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## Young people and screen time: It's complicated

**Please listen to the Psychology in Schools Podcast on this topic:** <https://youtu.be/bfMX2MplY4s>

If you are a parent or carer of a child who is old enough to attend school, you are probably well aware of the friction that screen time can create within any family unit. As parents/carers it is an extremely difficult area to navigate and we can become overwhelmed with the often-conflicting advice that we are offered.

In considering this topic we firstly need to think about what we mean when we talk about screen time. This is a generic term used by the media that actually covers all manner of devices such as television, smart phones, tablets, computers, video game screens. The term is further complicated by the fact that there is an infinite number of ways you can engage with each of these devices, completing online work, communicating with our friends, recording our steps, looking up a recipe, playing video games just to mention a few.

### **How much time is too much?**

Unfortunately, here is no easy answer to this question. The research would suggest that we need to move away from how many hours our children are spending on their screens and instead focus on what they are spending their time doing. If our children and young people are spending their time in what we call **active use** such as messaging their friends, playing online games with their peer group, creating a tik-tok dance or doing something else that is age appropriate and requires active participation these activities are generally considered more beneficial for our wellbeing. In contrast more **passive use** of screens such as scrolling news sites or flicking through Instagram or twitter for long periods of time is linked to a decrease in wellbeing. Although understandably excessive use of either type of engagement may impact negatively on the other parts of life that we recognise as fundamental for the health and wellbeing of our young people. These include daily exercise, consistent sleep, eating regularly and having face to face contact with our family and friends. When our children and young people start to struggle in any of these areas it will be important to consider how much time they are on their screens and the impact this may be having on other important areas of their lives.

### **Are all young people impacted in the same way?**

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The impact of screen time and social media will not be the same for all children and young people. Dr Amy Orben, from the University of Cambridge, offers a very helpful metaphor to help us to think about this. If we gave our children a full bar of chocolate to eat this would impact different children in different ways. For some children, who are diabetic for example, this would be unhelpful and potentially make them very ill. For another child, who is a sports enthusiast, the chocolate bar may replenish their energy supply and have no harmful consequences - essentially there is no way that we can establish how beneficial or detrimental the chocolate bar will be to an individual child without holding in mind the context information about that child. And this is the same for screen use. Children and young people are very different, and they will be very differently affected by the same type of use. For example, looking at people having a lovely time on Instagram may create lots of joy for a young person who is also having a lovely time but could be really distressing for a young person who is having a difficult time because of what is currently happening in their lives. As parents we need to consider each of our children on an individual basis and use this knowledge and understanding to consider what may and may not be helpful in terms of their screen use.

### **Can screens be used for positive connection?**

As parents we cannot underestimate the fundamental importance of connection particularly for our teenagers. Developmentally our teenagers are biologically programmed to move away from their parents/carers with their peer relationships taking on a whole new level of importance. During this period of lockdown our teenagers are trying to navigate their way through a myriad of loss, the loss of the school structure, the loss of exams, the loss of prom, the loss of summer plans, the perhaps the biggest loss of all the loss of face to face interaction with their peer group. And although we may be inclined to diminish these losses in the context a global pandemic these losses are very real and can be very painful for our teenagers. This is where screens become our saving grace. They allow our teenagers to remain connected with their peers, so although they are mandated to remain physically distanced from one another they can in fact remain socially connected. And the research is clear, social connection is critical for both emotional wellbeing and our teenagers brain development. So, when you are struggling to tolerate yet another online game or video chat try to hold in mind that this is actually one of the best things our young people can be doing in a situation that has taken away so many other important aspects of their lives

### **Why are video games so addictive?**

You know the scenario, the one where you are trying to have a conversation with your young person who is gaming on their computer and it's almost like you are not in the room at all. There are several reasons why young people get so hooked on these games. Firstly, when our young people (or us) engage in something pleasurable like a video game their brain releases something called dopamine which is the neurotransmitter responsible for that lovely hit of pleasure we all experience when we are doing something we enjoy. However, dopamine has also been called the 'gimme more' neurotransmitter by Russel Poldrack, Professor of Psychology at Stanford University, because once we have experienced a hit of dopamine our brains automatically crave more. And because computer games provide one lovely hit after another it's very hard to focus on anything else that is going on, even if it is happening in the same room. Secondly, our brains have something that researchers call a *novelty bias* which means that our brains are built to seek out and attend to anything new that is happening in our environment. And as we all know computer games (and screens in general) present a constantly changing environment which is

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specifically designed to hold our attention and unlike in previous generations, when we were used to things having natural endings, many of the current games have no ending cues. This means that they are essentially a bottomless pit of novelty which captures and holds our young person's attention unlike anything else.

### **Do video games make our young people aggressive?**

Although the research is still unclear there is mounting evidence to suggest that video games do not lead to a significant increase in aggression in the long term. However anecdotally, we probably all recognise stories about children and young people being very angry when they are asked to come off their games or devices. Throughout the day we all transition from one activity to another and for the most part we don't even notice this because it happens automatically. However, for a young person to make the transition from something so totally absorbing back into reality can be quite a big leap and it is helpful for us as parents to understand this in the context of what is happening in their brain chemistry. Some video games, particularly those with a focus on survival can activate what we call the fight or flight response in the old part of our brain. When this happens, our bodies are often flooded with adrenaline and cortisol which essentially improves strength and focus among many other things. This hyper-focus enables our young person to be able to pursue their target with more precision (much like in a real-life competitive situation) but can be very tricky if this is the moment, we decide enough is enough and pull the plug out. In this scenario our young person is likely to struggle a great deal with the sudden shift in their environment and this can often manifest in angry or aggressive behaviour. To reduce the likelihood of these situations, it is really helpful to create as much predictability as possible about the gaming time coming to an end and perhaps having a clear plan with the young person about a place in the game he/she can safely get to before the screen is turned off. This might sound something like "we are going to eat at 6.30pm today so please can you start to finish your playing time at 6.00pm, I can remain you if you would like me too".

### **Is there anything positive about computer games?**

The short answer to this question is a resounding yes. Research in the past five years has started to document some of the benefits experienced by children and adolescents. According to Isabela Granic, who is a researcher at the Radboud University in the Netherlands, many video games provide young people with compelling social, cognitive and emotional experiences and can also boost mental health and wellbeing. Social games allow children and young people to test out different life scenarios which provide great opportunities to develop skills that will be helpful in similar real-life scenarios.

There are also well documented cognitive benefits, including creativity, spatial reasoning, logical thinking and even teamwork. Video games have also been identified as a helpful way for young people to manage their emotions, giving them a temporary escape from a negative life situation like bullying and allowing them to experience moments of pride and achievement. I guess what is important is that video games don't become the only way our young people are managing difficult situations in their lives, moderation is key.

### **Does our screen behaviour matter?**

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Our children and young people are astute observers of the world around them and it is now well established that they are much more influenced by what we do as opposed to what we say. I am sure we have all had the experience of asking our young people to come off their screens only for them to be telling us to come off our own screens a short time later. And although we are all guilty of spending too much time on our screens, we need to be mindful of the potential impact this has on our children. Firstly, it makes us much less available as parents, although we may be physically present, we are often emotionally absent because we are so overly engaged with our phones. Secondly, our young people will do as we do and not as we say, so if we wish to reduce screen time and increase face to face time, we probably need to start with ourselves.

One helpful way to start this process as a family can be to pick a time in the day where all phones are put away for an agreed period. Some families like to do this around teatime, initially starting with 10 –20 minutes and gradually making this longer. It can also be helpful to join our young people (with their permission) in their online world, perhaps making time to create a tik-tok dance or playing a game together. This will have the double benefit of increasing our understanding of why this activity is so attractive while also allowing us to spend some quality time with our young people on their terms.

#### **In summary....**

It's complicated. It is hard for us as a generation who didn't grow up with screens to understand what it is like to be fully immersed in a virtual world that is so stimulating we forget time or the extent to which our young people's devices hijack their attention by the unpredictable novelty they provide. And although there are many structural ways we can support our young people to manage their time on their devices such as ensuring computers are turned off after a certain time in the evening and providing alarm clocks so smart phone can be left downstairs, ultimately our leverage with our young person is our relationship with them. By helping them to understand both the positive and negatives of screens and taking the time to actively listen to their concerns we will be in a much better position to reach a compromise in a supportive and collaborative way.