



TECHNOLOGY: BOON OR BANE?

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We exist in a world where technology is king. Smartphone ownership has more than doubled in the last 8 years, and an estimated 95% of the world now own a cell phone. And this isn't limited to the modern workplace. Children up to 8 years old are spending an average of about 3 hours a day in front of screens – children 8-18 are averaging around 7 hours a day.

A few months ago, the World Health Organization (WHO) issued guidance for how much screen time children under 5 should get. It was the first time that the U.N. agency has made these recommendations. And the truth is that too much screen time can be hurting our children in more ways than one.

In fact, too much screen time can stunt cognitive and emotional growth, lead to permanent vision problems, and may be a risk factor for heart disease and cancer. That's why the WHO says children under 5 should never spend more than an hour a day in front of a screen – and that less is even better.



Excessive Screen Time Stunts Childhood Development

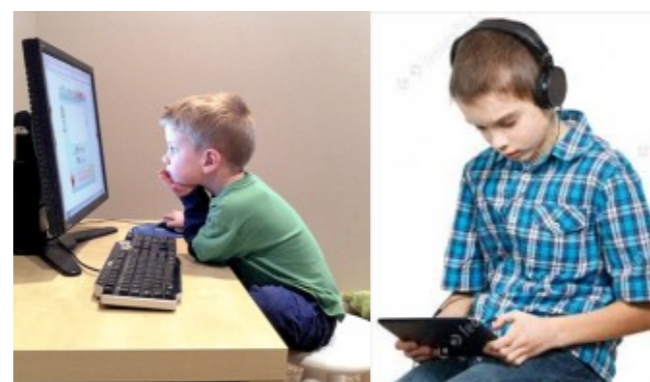
Children are in a constant state of development and learning, and the habits they form at a young age often stick with them well into adulthood. But a study published in a Pediatric magazine found a direct correlation between screen time and key developmental markers like communication skills, problem solving, and social interaction.

Another study evaluated sleep, screen time, and physical activity in over 4,500 children ages 8-11. National guidelines recommend 9-11 hours of sleep, less than 2 hours of screen time, and at least one hour of physical activity per day. But the researchers found that only 216 of the participants – less than 5% – met all three guidelines.

More importantly, they found that **children who met all three recommendations had superior memory, attention, and language skills** than their counterparts. Given that over half of the children met the recommended sleep quota, we find that screen time and lack of exercise are the main culprits in stunting development. But are the two connected?

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According to the National Institutes of Health, they are. They reported that children ages 8-13 are spending nearly six hours each day in front of a screen. For those with a TV in their bedrooms, TV time increased by an additional 90 minutes per day. The kicker? The more time children spend in front of a screen, the more likely they are to be overweight.



This, of course, is because children with excessive screen time tend to live more sedentary lifestyles. But the effects of too much screen time go even further. An article published last year in found that children who had a television in their bedroom had:

- A higher body mass index
- Unhealthy eating habits
- Higher levels of emotional stress
- Symptoms of depression
- Physical aggression
- Poor social skills

While there are many health issues stemming from coincidental behavior involving screen time, **there are other ailments resulting from the physical use of these devices.** Kids who get too much screen time can experience faster macular degeneration and are more likely to have damaged vision than their tech-free counterparts.

There has also been a documented rise in head, neck, and spinal injuries in those who spend the most time using tech. Posture suffers, and they end up spending more time looking down leading to spinal misalignment, blurred vision, and even migraines.

Insomnia is another associated side effect, suffered by those who are unable to sleep because of technology addiction. When children have access to a phone, tablet, or television at night, they are less likely to get the sleep they need. And all these problems, from obesity to cognitive issues can lead to stress. Not only can they cause stress, they can be worsened by it, **creating a vicious cycle that puts children at a disadvantage when they are most in need of healthy life habits.**

Screen Time, Heart Disease, and Cancer

The effects of a sedentary lifestyle and poor diet, which are both caused by too much screen time, can lead to more serious health issues down the road. A lack of exercise poses a health risk equal to or greater than traditional factors such as smoking, heart disease, and diabetes.

And if it isn't enough to know that heart disease is the leading cause of death worldwide, consider this: heart disease is a major risk factor for cancer. Screen time isn't just hurting our children's development; it could literally be killing them.

The combination of poor social bonding and the rewiring of our brains by technology have led to a sharp up tick in stress and anxiety. **Many people are turning to their devices to cope with stress.** Receiving texts and emails, playing games, or watching shows releases small amount of dopamine to the pleasure center of the brain. This encourages children and even adults to find solace in their electronic devices and screens.

Emotional stress is a major contributing factor to the six leading causes of death all over the world: cancer, coronary heart disease, accidental injuries, respiratory disorders, cirrhosis of the liver, and suicide. It suppresses the immune system, increases the risk of diabetes, depression, and mental illness, and may be the cause of nearly half of certain cancers.

Not All Screen Time is Created Equal

When it comes to screen time, especially for children, less is more. But there is evidence that the type of screen time to which children are exposed may be equally as important as the amount of screen time. With education and jobs becoming increasingly dependent on technology, it is inevitable that our youth will need to learn how to use it. In fact, it's becoming more and more common that technology is being used as a tool for learning.

Educational programming and digital instruction are different than mindless entertainment and gaming. And even some of the most tech-savvy millennials are beginning to see the dangers. Pop star Selena Gomez, who is the third most-followed person on Instagram, recently warned about the effects of social media on her generation and generations to follow. According to Gomez:

They're not aware of the news or anything [that's] going on. It's selfish - I don't wanna say selfish because it feels rude - but it's dangerous for sure. I think our world is going through a lot, obviously. But for my generation, specifically, social media has been terrible."

And she's right. The increased use of social media has led to a host of detrimental problems. According to the BBC, about 3 billion people, or 40% of the world's population, use social media. And they're spending an average of 2 hours a day on the platforms. According to the article, this increased use is causing problems with sleep, addiction, relationships, and overall wellbeing.

What Can We Do?

The biggest problem with excess screen time is the way it affects other, vital aspects of a healthy lifestyle. Children are missing out on sleep and exercise that their growing bodies desperately need, leading to a sharp rise in childhood obesity worldwide? So, what can we do to protect our children?

1. Limit Access to Devices

The first and most obvious change is to limit access to devices. Remove TVs and tablets from children's bedrooms. Consider waiting to give your child a smartphone, or at least restrict the amount of time they spend with it. For both children and adults, sleeping with a smartphone or tablet in the bedroom can have a profoundly

negative effect on health, so it's advisable that both you and your children leave your tech in another room when it's time to rest.

2. Encourage Plenty of Sleep and Exercise

The next change is to focus on physical activity and sleep. Children need to spend at least an hour each day exercising, and the more the better. Given that exercise increases longevity and health (and that habits formed in childhood tend to carry over into adulthood), it is recommended to schedule structured time for your kids to get outside. **This could mean joining a sports team, taking the family hiking, or simply sending the kids outside to play without their devices.**



3. Eat Plenty of Healthy Food (and tell them WHY!)

Another important thing to monitor is your child's eating habits. Studies that indicate that too much screen time can lead to poor diet. This may be due to exposure to advertisements, or even just that being in front of a screen frees up all other senses that ask for satisfaction by munching on snacks that may be unhealthy. Be sure to provide your children with healthy nutrition. This will not only fuel their growing bodies and minds, but it will protect them from the myriad disease risks associated with the standard diet.

Finally, it's important to talk to your children about why exercise and nutrition are important, and **why** you're restricting tech time. Children are endlessly curious by nature, and this is a good time to reinforce healthy habits

with important knowledge about the risks and benefits of our daily behavior. **Consider rewarding healthy habits to support these ideas** and talk with your family about how they choose to spend their time.

Studies have shown that families who eat dinner together tend to have better family and social relationships. The disconnect between digital interaction and personal interaction is immense, and you can help your kids develop strong social and interpersonal skills by **teaching them how to interact without the distraction of their phones and tablets.**

When it comes to parenting, there is nothing more important than protecting our children. We teach them not to play in the street or talk to strangers, but too often we fail to teach healthy life habits. Limiting screen time and encouraging nutrition, exercise, and proper sleep will protect your child from disease and illness long after you're gone. And at the end of the day, isn't that what every parent wants?

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