

# Phone addiction in children is like drug abuse



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We are living in a giant uncontrolled experiment with a generation of Australian children growing up exposed to an addictive technology.

Given many of us are equally hooked to our smartphones and tablets, it is an addiction that most adults can also understand.

What is scary is that we are yet to see the full impact of this social phenomenon as it currently exists, and how it is affecting not just the learning and interactions of our children, but the structure of young brains.

Schools are beginning to catch onto the issue, with Sydney's prestigious Kings School the latest to join the many which are banning technology use 'bell to bell', while governments in Australia and around the world are taking action to ban or limit phone use during school hours.

So why all the fuss regarding technology, given as adults we use our screens almost constantly and have not yet turned into mindless zombies?

For those thinking they are not addicted, why not put yourself to the test and head out for a day without your phone?

When you do, make sure you note the level of anxiousness you feel by being disconnected from something that is always with you, and take the rare opportunity to look around you and view the number of heads down all staring into screens.

If we struggle to spend a short period away from our phones, can you imagine the impact these devices are having on young and developing minds?



*If we struggle to spend a short period away from our phones, can you imagine the impact these devices are having on young and developing minds. Picture: iStock*

There are many children who have grown up with almost unrestricted access to screens, which has impacted their ability to reach developmental milestones and functional capacities, including self-regulation, impulse control, a desire to learn, to persevere and to be creative.

Coverage of the school bans and recent World Health Organisation declarations around gaming and screen use has seen many parents begin to question whether they should be restricting their children's access to technology at home.

The answer is an emphatic 'Yes', as when it comes to young minds, learning and short-term memory are impeded if the brain is distracted, distressed or sleep-deprived.

On a daily basis, I work directly with children and their parents, often inside the family setting, trying to repair the effects of behavioural issues caused through problematic internet use.

Violent rages are common as parents attempt to prevent access to the online world, and I have worked with many terrified parents who have either been, or believe they will be, assaulted by their own child if they do not switch the Wi-Fi back on.

Such violent responses are not surprising as we become more aware of the potential cognitive, psychological and social challenges resulting from online gaming and social media platforms, with the latest neuroscience research indicating that the impact of excessive online use on the brain being similar to substance abuse.

The short-term implications are clear: physically measurable changes in the brain, poor grades, poor sleep, anxiety, depression, disconnection from family and increased aggressive or violent outbursts.



The short-term implications are clear. Picture: iStock

We have the first generation of children who are sleep and touch deprived, with many beginning their school life unprepared and at a disadvantage.

Recent research from Canada shows that children between the ages of two and three who are exposed to more than two hours of screen time are five times more likely to have significant behavioural and learning challenges and seven times more likely to meet the criteria for ADHD.

The evidence is mounting for both the short, and long-term effects of poor learning, performance and social consequences due to distraction from technology.

To combat these serious consequences we need to see technology use banned across all schools and their use restricted in our homes.

This will not be an easy change to implement and will require parents to set standards by restricting their own use of technology and applying strict rules that limits technology use to the WHO standard.

That means no access to screens for children under the age of two and limited and monitored access of one hour per day for those aged two to five and two hours per day for those over five.

As adults we all have a role to play to reverse the damage that over exposure to screens and the digital world has had upon our children and work to restore a sense of humanity into our schools, families and the broader community.

Making these changes will be tough, but not nearly as tough as dealing with the psychological impacts on our children if we do nothing.

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