

The Discourse

Digital devices don't cause depression

But troubled teens may turn to gadgets as a coping mechanism, says UM addiction psychiatry expert

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IT is a widely held perception that spending too much time on digital devices will lead to a host of mental, physical and emotional problems, especially in children.

Parents became even more anxious after the World Health Organisation (WHO) released its sedentary screen time guidelines which set tight usage limits for children under the age of five, said Universiti Malaya Centre of Addiction Sciences Department of Psychological Medicine Psychiatrist and Addiction Medicine Specialist Assoc Prof Dr Anne Yee Hway Ann.

The guidelines state that children between the ages of two and five should be limited to only 60 minutes of screen time per day while those younger should not get any screen time at all, the addiction psychiatry expert told StarEdu.

"But WHO does not provide any specific limits for older children - those six years old and above - because they are aware that these children use educational apps and some schools use electronic devices for their lessons.

"Since we are now facing a global pandemic and formal education has basically moved into homes via digital devices, these guidelines need to be changed in light of the current situation.

"Especially since the pandemic may last a few more months, if not years," she added.

Dr Yee said people also tend to link excessive digital media use to depression or anxiety.

"Despite the many studies, it is still not possible to conclusively say that electronic media use is causing young people to be depressed."

She said it is more likely that these youths who already faced mental health issues have been turning to these devices as a coping mechanism.

When children have depression or anxiety, it may interfere with their normal peer engagement and social activities, she said.

There is also a stereotype that associates excessive screen time with couch potatoes, she said.

Obesity and physical health problems, she added, can crop up if someone is sedentary the whole day but electronic media can also be used for other things, including exercise.

So, not all screen time negatively impacts a child.

"It's not about the time that the adolescent or child spends on the device. What's more important is what they are using it for," she added.

Take for example a child who is having a video call with his or her grandparents, using the Internet for homework and learn-



Part of life: Digital devices are necessary tools for work, education and leisure. - 123rf.com



Dr Yee: The WHO guidelines on screen time exposure for children need to be reviewed to suit the current situation.



Toke: Children need digital devices for learning but they have to be supervised so that they do not get addicted to screen time.

ing, or using Wii (a gaming console) to do physical exercises.

"You probably would not judge this child's on-screen activities as bad," she said, adding that during the pandemic, many people had accessed mental health resources and support services that were being offered on online platforms.

Activities such as these, she said, make screen time a necessity.

She called on the WHO guidelines to be reviewed, taking into account the current situation where long screen time is part and parcel of today's lifestyle.

This is necessary, she said, to reduce the stigma surrounding long screen hours.

While it is true that more youths are seeking treatment for mental health issues, particularly anxiety and depression, the cause is most commonly rooted in the stress of not being in school physically or socialising with their friends face to face, Dr Yee pointed out.

These children are usually brought in by parents who harbour anxiety or guilt because they feel their children are on their devices for too long, she said.

"But just because I am for relaxing screen time rules for children does not mean that there should not be any limitations.

"Based on the recommendations of the American Academy of Paediatrics, screen time should be avoided at least an hour before bedtime to ensure children get adequate sleep," she said.

Clinical psychologist, counsellor and psychotherapist Dr Fred Toke, however, cautioned that anything above two hours of recreational usage of screen time can affect a child's mental health.

This is because children become screen dependent, he said, referring to a study published in *The Lancet Child and Adolescent Health*.

"Without sports and other physical activities, more children are turning to their mobile devices or computers to get on social media or binge-watch shows out of boredom," he said.

Parents, said Toke, need to enforce rules when it comes to device usage to prevent screen dependency disorder (SDD).

He said a balance needs to be struck.

"Yes, they need their devices, laptops and computers for learning but they also need to be supervised so that they do not get addicted to the Internet or experience SDD.

"Parents are key to this balance and cannot expect society, schools or the system to monitor their children," he added.

The Views

Parents share their screen time management tips...

"I run my own business so I have some flexibility with time and am able to help my wife at home during our children's online classes. We make sure that they are seated at the dining table where we can peek at their screens and monitor to see what they are doing every now and then. Kids will be kids, so if they are unsupervised, they would probably be on YouTube or browsing the Internet, instead of paying attention to their teachers. So it is our responsibility to ensure that they are focused. Our children are aged 11, eight and five. From 8am to 2pm, they learn on their devices. Some days, my daughter, who is the eldest, has to get back online for tuition classes. During the short breaks in between their six to seven hours of being glued to the screen, my daughter likes to chat with her mother while the boys play football. After classes, they either watch some television shows, join in our exercises or just nag their parents to death. Now that the year-end exams are over and school holidays have begun, we let them use the tablets for leisure but usage time is strictly controlled. Initially, they used to get hooked on their tablets and it was very difficult to communicate with them. Drastic measures were taken and they were all banned from using their devices. This got them onto other habits such as reading, playing games and sports. It was one of the best decisions we made. Now my children are quite disciplined with their gadgets. If they are allowed an hour on their gadgets, they switch them off when it's time to do so. If they throw tantrums, they will not be allowed screen time the next day."

Managing director and managing editor Gunaprasath Bupalan, 42

"There are times when my son, 16, and daughter, 12, are too focused on their devices until they are not aware of their surroundings. My wife and I try to limit their screen time and engage in conversation with them while they are on their devices. We would also sometimes watch whatever they are watching and turn it into a family affair. They will put away their devices if told to. I don't have to monitor what is going on during lessons. My son is very disciplined in terms of his school work. He is independent and liaises with the school for all his virtual classes. The younger one needs a bit more encouragement and we need to make sure she gets up on time for her online classes and hands in her homework. On normal school days, we limit their use of the devices and when the exams draw nearer, the time is shortened. My wife and I get them to do household chores and encourage them to bake, cook and prepare meals by themselves just so they wouldn't spend so much time on their devices. Some of their favourite activities include drawing and colouring."

Book publisher Sheikh Faisal Sheikh Mansoor, 46

"Only my youngest, aged 12, is still in school and I monitor what she's doing when she's on her laptop. The laptop is usually set up in the dining area so I am aware of what is going on. I also teach her myself as there are limitations to online classes. I know her teachers are trying their best to make the lessons interesting but I have to monitor her progress and at times, I do give her extra revision. Neither she nor my other two children who are in their early 20s, are hooked on their devices but I am worried about their eyesight as they are still exposed to a lot of screen time. I restrict my youngest daughter's usage by telling her to put her laptop away after a certain period. My children help me at home, read, play with the dog or spend some time outdoors at the park when they are not on their devices."

Homemaker Visalatchi Supramaniam, 48

Toke said supervision needs to start from young, as prevention is better than cure.

"Otherwise, once they are addicted to the Internet and suffer from SDD, there will be resistance, especially when they reach adolescence - the most challenging stage."

If a child is suffering from SDD, seeking professional help is not enough. Parents will need to be firm while trying to relate to the child and keeping communication lines open, he said.

Toke said balance could also be achieved by engaging a child in more activities and it does not

always have to be outdoors.

He said exercise, even indoors, releases "happy" chemicals like dopamine and endorphins in the brain.

Parents, he added, have to set an example and not just command their child to exercise.

Creative activities like telling stories, playing word games, dressing up and drawing are good for your child's creative development, said Toke.

These, together with a strong communicative relationship, can help keep children safe from the effects of excessive digital device usage, he said.