

SCREEN TIME AND MOODS

Is it just me or does every parent conversation end up in venting about our kids' electronic use? Whether its young ones glued to Peppa Pig, middle ones "addicted" to Fortnite and YouTube or teens obsessed with sending their "streaks" on Snapchat and spending endless hours scrolling through Instagram. Perhaps to our kids, the adults in their life look no different. I like to consider myself fairly "normal" when it comes to my parenting practices but when I get the weekly screen time notice on my phone, I am shocked! Although I justify it as productive: banking, reading a novel, reading/watching the news, checking the weather, emailing work, scheduling family activities, booking meetings, reading articles pertaining to my hobbies, social media, researching holiday destinations, texting family and friends, etc. It is no wonder my kids see me on my phone ALL THE TIME. But why does adult screen time not affect moods and behavior the way it seems to children? Anyone who has witnessed a full blown breakdown after hours on Fortnite or Snapchat can attest that too much screen time does something negative to younger people.

I read an interesting article by Victoria L. Dunckley, M.D. Victoria (a child, adolescent and adult psychiatrist) about this complex subject. With her permission, I have summarized it below.

Children or teens who are "revved up" and prone to rages or—alternatively—who are depressed and apathetic have become disturbingly commonplace. Traditional treatments often don't work very well, and a downward spiral continues.

Both parents and clinicians may be trying to treat what looks like a textbook mental disorder, but fail to address the most common environmental cause of such symptoms—everyday use of electronics. Time and again, I've realized [that to] successfully treat a child with mood dysregulation today requires methodically eliminating all electronics use for several weeks—an "electronics fast"—to allow the nervous system to "reset."

*If done correctly, this intervention can produce **deeper sleep, a brighter and more even mood, better focus and organization, and an increase in physical activity.** The **ability to tolerate stress improves, so meltdowns diminish** in both frequency and severity. The child begins to enjoy the things they used to, is more drawn to nature, and imaginary or creative play returns. In teens and young adults, an increase in self-directed behavior is observed—the exact opposite of apathy and hopelessness.*

When a child goes through an electronic fast, we see improved sleep, more exercise, and more face-to-face contact with others all compound the benefits—an upward spiral! After the fast, once the brain is reset, the parent can carefully determine how much if any electronics use the child can tolerate without symptoms returning.

RESTRICTING ELECTRONICS MAY NOT SOLVE EVERYTHING, BUT IT'S OFTEN THE MISSING LINK IN TREATMENT WHEN KIDS ARE STUCK.

An electronic fast is effective because it reverses much of the physiological dysfunction produced by daily screen time.

SIX WAYS THAT EXPLAIN WHY ELECTRONICS PRODUCE NEGATIVE MOODS

1. SCREEN TIME DISRUPTS SLEEP AND DESYNCHRONIZES THE BODY CLOCK.

Because light from screen devices mimics daytime, it suppresses melatonin, a sleep signal released by darkness. Just minutes of screen stimulation can delay melatonin release by several hours and desynchronize the body clock.

2. SCREEN TIME DESENSITIZES THE BRAIN'S REWARD SYSTEM.

Gaming and at times, social media, releases so much dopamine—the “feel-good” chemical—that on a brain scan it looks the same as cocaine use! When reward pathways are overused, they become less sensitive, and more and more stimulation is needed to experience pleasure.

3. SCREEN TIME PRODUCES “LIGHT-AT-NIGHT.”

Light-at-night from electronics has been linked to depression and even suicide risk in numerous studies. In fact, animal studies show that exposure to screen-based light before or during sleep causes depression, even when the animal isn't looking at the screen. Sometimes parents are reluctant to restrict electronics use in a child's room, but in fact removing light-at-night is protective.

4. SCREEN TIME INDUCES STRESS REACTIONS.

Both acute stress (fight-or-flight) and chronic stress produce changes in brain chemistry and hormones that can increase irritability. Indeed, cortisol, the chronic stress hormone, seems to be both a cause and an effect of depression—creating a vicious cycle.

5. SCREEN TIME OVERLOADS THE SENSORY SYSTEM, FRACTURES ATTENTION, AND DEPLETES MENTAL RESERVES.

Experts say that what's often behind explosive and aggressive behavior is poor focus. When attention suffers, so does the ability to process one's internal and external environment, so little demands become big ones. One way to temporarily “boost” depleted reserves is to become angry, so meltdowns actually become a coping mechanism.

6. SCREEN-TIME REDUCES PHYSICAL ACTIVITY LEVELS AND EXPOSURE TO “GREEN TIME.”

Research shows that time outdoors, interacting with nature, can restore attention, lower stress, and reduce aggression. Time spent with electronics reduces exposure to natural mood enhancers.

In today's world, it may seem crazy to restrict electronics so drastically. But when kids are struggling, we're not doing them any favors by leaving electronics in place and hoping they can wind down by using electronics in “moderation”. It just doesn't work. In contrast, by allowing the nervous system to return to a more natural state with a strict fast, we can take the first step in helping a child become calmer, stronger, and happier.

As parents, perhaps we should analyze our own screen time as well. Maybe we can buy a newspaper once in while or read a “real” book or magazine in a sunbeam or on the deck when it warms up. Ask our child to help with on-line banking (if it is age appropriate), rather than texting pick up the phone for a conversation. What our kids see us DO is far more impactful than what our kids hear us SAY.

This article was submitted by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. Tammy is Northern Gateway Public School's Student Support Facilitator. Tammy advocates for students and parents, providing a link between to other supports within the community. Tammy has been a social worker for over 20 years and is a mother to 4 children, 3 of which are teenagers.