FOSI Briefs

Tech Addiction; Not All Screens Are Created Equal

For many years the **American Academy of Pediatrics** recommended no screen time for children under 2. The advice was clear and easy to follow, in theory if not always in practice. Parents should avoid giving their toddler a computer. However, technology changed but the guidance took time to catch up. In the meantime parenting became more complicated. What do you do when grandparents want to FaceTime? or when the toys that a toddler has don't have a screen but do connect to the Internet? How does one parent in this new digital environment and what can be done to help?

There is no escaping the fact that phones, laptops, tablets, and gaming devices are incredibly attractive to children, just as they are to adults. From the flashing images to the new message tone - all have some elements designed to grab our attention. Parents are concerned about their children who may spend all evening playing games instead of completing their homework, or who may be so consumed with the latest social media post that they neglect their chores. But at what point does this become more than just childhood behavior, or misbehavior, and is there any point that outside intervention becomes necessary?

Too much time playing games or surfing the Internet rings alarm bells for parents about the impact of the technology on children's attention spans, social skills, and behavioral problems. They also complain about kids being distracted and unable or unwilling to put down their devices. They hear the scare stories and see the headlines about 'tech addiction' and its dangerous impact on families. But at the same time children are being encouraged to do more and more online at school and for homework and the jobs of the future are often touted as being technology based. Parents are confused and are looking for guidance from pediatricians, government, and experts.

At a recent **FOSI Briefs the Hill event on Kids, Screen Time & "Tech Addiction"** panelists explored the use of technology and its implications on child development. Dr. Michael Rich, Center on Media and Child Health, Harvard, spoke specifically about the term "tech addiction." He reminded the audience the word addiction is used loosely in society, but that it has real meaning in the medical community. There has not been a physiologically measured response to technology withdrawal, as in the case of medically acknowledged addiction, and he explained that a preferable term is "problematic interactive media use."

The expert panelists also talked about the need for balance in children's activities, and how some children may choose to spend more time playing sports rather than online activities. There was consensus that there is no right answer, no one size fits all response to the question of how much time should children spend on the Internet. However true this may be, it doesn't help caretakers looking for clear guidance in the upbringing of their families.

There is general agreement that there is a need for more research about the impact of screen time on children. This is a very new space, in fact this is the first generation to be born into an online world that allows a teddy bear to read them stories, with screens that connect them to family on the other side of the world, and offers them opportunities to travel and explore different countries from the device in their pocket. The implications on their cognitive, behavioral, and social development have yet to be established and explored.

In July 2018, Senators Markey, Sasse, Blunt, Schatz, Bennet, and Collins, and Representatives Delaney and Budd from the United States Congress introduced bipartisan and bicameral legislation to study the impact of technology and media on children. The legislation entitled the **Children and Media Research Advancement Act** would direct funding to explore the effects of media on core areas of cognitive, physical, and socio-emotional development of infants, children, and adolescents. This research would investigate the impact of exposure to and use of media such as smartphones, computers, social media sites, apps, websites, television, movies, artificial intelligence, video games, and virtual and augmented reality.

This detailed and longitudinal study proposed in the U.S Congress will explore the positive and negative effects of modern-day technology use, and the findings could be vital in enhancing our understanding of the impact of media and developing the appropriate responses as a society to ensure the well-being of children.

In the meantime, industry has recognized the concerns of many users, not just parents, and has developed a range of tools to help track and manage technology use. **Apple** introduced activity reports, app time limits and Do Not Disturb functionality in iOS 12 to help individuals reduce interruptions in their daily lives, and control screen time for themselves and for their families. **Google** launched a digital well-being campaign to help people better understand their use of devices and to create healthy technology habits for the whole family. Users can access information on how long they have been using their phone and apps, and set reminders to take a break. The ability to quiet notifications and the in-built options to instill balance in children's lives through Google's Family Link are all integral to the well-being work that is being undertaken.

Mobile carriers, such as **Verizon** have developed tools that allow parents to manage aspects of their kids' smartphones like content filters and screen time limits. In addition to monitoring their children's use of the phone, parents are now able to remotely pause the Wi-Fi functionality of the device and set time restrictions, to allow for uninterrupted homework time or bedtime.

The gaming industry, through the **Entertainment Software Rating Board**, has created resources on how to activate parental controls and monitor children's playing of games. The tools allow parents to limit access to games based on the ESRB rating categories, set the duration of gaming, as well as to restrict access to online interactions such as in-game chat, web browsing, and in-game purchases. Additionally, **Facebook and Instagram** recently introduced new tools to manage their time on the platforms. The services provide an activity dashboard, a daily reminder and a new way to limit notifications. And with the launch of the Surface Go, **Microsoft** considered how to make products that "fit into people's lives, not take them over" and with that in mind they increased user control over notifications and introduced tools to promote focus.

Many of these advancements are designed to give users more information about the time that they are spending online. With this increased data in the hands of individuals it is hoped that they will be able to make informed choices about their online activities, including being more aware of how much time they spend on apps and devices.

An important action that worried parents can take is to model good behavior around screen time for their kids. Children learn from what they see around them, so if their parents are always checking their phones, even if it is for work, they will emulate that activity. Also, engaging with the children on what they are doing on the Internet often goes a long way to alleviating worries, and promoting understanding within families.

There are many different types of screen time, and all screen time is not created equal. There is time spent online posting photos; and there is time spent researching content for a term paper. here is time spent chatting with friends; and there is time spent reaching out for emotional support. Is 2 hours reading a book on a e-reader a concern to parents or is it just when a child is playing a game? A child's interests, personality, and individual circumstances need to be considered when thinking about the technology and media diet of children.

More research is needed to help us understand the impact of screen time and industry must continue to provide tools to assist all users to become more aware about their technology use and making informed choices about that how often they are on their devices. Ultimately, though, it is the parents who must decide exactly how, when, and with what devices they want their children to engage with technology.

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