



Technology Overuse + Problematic Gaming

Key Takeaways from Addictions Prevention Literacy Webinar #5 – Technology Overuse and Problematic Gaming from School Mental Health Ontario

The following information is drawn from the webinar offered by Dr. Michael Cheng, staff psychiatrist at the Children's Hospital of Eastern Ontario (CHEO) and Associate Professor at the University of Ottawa. Supplementary information has been added, including answers to additional questions submitted by Ontario parents and caregivers.

How technology affects mental health and well-being

Many factors contribute to the mental health and well-being of children and youth, and digital technology use is one of them. Digital technology can offer both opportunities and challenges for your child's mental health and well-being.

Here's how digital technology use affects brain chemistry:

Technology use influences three key hormones in the body: dopamine, adrenaline and oxytocin

- Using digital technology triggers the release of dopamine + adrenaline = reward and excitement (makes screens hard to put down).
- When we feel connected to others our brain releases oxytocin = connection hormone that helps us feel connected and supported (boosted by real-life social contact, not screen time).
- While engaging with digital technology can be fun and stimulating (thanks to dopamine and adrenaline), it does not give us the sense of connection that oxytocin provides. When technology use interrupts real-life relationships, mental health can be impacted.
- Too much screen use can interrupt sleep and movement—key parts of healthy development. Sleep is crucial for development and mental health. Studies show that digital technology overuse has a direct impact on sleep.

Guidelines by age

Digital technology is a big part of daily life. Consider these guidelines to support balanced use in your family.

GUIDELINES	
Ages 5–12	Aim for <2 hours of non-educational screen time daily.
Ages 13–17	Focus on prioritizing sleep, physical activity, and screen-free meals/bedrooms over strict time limits.



GUIDELINES

Phone + social media

- Delay smartphones until at least age 12 (or 14 if possible).
- Start with basic phones or limit features on smartphones.
- Delay social media use until mid-teens (14–17).

** In Canada, there is currently no evidence-based recommendation on the ideal age for smartphone ownership, some experts suggest 14 as the earliest age.*

How to support your child with balanced technology use

- Explore with your child why they use technology and what they like or don't like about them.
- Try to use technology together when possible (e.g., watch a show together or play a video game together).
- Encourage apps that foster creativity, problem-solving and learning new skills.

Signs of problematic technology use

Problematic technology use is not a diagnosis; it is a broader term that includes problematic use of social media, Internet and video games.

Technology use becomes a concern when it:

- disrupts school, sleep, or family life
- leads to conflict or isolation
- involves high-risk online activity, such as engaging with strangers online
- is the only source of relief or happiness

Your questions, answered

QUESTION	ANSWER
How can I know if my child is addicted to video games?	<p>Some youth may experience severe problems with technology overuse. You might notice your child experiencing the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• not being interested in non-video game activities• becoming distressed if video games are removed or limits are set• expressing that video games are the only thing that makes them happy <p>If you are concerned about your child's video game use, you can reach out for assistance from a mental health professional through your child's school, or in the community. You can speak to your school principal to learn more about school mental health services that are available. See the list of services and supports at the end of this document.</p>



QUESTION	ANSWER
<p>I think my child is addicted to their devices. What can I do to help them?</p>	<p>There are many things you can do as a parent/caregiver to help. Consider trying some of the suggestions below and see what works for your family.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plan ahead for a conversation with your child. Let your child know you would like to talk with them about their digital technology use. Try to seek their input on when and where they would like to have the conversation. • Share what you are noticing and express your concerns without judgement. For example, “I’ve noticed that you haven’t picked up your guitar in a long time and you haven’t been going outside when the weather is nice”. Try not to label technology use as “bad”; this can immediately shut down communication. • Try to understand what needs are being met through their device use. For example, if your child is using devices to escape uncomfortable thoughts and feelings, consider reaching out for mental health support. • Explore their goals and whether device use supports their goals or takes away from them. For example, “I know you are hoping to make the basketball team this season. In what ways do you think your gaming afterschool might be affecting your chances?” <p>After having a conversation with your child and better understanding their use, you may want to start by exploring one small change they could make to decrease technology use. Map out their day together and notice where technology use is the highest. Talk about a possible change that could be made at that time of day. For example, if use is high after school, what other activities could they be doing? As the parent/caregiver it can be helpful to have an activity you do with them (if possible), such as cooking dinner together. Think about ways you can keep them busy, connect with them, and offer choices of activities.</p> <p>Remember that it is hard for anyone to change behaviour habits. It will take time for your child to make changes.</p>
<p>How can I support my child with balanced smartphone use while addressing their concerns of feeling socially isolated?</p>	<p>Digital technologies can support connections with others, and with limits and balance these tools can offer meaningful experiences for your child. Try using the 3 M’s of balanced use below, recommended by Media Smarts, to guide conversation:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Manageable – Are they in control of their use? Is it getting in the way of other important activities or responsibilities? • Meaningful – Does the time they spend feel worth it? • Mindful – Are they choosing to use their phone with intention? Are they staying present and focused on activities rather than being distracted or disconnected? <p>By helping your child to reflect on the three M’s, you can support them with developing balanced use, ensuring that their phone use serves as a tool for connection.</p> <p>Consider setting goals together that support face-to-face connections with friends also. Are there ways you could help your child to shift some of the online connection with friends to in person?</p> <p>Leading by example as a parent/caregiver is also important. Be aware of your own device use and model the importance of face-to-face connection with family and friends.</p>



Looking for support for a child or youth who is facing challenges with technology overuse?

SUPPORT	
YOUTH-VAST Program (CAMH)	Support for youth (12–21) facing substance use, vaping or technology overuse concerns Visit: https://www.wehearyou.ca/
ConnexOntario	24/7 helpline with free support + info on mental health + addictions services Visit: connexontario.ca
Media Smarts	Online resources to help parents and caregivers navigate technology use Visit: https://mediasmarts.ca/resources-for-parents

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