

COUNSELLOR'S COLUMN

EXCESSIVE USE OF SCREEN DEVICES

Over the last few years I have noticed an increase in the number of students struggling with anxiety and depression. I have noticed a link between increased anxiety and/or depression and excessive screen use. How much time does your student spend on social media and gaming both on and off line?

A healthy level would be no more than 4 or 5 hours a week not 4 and 5 hours a day or more. Some students are spending more time social networking and gaming than they do sleeping or attending school and studying. More and more students at school seem to be preoccupied with screens at recess and lunch instead of being engaged face to face socially and being active. Reduced activity levels are of concern to health professionals predicting increased burden on the health system.

Adults can also be addicted to screen technology impacting on family communication and cohesion. Excessive screen use negatively impacts on quality of relationships.

Excessive screen time reduces face to face social interaction with a loss of ability to recognise non-verbal communication cues from others. This has a huge impact on family functioning and in the workplace. Workers with highly developed social skills will be the most sought after by employers. Exceptional social skills will be regarded more highly than qualifications. Recruitment practices already indicate this trend.

Restricting screen time by setting limits during the school week is not enough. Limiting screen time on weekends and holidays is also important for mental and physical health. There are only 24 hours in any day. Too much time on screen devices results in not enough time for sleep, not enough meal time together as a family, not enough time for face to face interaction, not enough time outdoors and not enough time for physical activity.

Excessive screen use has a cascade effect on mental and physical health – increased anxiety and depression, reduced capacity to manage stress, sleep disorders, weakened immune system with increased susceptibility to illness, mental and physical fatigue, reduced motivation, persistence and resilience, impaired relationships, impaired concentration and learning, poor muscle

tone, susceptibility to repetitive strain injuries, poor posture, muscular and skeletal problems and poor levels of physical fitness.

Current research is also raising concern about the impact on human health of long term exposure to electromagnetic radiation emitted from screen devices. Recent research has shown a link between the rapid increase in diagnosis of short sightedness in young people and reduced exposure to outside light. Too much time on screens reduces time spent outdoors.

TIPS FOR PARENTS

- **Read the book “Breaking the Trance: A practical guide for parenting the screen -dependent child” by G. Lynn & C. Johnson – highly recommended**
- Monitor your students screen use – record daily screen time – there are apps for this e.g. ‘RescueTime’
- Monitor social networking sites -be aware of risky sites such as **Musical.ly**
- Monitor gaming, check game content and suitability
- Remove screen devices from bedrooms
- Turn off screen devices 90 minutes before bedtime
- Set limits and times for screen use
- Negotiate a study routine
- Allocate a place for study in a quiet but public area of the house
- Remember not all study requires a screen device
- Traditional study techniques are still important – text book reading, hand written note taking, revision, organisation and time management
- Check student planner/ diary regularly for effective use
- Encourage access to www.learningcurve.com.au – the companion website to the planner
- Have ongoing conversations about the moral, ethical and safe use of screen devices
- Access www.cybersmart.gov.au/parents.aspx and www.esafety.gov.au for strategies and resources
- Access www.internetsafeeducation.com **lots of resources for parents and students -note the warning on risky apps like Musical.ly**
- Support a healthy lifestyle – practice good sleep hygiene (9 hours per night for adolescents and 7-8 hrs nightly for adults), healthy eating and

regular exercise. A healthy breakfast is a prerequisite for optimal learning.

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