

The Impact of Screen Time on Child and Adolescent Development

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Less than 20 years ago very few people owned cell phones and these were generally brick-sized devices that were mainly used for making phone calls. Nowadays many adults, adolescents and children own a smart phone, helping people stay connected to the internet. Although most of us cannot imagine our lives without access to the internet via our smart phones, tablets and laptops, there are some serious consequences to the time we spend on our devices.



I am often asked: “at what age should my child have a cell phone?” Before I give an answer I would like to consider some of the effects that time in the cyber world has on us. Screen time experiences on the internet and TV influence how brain structures develop in childhood and adolescence. Neurologically, a lack of eye contact with babies and children prevents a secure emotional attachment style from forming. However, when a secure attachment style is formed optimum development can take place. Young children do not yet have an adequate memory base to process and make sense of screen material resulting in feelings, such as fear and aggression arising. Research has repeatedly found a relationship between media violence and aggressive behaviour in children. This aggressive behaviour may also continue into later life. Cyberbullying as a form of aggressive behaviour becomes more likely as children and adolescents spend a greater amount of time on devices. Interestingly, research has found that by reducing screen time violence and verbal aggression can also be reduced.

Since screen time on the internet or TV provides a great deal of overstimulation it can negatively affect one’s attention span. Research findings show that the more TV a baby or toddler watches the more likely they are to have attention problems when they start school. This is in turn associated with negative educational outcomes in the long-term. On the other hand when screen time is restricted children show an improved attention span, better reaction times and enhanced sporting performance.

In addition to the emotional and mental consequences of screen time, there are also physical consequences. Screen time can impair motor development by minimising movement and exercise. Sedentary behaviour also encourages obesity and type 2 diabetes. The overstimulation from screen time can cause sleep disturbances. Furthermore, there is a link between screen time and damaged eyesight.

Children are unique in that their ability for imaginative play is rich. This imaginative play is key in forming their inner world and building their self-concept. By substituting imaginative play with screen time children's development is impaired. Similarly, adolescents are unique in that they are highly adaptive to the many changes that will take place during this period of their lives. Adolescents engage in high-risk behaviour as a means of exploring their world; however, this high-risk behaviour can also lead to dangerous situations online, such as sextortion, cyberbullying and harassment.

If after reading this you, as a parent, are still uncertain as to how to set boundaries around screen time and devices I would recommend the following guidelines:

- Children under the age of three years should have no screen time
- Screen time for children should be limited to one hour per day
- Screen time for adolescents should be limited to one-and-a-half hours per day
- Screen time for adults should be limited to two hours per day
- Children, adolescents and their parents should not have a TV in the bedroom
- Parents should set examples with the programmes they choose to watch on TV
- Parents should encourage reading, hobbies, sport, imaginative play and time with friends
- Parents can set up a cell phone contract with their adolescent children. A great example can be accessed on <http://nikkibush.com/resources-summary/>

By spending a greater time online real social interactions are diminished and children may become less competent socially. We should not become so absorbed in technology that social relationships are lost. The best way to promote a child or adolescent's development is through interactions with other people.

Adapted from a workshop by clinical psychologist Dr. Marita Brink.

