

For teenagers today, their everyday life is surrounded by technology. Mobile phones, tablets, smart watches, televisions, and gaming devices are everywhere we look! As we take in life around us, it can be easy to get caught up and become reliant on this technology. Unfortunately, there can be too much of a good thing, and recent research suggests that children and teenagers can attract significant health risks when they spend too much time in front of screens or use electronic devices inappropriately.

### **Increased screen and device time have been empirically linked to:**

- An increased risk of becoming overweight or obese, and developing cardiovascular disease and diabetes due to a lack of physical exercise and movement
- Exposure to harmful advertising (i.e., weight loss/appearance focused rhetoric)
- Sleeping problems more than 70% of young people don't get enough sleep on school nights due to overusing electronic media. This can affect their circadian rhythm and ability to achieve REM sleep. Additionally, they're at risk of poorer mental health, poorer eating habits, and lack of engagement and learning at school
- Behaviour issues and attentional problems
- Desensitization to violence
- Mental health issues as a result of excessive gaming/social media use

### **Signs to look out for in your child:**

- Less interest in social activities like seeing their friends face to face or playing sport
- Struggling at school
- Tiredness, sleep disturbances, headaches, eye strain
- Changes in eating habits
- Reduced personal hygiene
- Obsession with particular websites/games
- Emotional outbursts when being asked to take a break from a screen/online activity
- Appearing anxious/irritable when away from their phone/computer/other devices
- Becoming withdrawn from friends and family

### **What can we do?**

It should be noted that not needing to rely on a device for your child is a privilege. Some parents/caregivers lead lives where time in front of a device is much needed as a tool to slow down and have some quiet time. However, any steps to cut back is a step in the right direction. Do what works best for you and your family.

1. Taking note of how much time your child is using a device or spending time in front of a screen
2. Talking with them about why it is important and the benefits of cutting back
3. Work with your child to set goals and age appropriate boundaries to reduce their screen/device time. This may include exploring what other interests they have (i.e, reading, playing a sport, etc)
4. Turn off any idle televisions running in the background.
5. Mealtimes, getting ready for school, and preparing for bed should be "device free" times if possible. Using devices for homework should be used for educational purposes only

6. Set a positive example. What we model as parents will rub off on our children, so reducing your own screen/device time could indirectly influence your child to reduce theirs

### **eSafety for teenagers**

As we continue to pull through the COVID-19 pandemic, our children are spending much of their time online. This brings with it concerns for their eSafety, as many have their own laptops and other devices. Teenagers spend copious amounts of time socializing online, with many having Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat. Empirically supported evidence shows that teenagers are at considerable risk for an increase in depressive symptoms, anxiety, loneliness, self-harm, and even suicidal thoughts. Teenagers can have negative experiences such as:

- Inadequacy about their life or appearance (image-based platforms such as Instagram can exacerbate appearance-focused worldviews and increase the risk for disordered eating habits)
- Fear of missing out (FOMO)
- A sense of isolation
- Depression and anxiety
- Cyberbullying
- Self-absorption
- Increased distraction and inability to focus
- Image-based abuse and consequences via sexting

In order to protect our children online, we can practice the following 10 top tips from the eSafety Commissioner:

1. Build an open and trusting relationship around technology
2. Co-view and/or co-play with your child online
3. Help your child develop digital intelligence and social and emotional skills (I.e., respect, empathy, critical thinking, responsible behaviour, and resilience) in order to make them good online citizens
4. Empower your child to make wise decisions for themselves, rather than telling them what to do. Providing strategies to help them deal with negative online experiences will reinforce their confidence and resilience
5. Use devices in open areas of the home if possible. This can allow for better monitoring of online experiences
6. Set time limits that balance time spent in front of device screens with offline activities
7. Know what apps/games/social media platforms your child is using
8. Check the privacy settings on the social media platforms or games that your child is using
9. Parental controls can be utilized for some games and social media platforms
10. **Be alert to signs of distress in your child and know where to go for support and guidance** [esafety.gov.au/report](https://esafety.gov.au/report) Parent Helpline SA 24/7: 1300 364 100Kids Helpline: 1800 55 1800

*Ashlee Beecroft, BHS Wellbeing Team*