



Helping Your Child Manage Digital Technology

As families prepare for the return to school, it is important to consider the relationship your child has with digital technology, also referred to as “screen time.”

The most common forms of digital technology devices used by children and youth are smartphones, computers, and game consoles. Most children use these devices to talk with their friends, find information, or just play. Through these devices, children listen to music, use social media (e.g., Instagram), watch video sharing sites (e.g., YouTube), or play on-line video games.

The level of digital technology use during the pandemic has significantly increased for most people, including our children. In addition to online learning, digital technology has helped us to stay connected with family and friends and to engage in some recreational activities. Understandably, parents and caregivers have tended to relax family rules around screen time due to the limited options for face-to-face interaction and outdoor activities. Unfortunately, for some students the tremendous increase in use has had a negative impact on their mental health and well-being. Some students may be experiencing problems related to or worsened by their use of digital technology. It is anticipated that as families prepare to transition to in-person learning, adjusting to a reduction in screen use might be challenging for some students and cause some conflict at home. This resource is intended to assist parents and caregivers in navigating their child’s use of digital technology as they return to school. It is important to identify and address problems early in the school year before problems get too big.

How do I know if my child’s screen time is problematic?

Here are some things you may wish to watch for:



Is your child spending more time on screens than on other enjoyable activities such as hobbies, physical activities and face to face interaction? Technology use can have a powerful “crowding out effect” by taking the place of other interests. You may notice your child prefers the virtual world over involvement in the real world (e.g., child consistently prefers to play a basketball video game instead of joining their friends in a game of basketball outside). Perhaps your child reads less, spends less time on hobbies, or neglects their physical hygiene (e.g., showering, bathing, brushing their teeth).



Does your child’s use of digital technology get in the way of their ability to do the things that are expected of them at their age? When screen time is problematic, you may find that your child is not as involved in school, isn’t attending class regularly (or on time), doesn’t participate as much in family life, and/or neglects extracurricular activities and friendships.





Does your child seem more irritable, anxious, sad, or less interested in things they used to enjoy?

Excessive screen use can negatively impact mental health and can change brain functioning (e.g., impulse control). This can show up as persistent problems with emotions, like angry outbursts, worries, or low mood. Or you may notice changes with friendships and family relationships. Perhaps your child has started to avoid face-to-face interactions and is struggling with friendship skills. It is important to note that children and youth who struggled with mental health concerns before the pandemic or since are more vulnerable to problems related to technology overuse.



Is your child overly concerned about their on-line presence? Excessive use of social media can impact young people's self esteem. Your child may compare themselves to images of others and may feel that they do not "measure up" to the people they see on-line. You may notice a pre-occupation with posts, likes, or "Snapchat streaks" (i.e., a count of the number of days two people have continuously sent each other snaps). Social media can also introduce and normalize risky and harmful behaviours such as self-harm and suicidality among youth.



Is your child less engaged in school or less motivated to succeed than usual? When children become preoccupied with the virtual world, they may not view school as important or they may not try their best as they may prefer the rewards (e.g., "likes") they get in the virtual world more than the rewards (e.g., grades) they get at school. This may include being more focused on how many followers and likes they are able to get or their status within the gaming world.



Is your child spending money on-line? Many on-line games include ways for players to make in-game purchases, that can include gambling-based activities. There are also websites that provide opportunities to gamble on games and to buy and sell virtual goods/items. Knowing about the games your child plays and if and where they are spending money can help you to set limits. Early exposure to gambling can increase the likelihood of gambling related problems later on in life.



Might your child be experiencing withdrawal because of excessive use of screens? We typically think about withdrawal as something associated with excessive drug or alcohol use. Did you know that excessive gaming can also be addictive? Withdrawal symptoms may include intense cravings to use digital technology, irritability, anxiety, depressed mood, finding other activities extremely boring, being preoccupied with wanting to be on a screen, and experiencing a fear of missing out. If your child is on-line excessively, they might also experience physical symptoms such as headaches, lack of energy and sleep difficulties when you (or others) try to limit their use.

If you are concerned about your child's digital technology use, the strategies and resources below may help. You can also reach out for assistance from a mental health professional through your child's school, or in the community (e.g., [CMHO Find a Centre](#)).

What should I do if my child's digital technology use is problematic?

- ▶ Your relationship to digital technology is the best example for your child. Has your screen time increased during the pandemic? Do you use it as a way to "escape" day to day hassles? It is important that you model healthy use, such as setting screen boundaries, and modelling a range of ways of coping with stress (e.g., physical activity, time in nature, art, meeting up with friends).
- ▶ Remember making changes is a process. Don't start with cutting off your child's access to digital technology. Take a planful, collaborative and gradual approach. Use the return to school routines as a way to naturally taper off excessive digital technology use. Re-introduce household guidelines about use of technology in the evening hours, overall amount of use, where devices are used, etc. You might consider posting these new rules where everyone can see them.



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- ▶ Collaborate with your child around setting structured rules and consequences regarding screen use. For example, it can be helpful to establish designated technology-free times (e.g., no screens during mealtimes). The focus should be on establishing a healthy balance between technology use and: physical activities, face to face contact with friends, hobbies, healthy eating and proper sleep. Consider the use of a Family Media Contract, like this example: <https://www.ementalhealth.ca/Ottawa-Carleton/Technology-Contracts-including-Social-Media-and-Video-Game-Contracts/index.php?m=article&ID=57030>
 - ▶ Encourage and support face to face contact with friends and family, as COVID-19 restrictions allow. Introduce and explore new activities and interests together. Help your child to fill in more time with non-screen hobbies.
 - ▶ If you feel concerned about your child's screen time, plan ahead for a conversation rather than reacting in the moment. Choose a time when you feel calm and not rushed, and when your child is in a good frame of mind (e.g., consider taking your child out for their favorite treat). It is important to start the conversation off gently. Rather than saying, "you need to stop scrolling through Instagram all day", point out what you are observing, and express your concern (e.g., I've noticed that you haven't picked up your guitar in a long time, and you haven't been getting outside while the weather is good. I'm wondering how we can switch things up a bit as we get back into the routines of school). You may wish to point out that during COVID-19 we all slipped into screen habits that we need to ease out of so we create a healthier balance. This doesn't mean giving up screen time entirely, rather to use screens in proportion to non-screen activities.
 - ▶ Effective communication is a key factor in facilitating change. This resource provides conversation tips, including what teens find helpful. <https://screentimenetwork.org/sites/default/files/resources/Dear%20Parents.pdf>
 - ▶ Understand what needs are being met through digital technology and work to find physical world outlets to address these needs Maybe they like the challenge in the game or competing with friends to achieve a high score (e.g., need for competition /challenges). Set small achievable goals that are not based on screen time (e.g., 15 minutes of exercise or 10 minutes practicing a musical instrument). This can help transition your child from online fun to other types of fun.
 - ▶ Is your child relying on screens as a method of coping with stress or feelings of distress? Over the course of the pandemic, many people have used on-line gaming and connections as a way to escape uncomfortable thoughts and feelings. Some children will need extra support to re-establish healthier coping routines. If difficulties with coping persist, consider consulting with a mental health professional.
 - ▶ Some parents have found the use of digital control tools, such as blocking access to certain websites, helpful. It is encouraged that any use of these tools be done in collaboration with your child. <https://www.common sense media.org/blog/parents-ultimate-guide-to-parental-controls>

Resources

Parent information: Screen time and digital media:

<https://www.caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/behavior-and-development/screen-time-and-digital-media>

Connex Ontario provides free & confidential health services information for people experiencing problems with alcohol & drugs, mental illness or gambling/gaming. <https://www.connexontario.ca/en-ca/>

Game Quitters: resources and programs for parents and gamers: <https://gamequitters.com/>

Today's Parent: 9 Signs of Screen Addiction in Kids:

<https://www.todayparent.com/family/family-health/screen-addiction-in-kids/>

Abi-Jaoude et. al, 2020, Smartphones, social media use and youth mental health:

<https://www.cmaj.ca/content/192/6/E136>

Compiled by Steven Chiasson, RP, Digital Tech Consultant and Allison Potts, MSW, RSW for School Mental Health Ontario

