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Psychology is for Everyone

Creating a Healthy Balance: Technology Use for Children and Adolescents

This article was prepared by TCDSB Psychology staff based on the latest scientific research in the fields of psychology and child development.

There are many opinions about the use of technology for children – from the concern about wireless technology to battles at home about too much “screen time”. Needless to say, technology is our new reality. It’s everywhere and kids are becoming savvy at surfing and texting, not to mention the exercise their thumbs are getting from endless gaming!

The Advantages of Technology Use

An article from Psychology Today (December, 2012) proposes that all the new technologies are, undoubtedly, shaping the way we think and focus. Research supports that some technology actually improves our visual-spatial abilities, as well as our reaction time, and the ability to identify details among cluttered information. Here are some additional advantages to consider:

Advantages for children:

• There are many technological games that are both fun and educational.
• Games help to develop hand/eye coordination and fine-motor skills.
• Kids can develop independence and autonomy by accessing information easily and on their own.
• Some interactive video games encourage kids to collaborate and learn turn-taking skills.

TIPS: The use of some websites can help children develop literacy, math and/or other skills necessary for school and everyday life. (i.e. [www.starfall.com](http://www.starfall.com) for early reading skills, [www.bbc.co.uk/schools/typing](http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/typing) for keyboarding skills, [www.funbrain.com](http://www.funbrain.com) for math and reading games). Ask teachers about their favourite websites that promote literacy and/or math skills.

Advantages for teenagers:

• Some interactive games can allow students to practice strategic and critical thinking skills.
• The use of a laptop or tablet can be important for developing technology skills necessary for future employment.
• Quick access to information from a variety of sources. This allows the teenager to read about different viewpoints from around the world.
• Many websites are dedicated to highlighting healthy choices, with vast information in order to help teens make informed decisions.

TIPS: We need to educate our teens about the responsible use of the internet and social media.

Take a trip to the library - learn how to conduct research from a variety of sources.

Embrace technology, yet maintain limits and balance!

The Disadvantages of Technology Use

Are We Introducing Technology Too Soon?

• Using technology too soon may decrease the amount of time children are spending doing physical activities and other age-appropriate activities such as art, music, reading and writing, etc., which are all necessary for a healthy and balanced development.
When children become ‘masters’ of the technology they are using, sometimes these other activities become less interesting but are nevertheless very important to holistic brain development and academic achievement! Children today may be deprived of the rich and real experiences that many of us parents had.

Remember the value of such things as creative play, sports, making up games and exploring nature, reading with and to your children and being a model for them.

Videogame Considerations
- Videogames can be addictive. They are fast-paced, many are based on a rewards-system in order to progress levels and they require a complex and simultaneous set of skills, designed to sustain a person’s attention for a long-period of time.
- Youth tend to be able to ‘focus’ on games for longer periods of time compared to less stimulating tasks such as reading or school work which they may more easily lose interest in.
- Frequent exposure to violence in videogames can have a negative impact on children’s social-emotional development.
- Overuse can lead to isolation from others, spending too much time in the ‘virtual world’ and not enough time in the ‘real world’. For these reasons, video games are particularly addicting to persons who have been diagnosed with ADHD or with Autism.

**TIPS:** Videogames should be viewed as a ‘reward’ or ‘dessert’ which follows the completion of other activities. Parents are encouraged to place time limits on the use of gaming systems particularly during the weekdays. Consider keeping game systems in common areas of the home to allow parent supervision.

Use of the Internet and Social Media Considerations
- Youth can become dependent on the exclusive use of technology as a communication tool, thereby decreasing their real face to face interpersonal/social skills.
- Social media such as texting, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others can be very easily misinterpreted and misused, including the risk of cyber bullying. These media require a maturity level that young people have not yet developed.
- Recommended age for Facebook use is 13 years of age or older – however, parents themselves need to determine their individual child’s readiness.
- Using the internet allows children/teens instant access to a variety of images, messages, etc.; that parents may not consider to be appropriate. Using an internet provider that allows parents to control access to unsafe sites is recommended.

**TIPS:** Parents are encouraged to have conversations with their children and teens around dependency and misuses of technology. Consider your individual child, and avoid ‘peer pressure’ from other parents when considering whether your child is really ‘ready’ for social media, surfing the net independently, or a cell phone with data capacity.

Sleep Problems:
- Looking at a ‘screen’ (phone, computer, iPod or video game) at bedtime is actually said to ‘trick’ the brain to think it is daytime and be associated with sleep problems.
- Sleep problems brought on by technology use too late at night can lead to fatigue during the school day, school attendance problems and mental health concerns.

**TIPS:** Setting up healthy sleep hygiene should be practiced such as turning off phones and devices one hour before bedtime in order to remove distractions and interruptions.

**General TIPS re: Technology or Video game use with Children**
- Parents need to be the gatekeepers of all technology use of their child and teen up until the end of high school in order to minimize the negative impacts and maximize the potential benefits.
- Remember that children thrive from spending time with their family members, and that nothing can replace the rewards and memories made. Consider leaving technology at home during family outings and gatherings, having ‘tech-free Sundays’, playing board games or charades, reading, hiking, exploring nature, and enjoying physical exercise to provide a healthy balance!