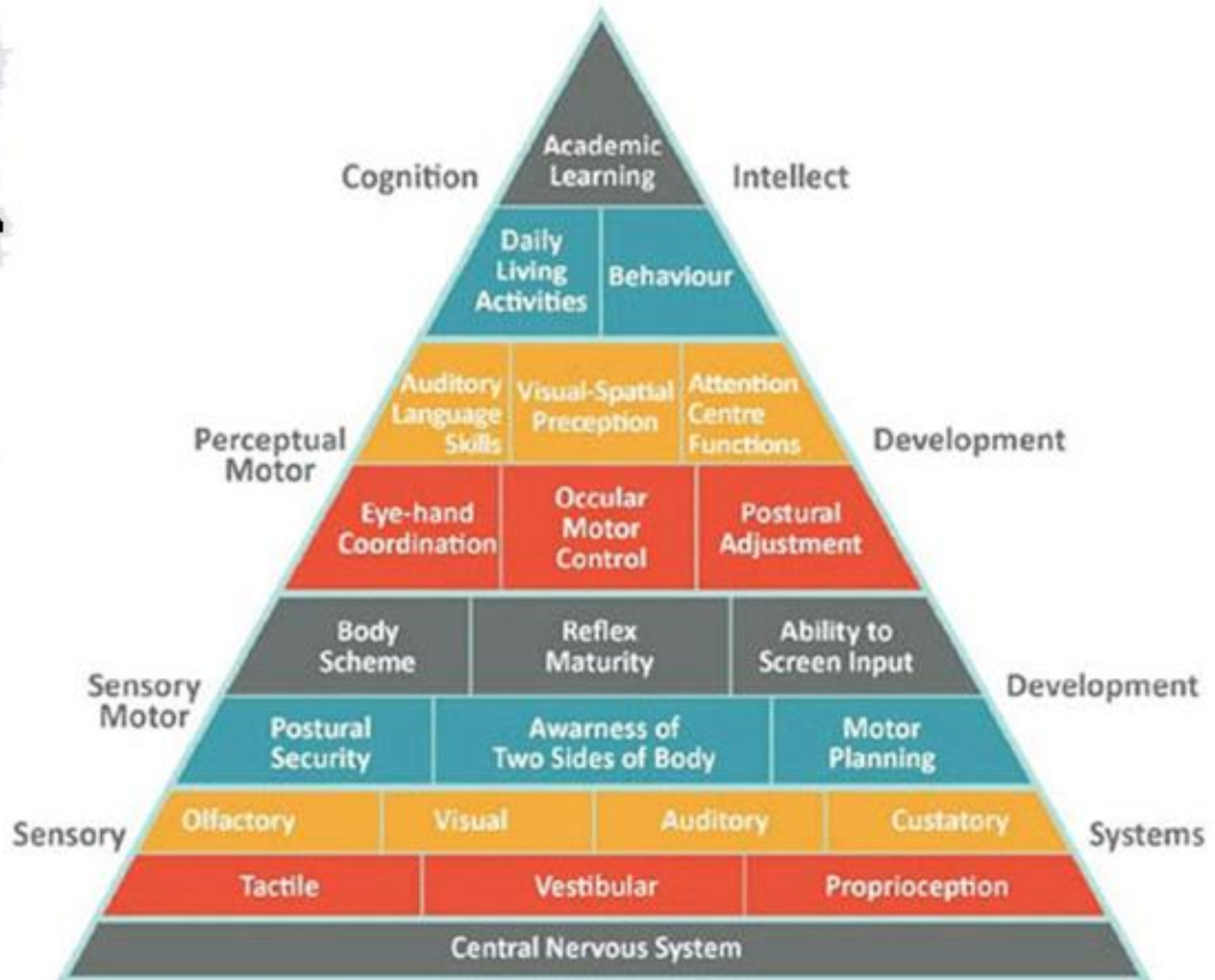


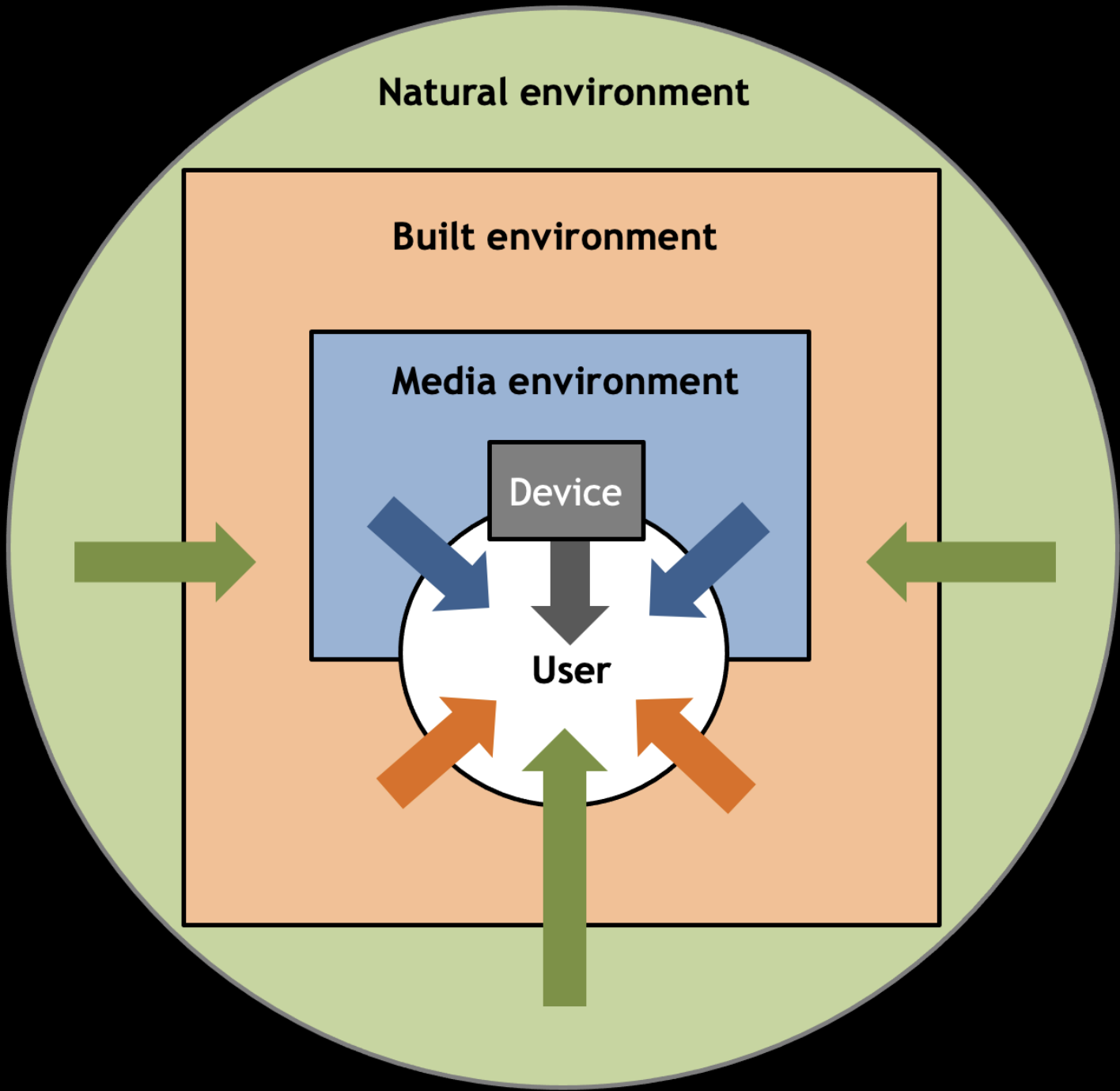
**100 years
of research
on media
gratifications**

**Informational
Emotional
Relational
Sensory?**



PYRAMID of LEARNING





Natural environment

Built environment

Media environment

Device

User

MEDIA SENSORY CURATION

Selective use and arrangement of media devices, content, settings, peripherals, and environments to maintain sensory regulation through visual, auditory, and tactile sensory inputs

Like “picky eating” ... but with media



Assumptions and Predictions of Media Sensory Curation Theory

Diversity in human sensory preferences and tolerances

Screen media **capture, curb** sensory input

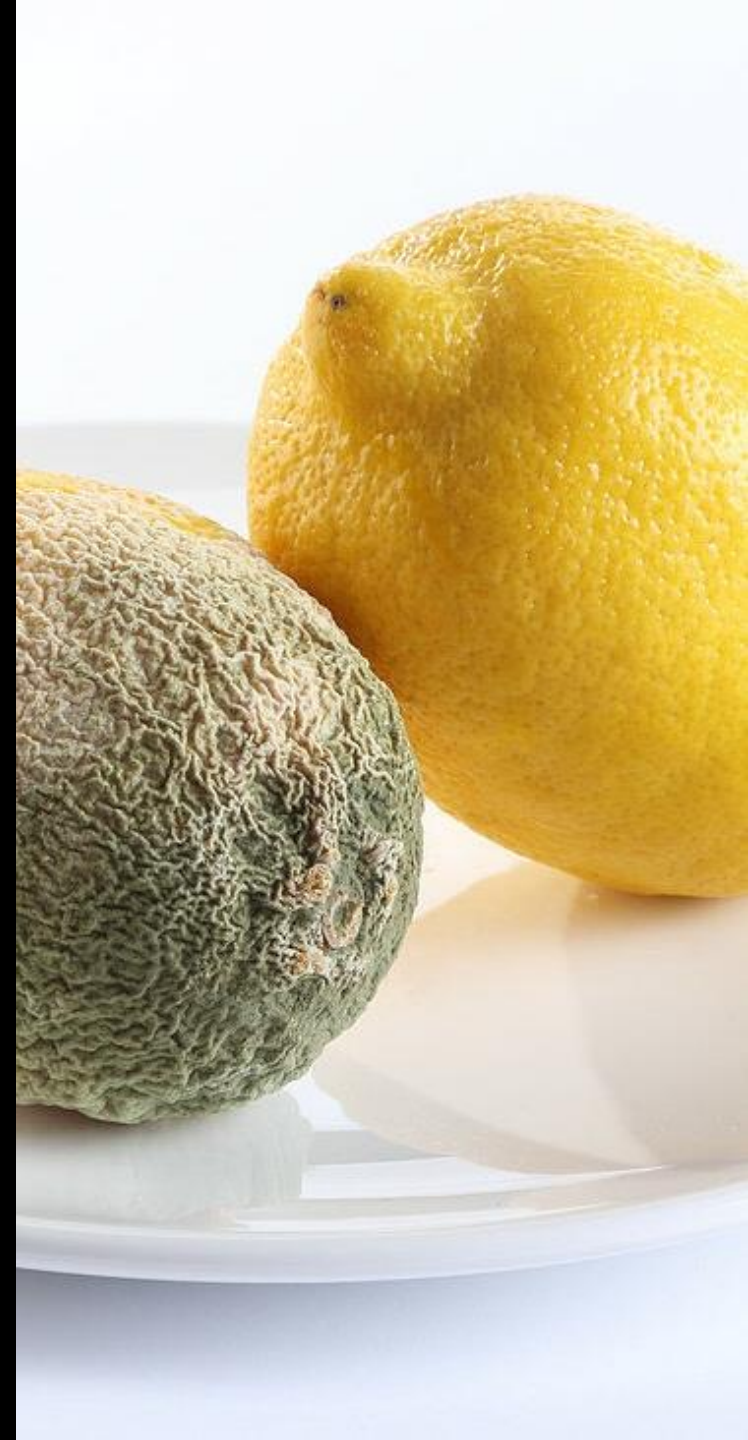
We select and adjust media devices, content, settings, accessories, environments to **maintain overall sensory regulation**

Media can capture and curb simultaneously even in **same modality** (e.g., sound)

MSC and **children**: sensory systems developing, less control over environments

MSC and **neurodivergent** people: built environment not normed for them

Environmental arrangement: always about **tradeoffs**





Media devices are tools that help maintain sensory regulation in dysregulating environments

SERVICE
SELF SERVICE

WHERE HARRY
MET SALLY.
HOPE YOU HAVE
SOMEONE SHE HAD!
RIGHT?





How do we measure sensory curation?

ADULTS:

“I find pop-up ads on the computer distracting”

“I turn on screen media or the radio to add background sound while I work”

How do we measure sensory curation?

KIDS:

“My child likes to use screen media under a blanket”

“My child loses track of time while watching TV or playing video games”

Who practices sensory curation?

Anyone, but especially those for whom the built environment was not normed

Survey of 1543 parents of kids

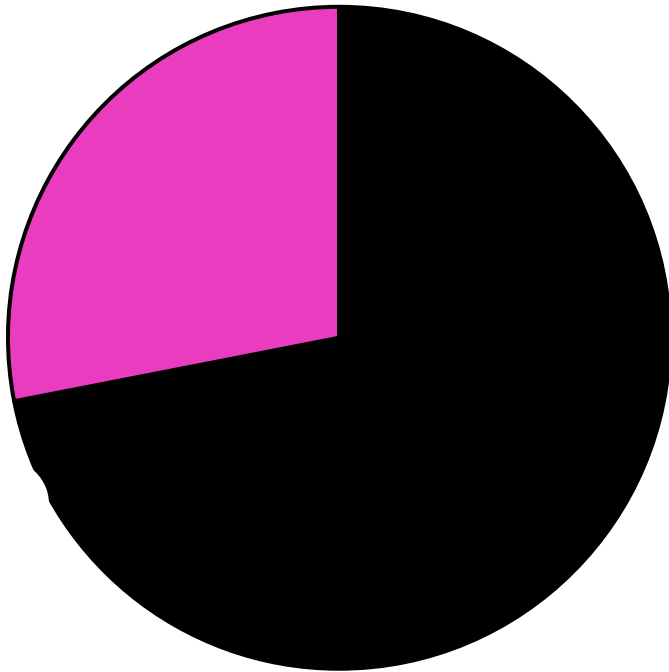
Ages 3-13

Survey findings

Ages 3-13

Sensory curation

■ Low ■ High



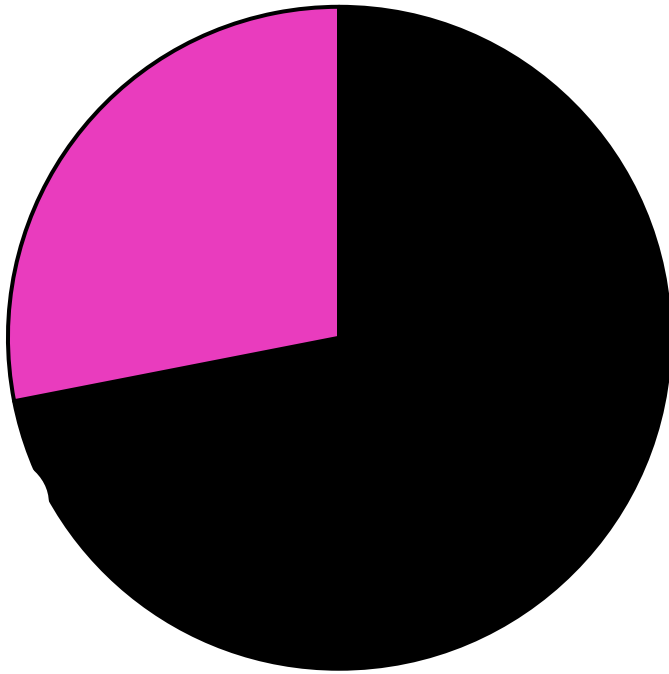
Typical kids

Survey findings

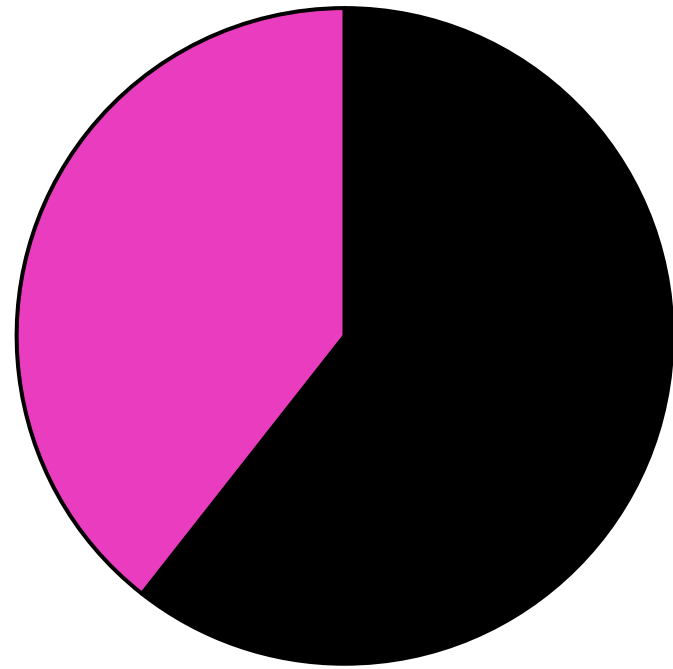
Ages 3-13

Sensory curation

■ Low ■ High



Typical kids



Autistic, ADHD kids

A photograph of a young girl with blonde hair, wearing a pink shirt, touching the face of a young boy with blonde hair, wearing a blue and yellow patterned shirt. They are outdoors, with a grassy area and a red structure in the background. The image is framed by an orange border.

**BILLY, LISTEN. I'M TACTILE SEEKING
AND YOU'RE TACTILE DEFENSIVE**

**EITHER WE GO SEE AN OCCUPATIONAL
THERAPIST OR THIS RELATIONSHIP IS OVER**

Media conflict by sensory curation combinations

Adult - Child



6

5

4

3

2

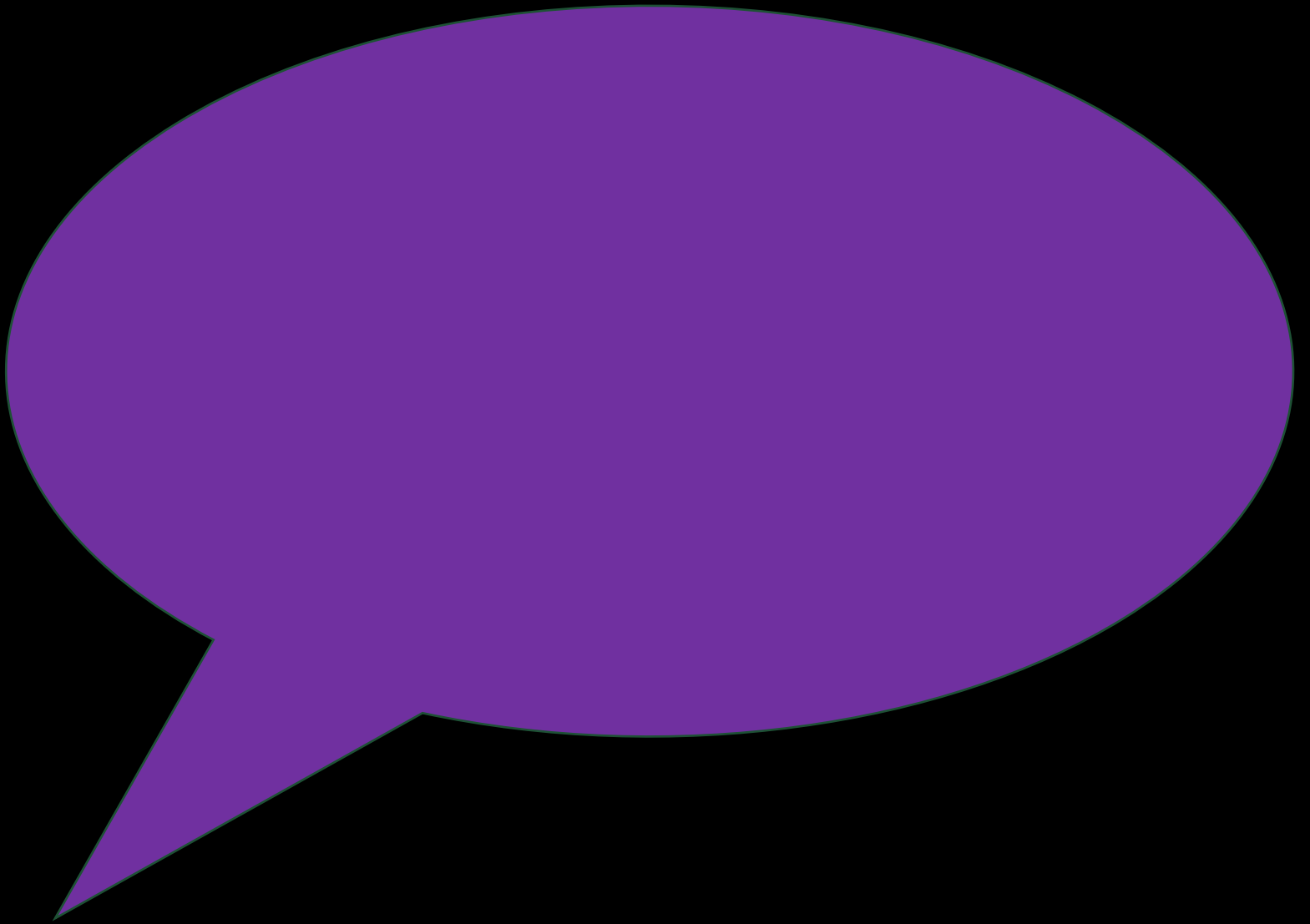
1

TV computer tablet phone gaming

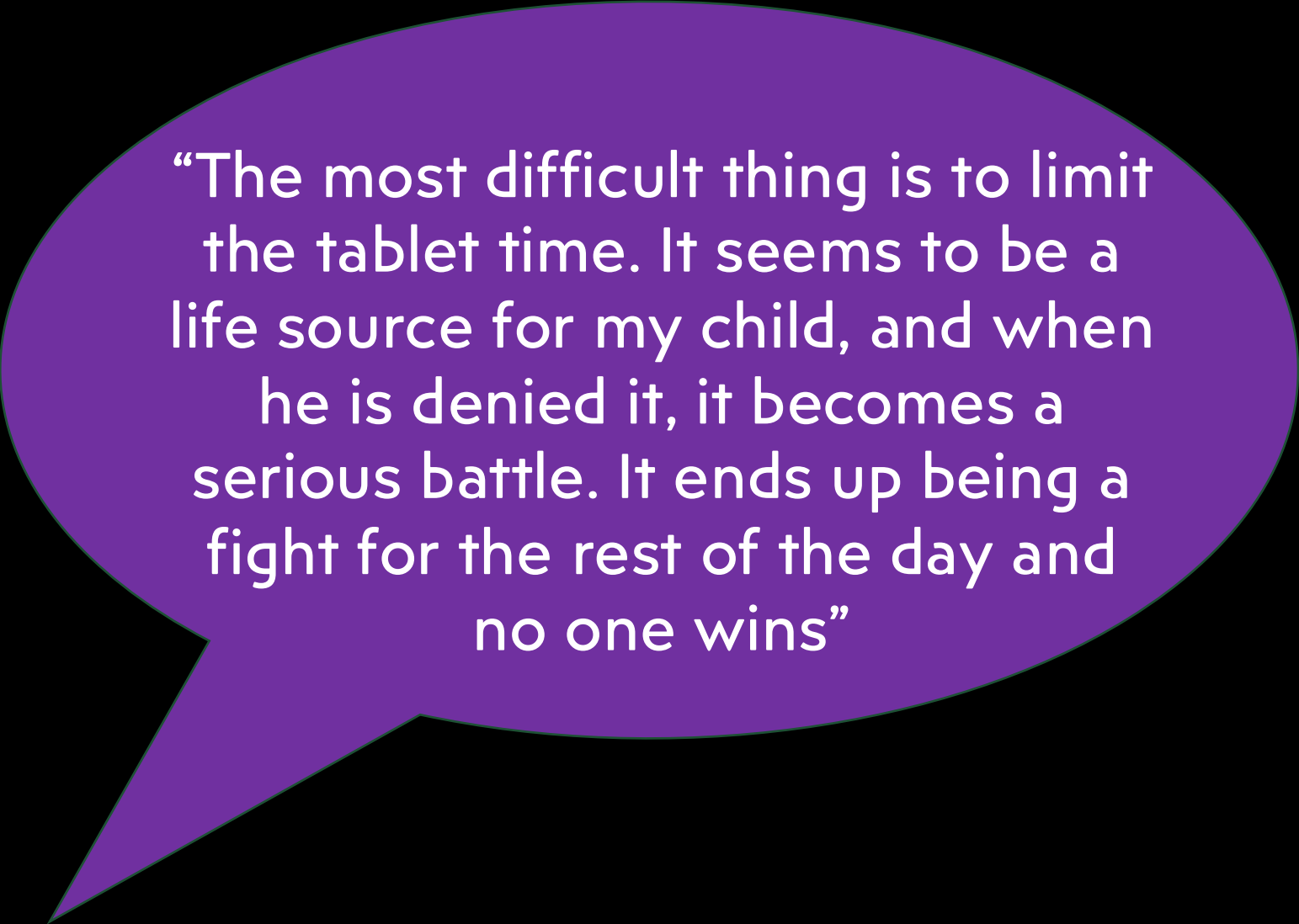
Parent Narratives About Conflict

“If you reported any conflict in the previous items, please take a minute to describe the media-related conflict you and your child experience most frequently and your challenges in managing it.”

—



Parent narratives

A purple speech bubble with a black outline, pointing downwards and to the left. The text inside is white and reads: "The most difficult thing is to limit the tablet time. It seems to be a life source for my child, and when he is denied it, it becomes a serious battle. It ends up being a fight for the rest of the day and no one wins"

“The most difficult thing is to limit the tablet time. It seems to be a life source for my child, and when he is denied it, it becomes a serious battle. It ends up being a fight for the rest of the day and no one wins”

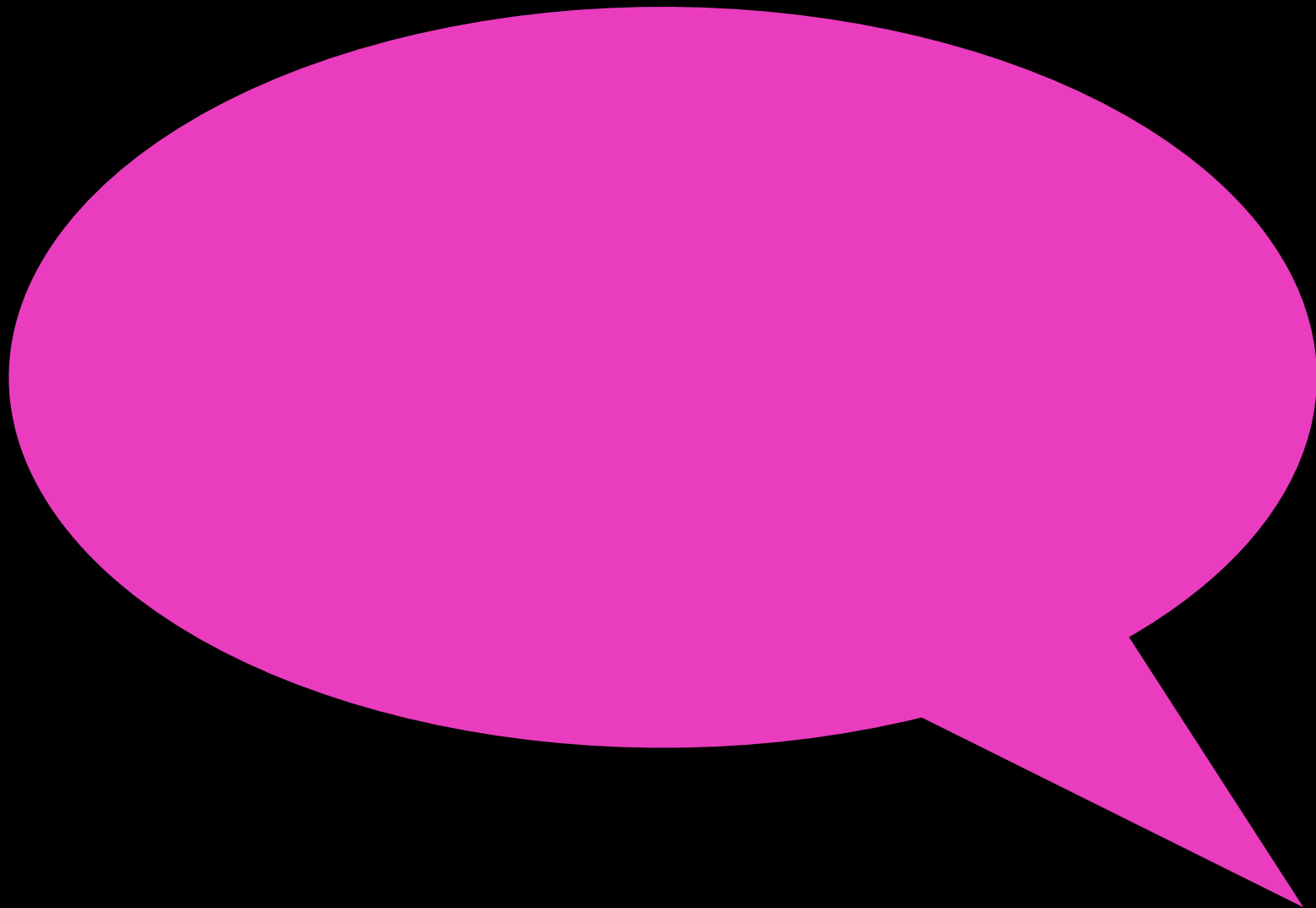
Parent narratives

“When we take it from him to make him go to bed, he becomes violently confrontational. When he is restricted from any screen time, he destroys the house, including but not limited to breaking furniture, toys, doors, his bed, walls, and even hurting himself along with trying to physically assault his mother and myself, his father”

Parent narratives

“I will attempt to gently encourage him to move on to another activity which seems to anger him... sometimes this will escalate to the point of throwing the phone/controller/device or even breaking the television. His emotional outburst seems dramatically out of proportion to the situation from my perspective but he claims it is out of his control when he has returned to a reasonable state”


Parent narratives



Parent narratives

“We do not have any conflict, I AM THE PARENT my children have been raised to follow the rules and listen. There are too many children being allowed to do as they wish including on TV, screen media, etc. The answer is simple, do not allow them to use it if it is not what you want. Tell them no or take the item and shut it off. You are the parent, they are the child, teach your child rules”

Parent narratives

A large, pink speech bubble with a white outline, pointing downwards and to the right. Inside the bubble, there is white text. The background of the entire slide is black.

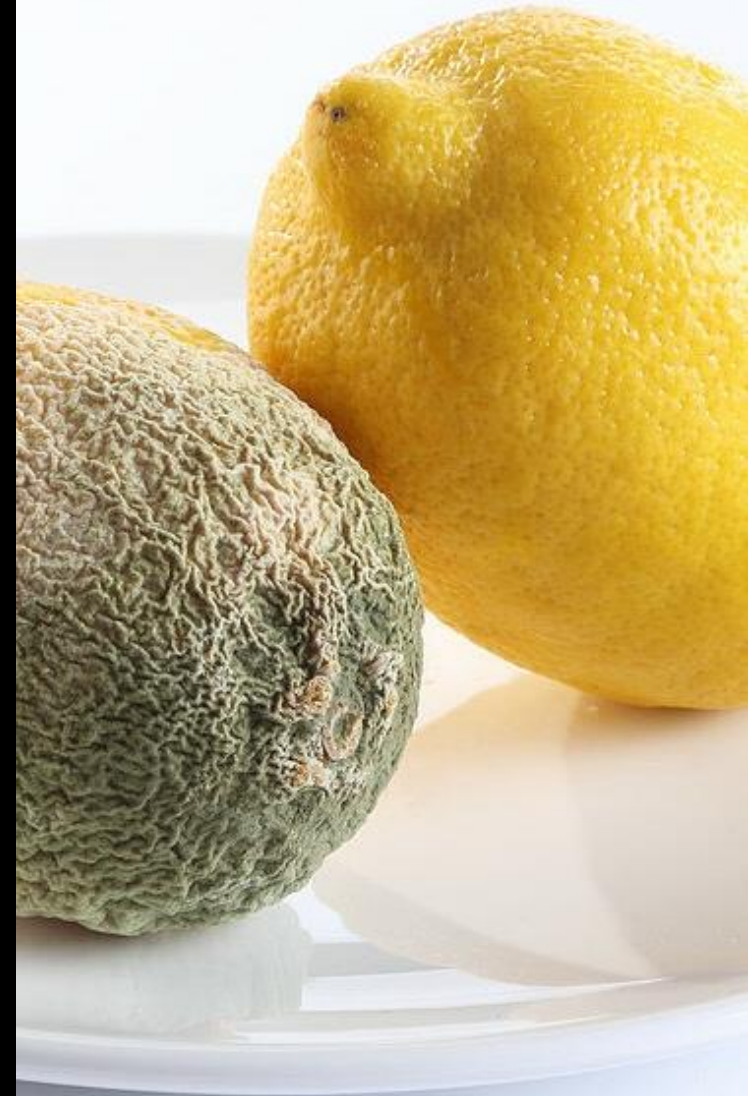
“All I do is let him have any and all media time. My son doesn’t really understand the concept of a lot of things.”

Parent narratives

Other media gratifications still apply!

Media that relieve sensory dysregulation AND provide those gratifications will be extremely attractive

Media “addiction” might reflect tradeoff of a lemon over a moldy lemon



TAKEAWAYS

**Kids use media for
sensory regulation**

**To reduce conflict,
look for non-media
care structures
that support
regulation**

**But so do
parents!**

CARE STRUCTURES

Artifacts of human
care in the design
and function of
everyday
environments,
institutions, things:
invisible when
they work

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Individuals with Disabilities
Education Act (IDEA)



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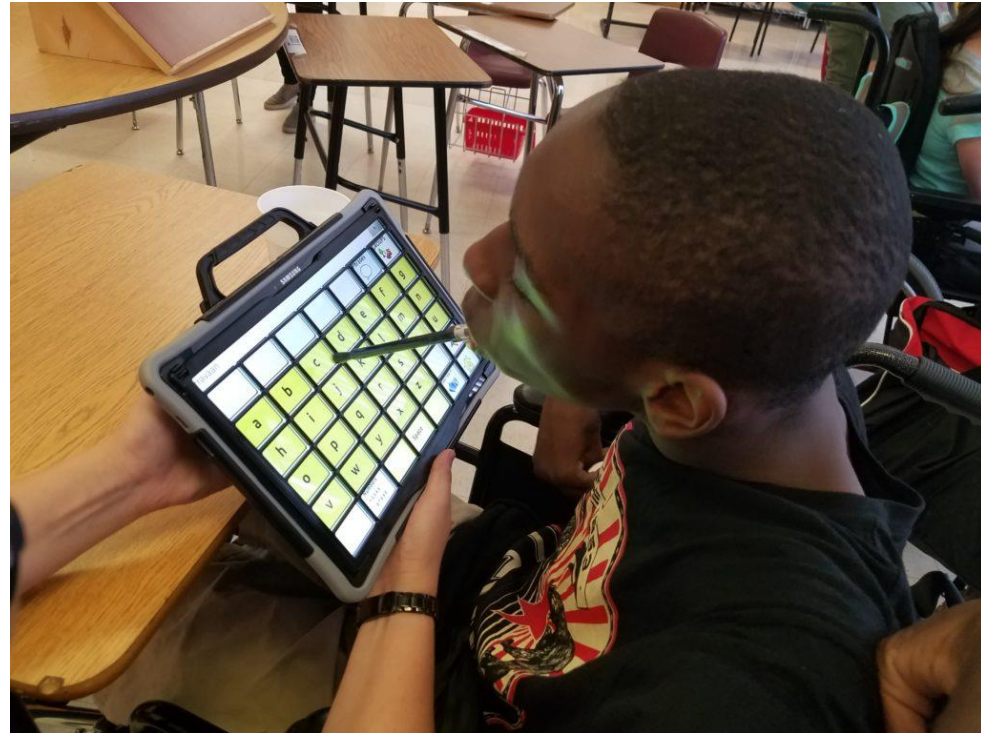
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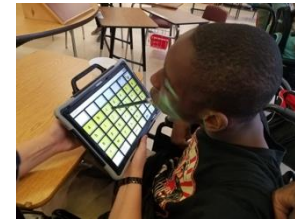
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**Trial and
error with
care
structures**

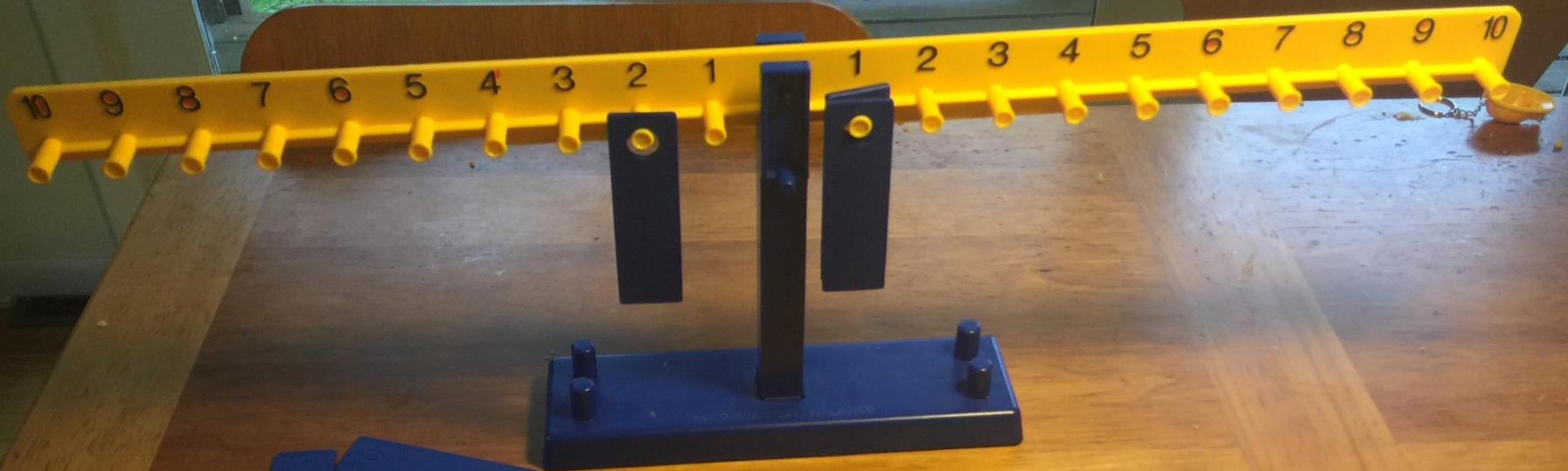






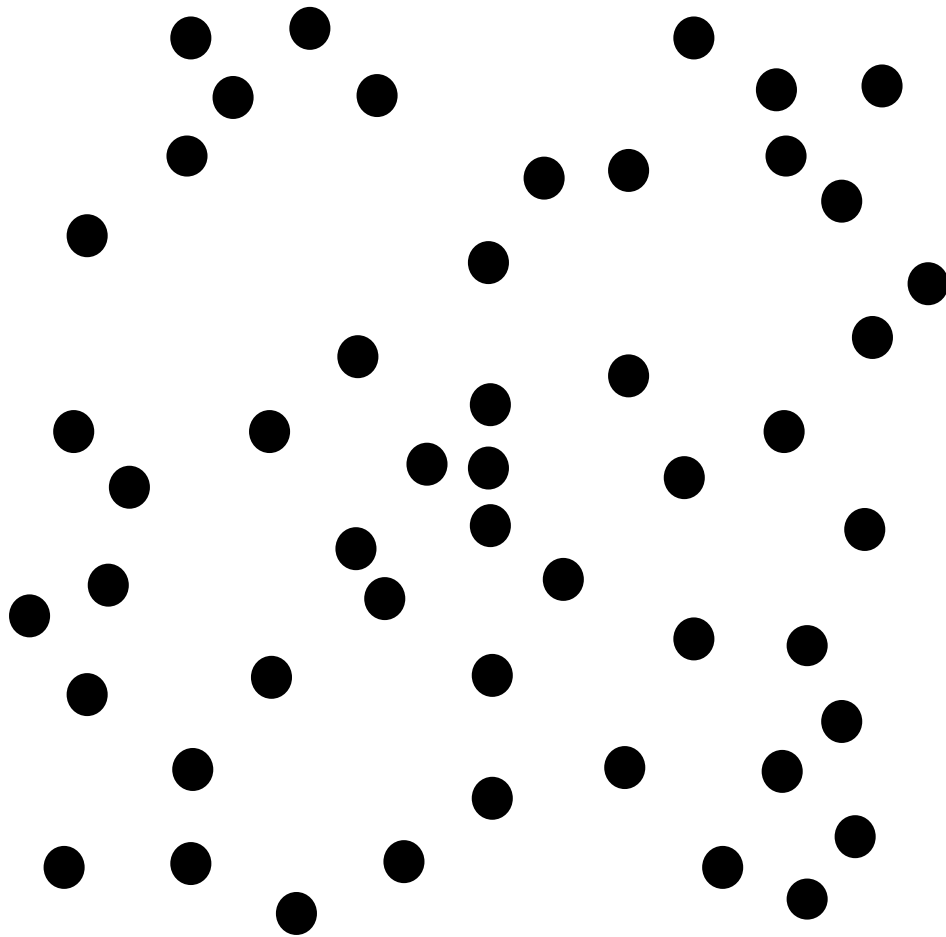






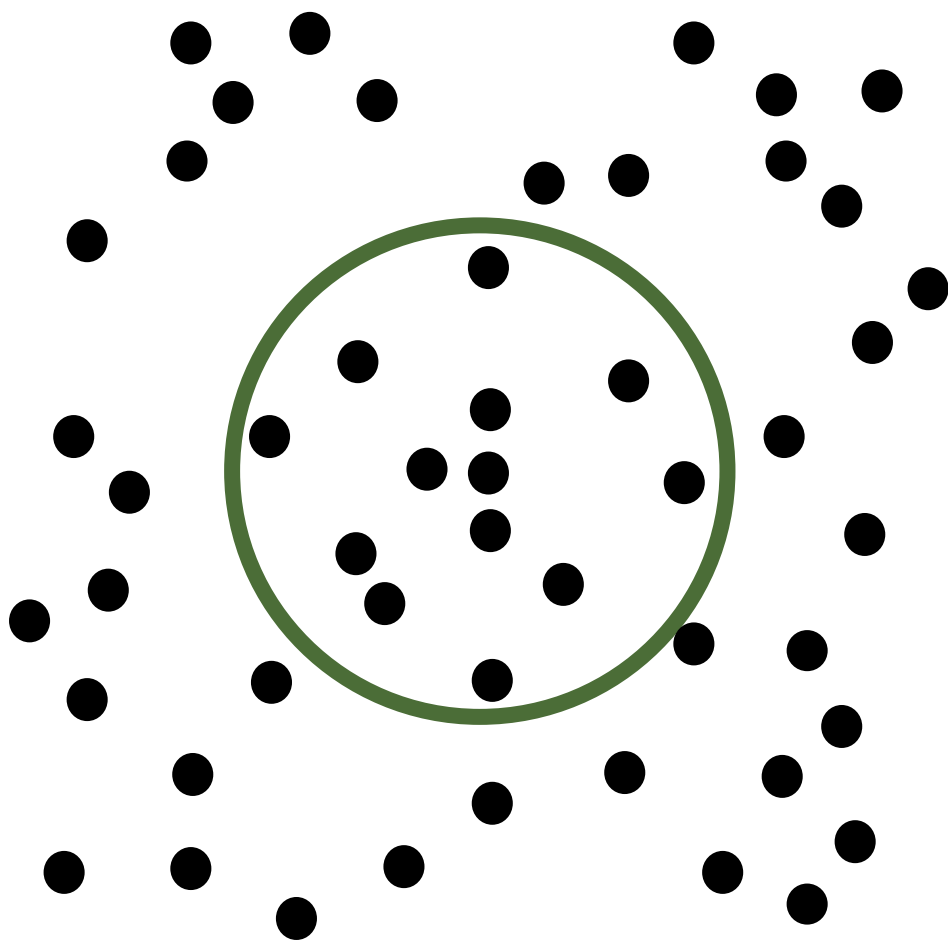


Care structures do not accommodate everyone equally



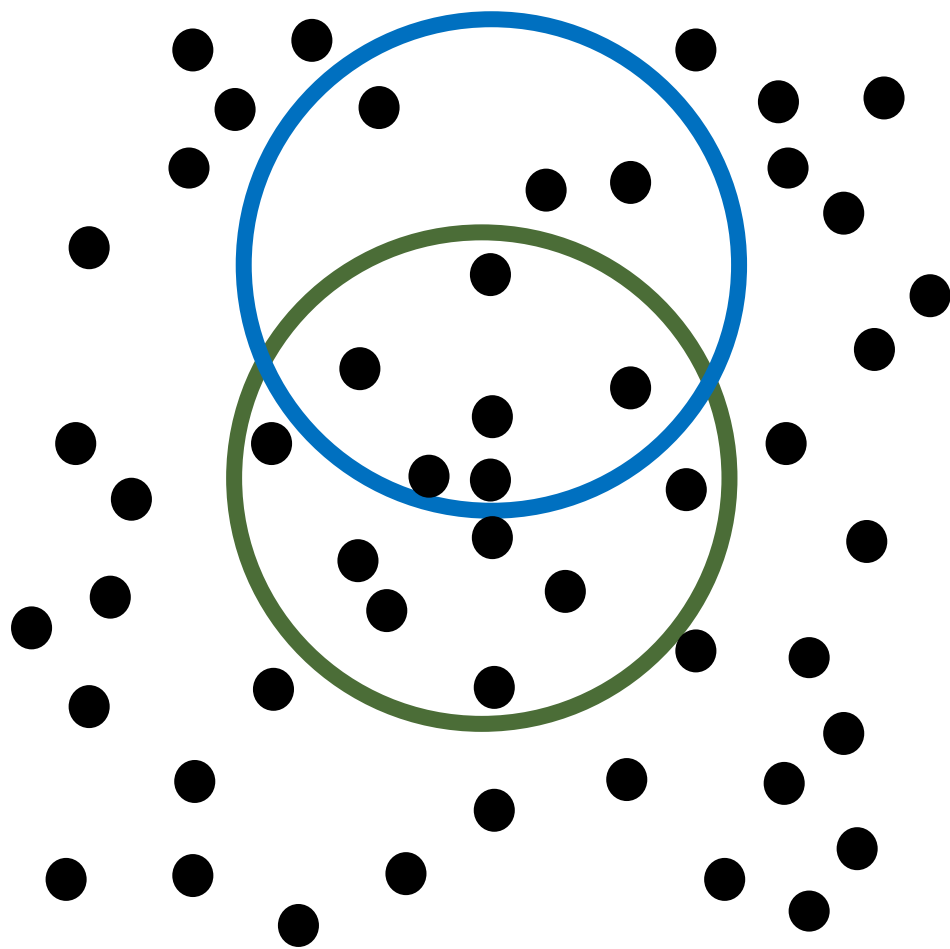
ENVIRONMENTS:

Care structures do not accommodate everyone equally



ENVIRONMENTS:
Built

Care structures do not accommodate everyone equally

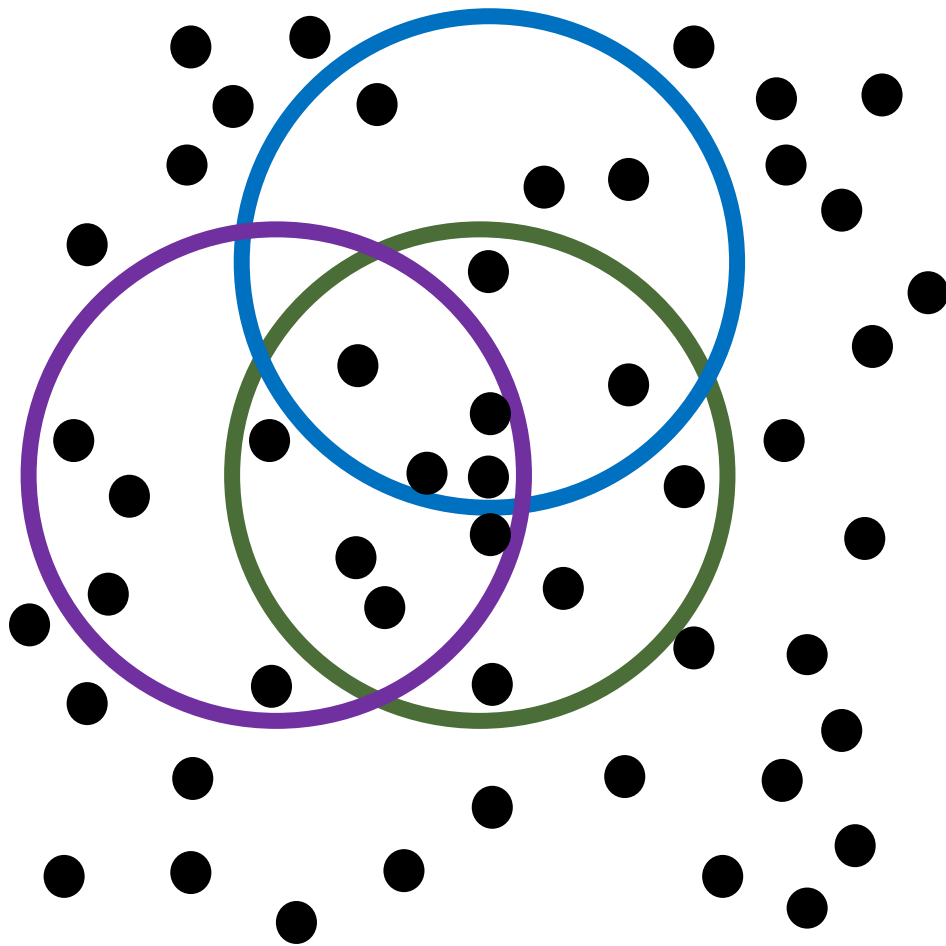


ENVIRONMENTS:

Built

Educational

Care structures do not accommodate everyone equally



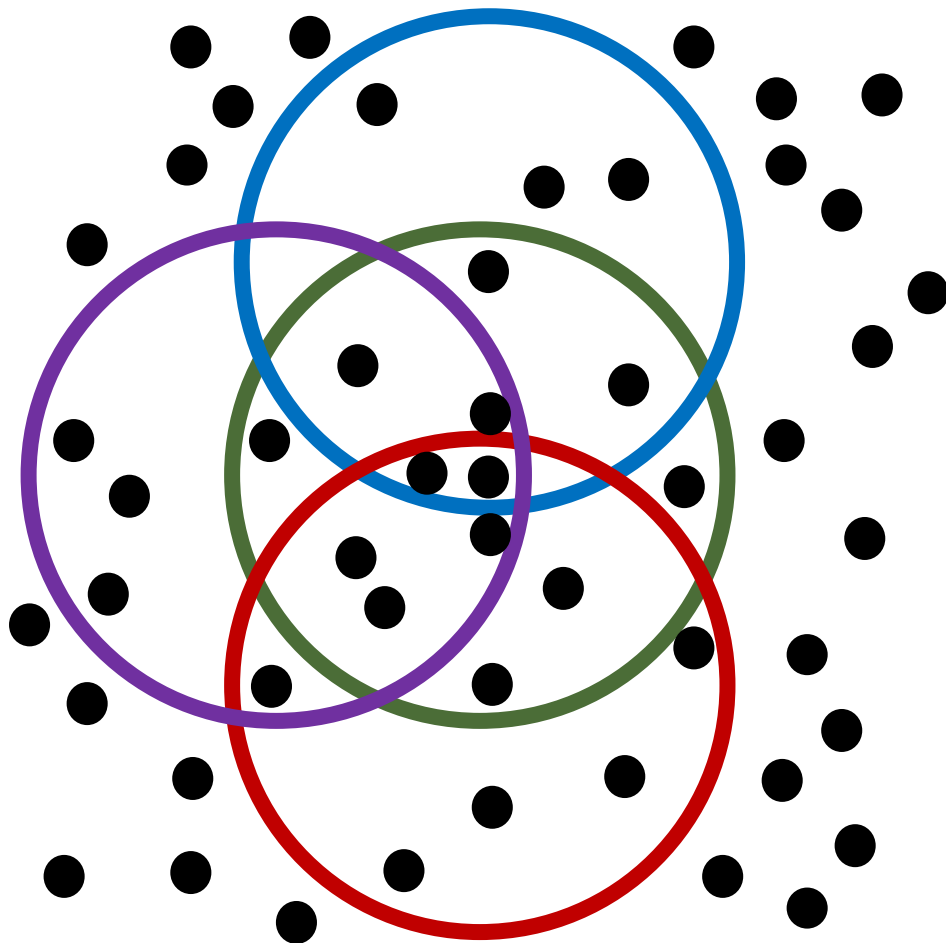
ENVIRONMENTS:

Built

Educational

Economic

Care structures do not accommodate everyone equally



ENVIRONMENTS:

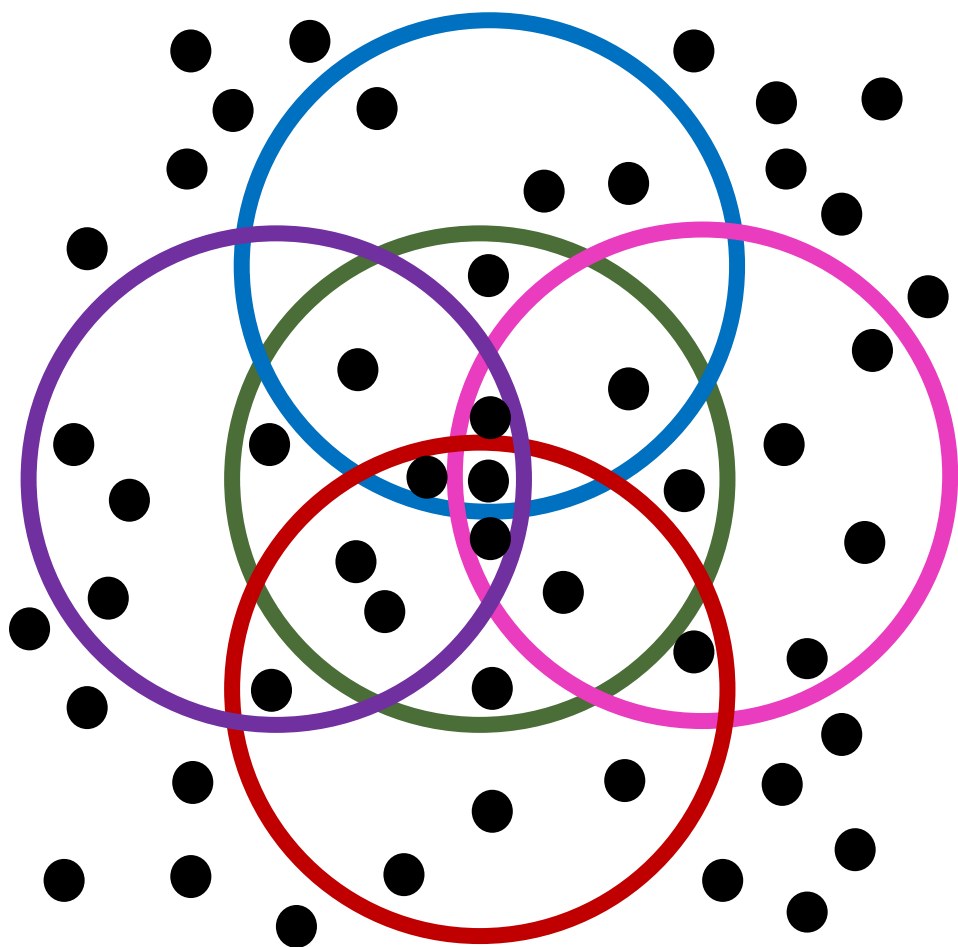
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Care structures do not accommodate everyone equally



ENVIRONMENTS:

Built

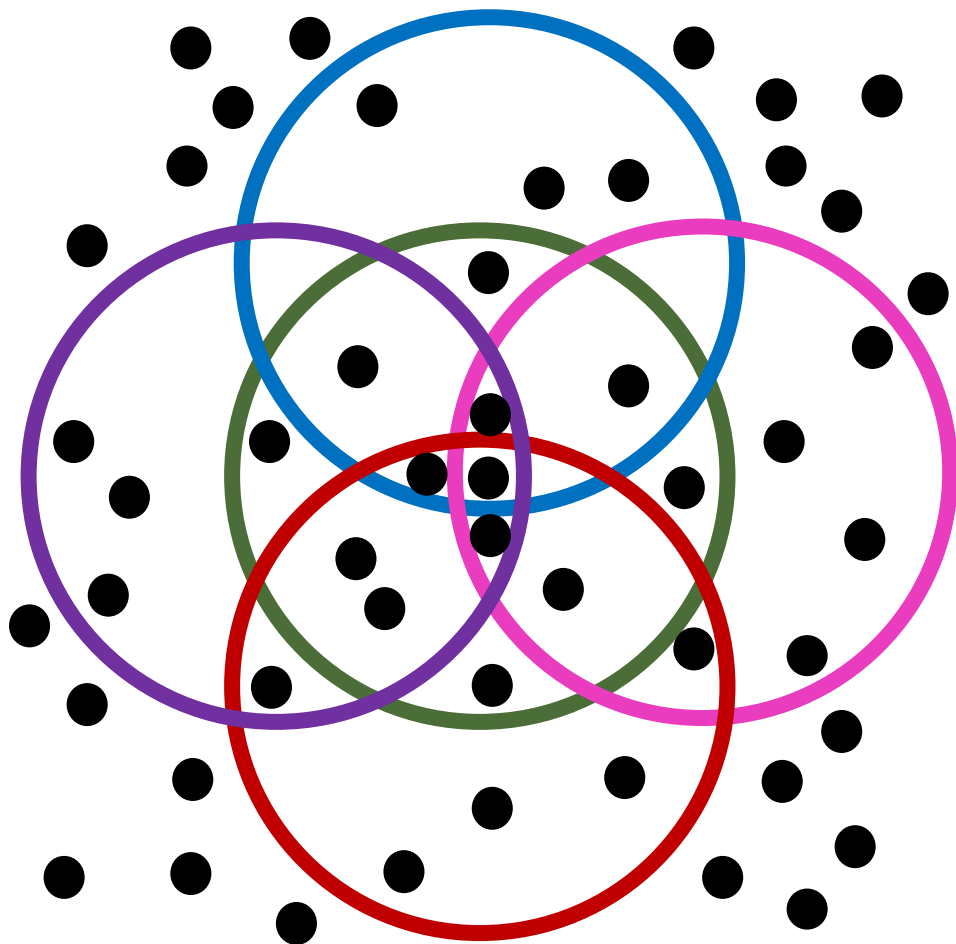
Educational

Economic

Legislative

Medical

Care structures do not accommodate everyone equally



ENVIRONMENTS:

Built

Educational

Economic

Legislative

Medical

*To support **all** of our
kids (and adults) =*

EXPAND the CIRCLES

Building and identifying sensory care structures in the home

Your child lives in a different body

Your child needs different care structures

Trust that your child's sensory experience is real

Experiment with non-media care structures to support sensory regulation

Advocate for that care with your child

Thank you!

- **Harrison, K., & Couture Bue, A.** (2021). Media sensory curation and family media conflict: Replication and validation of short-form measures. *Media Psychology*, 24(4). <http://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2020.1758145>
- **Harrison, K.** (2019). Rude or shrewd? Reframing media devices as care structures and child use as accommodation. *Journal of Children and Media*, 13, 367-375. <http://doi.org/10.1080/17482798.2019.1628192>
- **Harrison, K., Vallina, L., Couture, A., Wenhold, A., & Moorman, J. D.** (2019). Sensory curation: Theorizing media use for sensory regulation and implications for family media conflict. *Media Psychology*, 22, 653-689. <http://doi.org/10.1080/15213269.2018.1496024>
- Domoff, S.E., **Harrison, K.**, Gearhardt, A.N., Gentile, D.A., Lumeng, J.C., & Miller, A.L. (2019). Development and validation of the Problematic Media Use Measure: A parent report measure of screen media "addiction" in children. *Psychology of Popular Media Culture*, 8(1), 2-11. <http://doi.org/10.1037/ppm0000163>