

The COVID-19 Outbreak and Screen Time: Allies or Foes

The COVID-19 pandemic opened the doors wide for an exponential and unprecedented increase in screen time worldwide. The current lockdown has reinforced the sedentary screen-time lifestyle of the lockdown caused in November 2019, and has the potential to bridge it with the summer vacation. While there certainly are benefits to this approach – using screen time to avoid stress, anxiety, depression, etc. – there are also risks of prolonged screen use. A detrimental impact of this life style is that some children are now at greater risk of engaging in a dopamine seeking-reward loop, which may eventually lead to digital addiction.

During these times, parents should take extra care with their children's unlimited recreational screen time, because it could lead to digital addiction. It is appropriate and desirable to use screen time to learn, educate, research, work, practice hobbies, entertain oneself, and stay in touch with grandparents, distant family members, relatives, and friends. The online learning measures put in place to help mitigate the effects of the COVID-19 lockdown contribute to digital addiction avoidance. By engaging children in online learning, they become productive. This is one path to using technology in appropriate and healthy ways that don't overdose children's brains with dopamine. Another example would be educational videos. Children are less likely to get addicted to technology if they watch videos on how to do various activities such as paint, solve math equations, and write code, and are then encouraged to undertake the same activities.

Children are adversely affected by the significant mounting stresses that threaten their families during these difficult times. As a result, some children may isolate themselves during quarantine using technology to escape, seek challenges, expand their capacity and capability, get in contact with people from around the world, and generally help with their mood. This digital isolation could become destructive if they remain isolated indefinitely and stop practicing their hobbies, and socializing in the real world. Good habits should not be replaced with endless social media scrolling and video games without clear end points. Research conducted by Institute for Internet and Technology Addiction (INTA) showed that addiction to digital devices has serious and significant negative consequences. Children who binge on social media and video games for long hours lose their chances to improve their critical thinking skills, educate themselves, and prepare themselves for life after the lockdown is lifted.

While parents have many concerns, particularly in the current climate, we do have a choice over how family time can be spent daily, and especially on the amount of recreational screen time. INTA research has coined the term E-Discipline, which calls for setting consistent rules to manage screen time. The recommendations were given when the world was living in a time of relative normality, but they apply equally during. Parents should set a daily schedule in collaboration with their children. Children's input ensures their consent and adherence to the schedule. The schedule may include daily routines for online school mornings, bath time, bedtime, mealtimes, and indoor activities like reading, cooking, playing music, playing chess, and watching a documentary to name a few. Having fun spending time together strengthens family relationships. The schedule should limit recreational screen time, including all digital devices and TV, to a maximum of two hours. Such a strategy mitigates the risk technology

addiction. On a final note, don't be afraid of boredom, it triggers creativity which help break established dopamine seeking-reward loops.

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