

All screen and no play?

Lack of options for outdoor activities has put children at the mercy of smart devices



WE are all familiar with the sight by now: everyone in a family—adults, children, parents—sitting together, but each concentrating on their personal device, usually a smartphone or a tablet. So familiar are we that we have also accepted it as our reality. Those of us who cannot stand the awkwardness of certain social settings are even grateful to have something else to look at, which makes us appear as if we are otherwise busy or occupied. However, when it comes to children’s usage of these devices, there is no denying the fact that such daily and prolonged exposure to screens is indeed concerning as it may have long-term harmful effects on them.

With the increased ease of access to high-speed internet and compact devices, children over the last decade or so have been introduced to screens pretty much since infancy. It has been, in a way, fascinating to see how quickly some babies can get the hang of working smart devices without any help. Busy parents even find solace in the fact that at least their child is sitting in one place, occupied with one thing, instead of running around or getting hurt while they—the parents—work outside or around the house.

But smart devices are untrustworthy babysitters. While the child is occupied with one thing (and in one place) for hours, that one thing is a screen which not only affects their health—physical and mental—but also eliminates their desire to do anything else that is productive. And in no other time have the effects of this been clearer than during the last one year and a half of the Covid-19 pandemic and of online schooling.

A recently published research article, titled “Prevalence and impact of the use of electronic gadgets on the health of children in secondary schools in Bangladesh: A cross sectional study,” reveals how much

dependent students have become on technology. The study was conducted on 1,803 secondary school students (Classes 6 to 10) from English and Bangla medium schools as well as madrasas, between June and December in 2020.

One may assume that it is because of online classes that children are spending more time in front of screens. However, for the year 2020, only about 25 percent of survey participants—of more than 87 percent who reported using any form of

the Covid-19 pandemic. While 33.5 percent of the students reported using gadgets for over two hours daily in 2019, this proportion surged to almost 53 percent in 2020. The overall percentage of respondents using these gadgets, for at least five hours a day, was also three times more last year than it was in 2019. And while around 28 percent said they spent less than two hours daily engaging in outdoor activities, nearly 27 percent said they did not spend any time outdoors at all, or spent so little time there

only were they now pursuing one of the most important aspects of their lives—their education—through screens, but they were also deprived of all the positives of going to school, such as having a circle of peers and being able to socialise with them through conversation and shared activities.

In our cities, where playgrounds are becoming scarcer by the year, school is often the only place where many children get the chance to play outdoors, be physically active, and thus avoid dependence on screens. It is, therefore, not shocking that the study also found an increasing pattern of gadget use going up from children living in rural areas, to those in suburban areas, to those in urban areas. So, whereas a little over 90 percent of urban respondents said they used one or another form of gadget, the percentage was a bit lower, at about 84 percent, for rural participants. Higher technological dependence was also found in students who came from more financially solvent families.

Regardless of their geographical location and financial standing, the most concerning findings of the study remain true across the board: the harmful physical and mental effects of children’s technological dependence. For instance, respondents who spent more than six hours with gadgets daily were found to be more than twice as likely to experience regular headaches, than those who spent an hour or less doing the same. Moreover, more than half of those who used gadgets for more than two hours also reported feelings of depression and sleep disturbances.

In contrast, participants who reported less than an hour of daily usage of gadgets reported significantly fewer instances of headaches, back pain, depression, sleep disturbance, and visual disturbance. Pain in limbs was the problem most experienced by this group, but that too in only about a quarter of them. This is in stark opposition to the nearly 50 percent, on average, of participants who reported using electronic devices for more than two hours daily, who were also suffering from different forms of

the aforementioned physical and mental ailments.

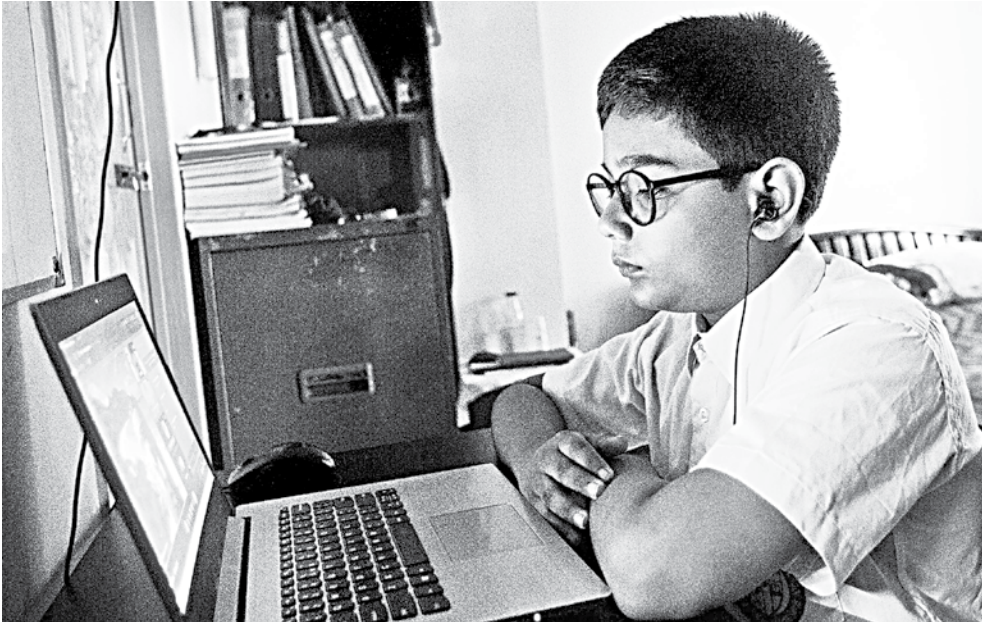
Now, the simplest solution to the increased dependence on screens would be to lower and limit the time children spend glued to these devices. But before parents snatch away their children’s laptops, smartphones and/or tablets, it may be fruitful to take a minute to visualise the child’s perspective, too.

While children are beginning to return to in-person schooling, students from grades besides fifth and those who are SSC candidates (for 2021 and 2022) are only attending classes for a couple days a week at most. Schools that have the infrastructure to do so are still heavily dependent on online schooling. So it will be a while before children can stop looking at their screens to continue their education. And as long as they are trapped at home—especially for those in urban areas—their only solace may be in these electronic gadgets, which they can use to stay connected to and updated about the outside world.

Instead of imposing blanket restrictions on their screen time, it may be more useful for parents and guardians to first discuss with children why spending excessive amounts of time on electronic gadgets is unhealthy for their mental and physical well-being. The limitations can then be applied in phases, thus letting them eventually get used to using their devices for online classes and then for a specified period of leisure every day. Not only will this help build trust between the caretaker and the child, it may also inspire children to self-monitor and regulate the time they spend with screens. But parental supervision is key to any desirable change.

That said, the problem of online-offline class arrangements and the lack of outdoor spaces for children, which in part is responsible for their increased dependence on screens, are something that parents can’t solve. It will require interventions from the higher authorities.

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Stuck at home because of Covid-19 restrictions, children in Bangladesh turned to technology to remain connected with the outside world for a year and a half, which meant an increased amount of screen time.

PHOTO: ORCHID CHAKMA

electronic gadgets—used those for attending online classes. According to the report, most of the students (around 39 percent) used smartphones and other devices for watching cartoons or movies, followed by almost 30 percent using them for other reasons.

Regardless, one thing that was evident from the study was that students’ engagement with screens increased during

that it would not be worth considering.

So, what does such an increment in children’s usage of electronic devices indicate?

With in-person classes remaining closed for 543 days since March 2020—and reopening in phases just a month ago—children had to bear the shock of their daily routine being drastically changed. Not

PROJECT ■ SYNDICATE

The Pandora Papers and the Threat to Democracy



THE “Pandora Papers,” a new investigation led by the International Consortium of Investigative Journalists (ICIJ), has fuelled outrage around the world. Politicians, businesspeople, sports stars, and cultural icons have been caught in the act of hiding their wealth and lying about it. But how likely is a reckoning for the lawyers and accountants who helped them?

There is nothing new about the practices the ICIJ investigation has uncovered. True, the sheer scale, sophistication, and legal firepower deployed to allow today’s ultra-rich and powerful to game the law may be newsworthy. But the only truly shocking revelation is that it took more than 600 journalists from around the world to expose these practices, often risking their own safety and professional futures. The difficulty of that task attests to how well lawyers, legislatures, and courts have tilted the law in favour of elites.

To hide their wealth, today’s rich and powerful have availed themselves of centuries-old legal coding strategies. In 1535, King Henry VIII of England cracked down on a legal device known as “the use,” because it threatened to undermine existing (feudal) property relations and served as a tax-avoidance vehicle. But thanks to clever legal arbitrage, it was soon replaced by an even more powerful device: “the trust.”

Legally encoded by solicitors and recognised by courts of equity, the trust remains one of the most ingenious legal tools ever invented for the creation and preservation of private wealth. In the old days, it allowed the wealthy to circumvent

inheritance rules. Today, it is the go-to vehicle for tax avoidance and for structuring financial assets, including asset-backed securities and their derivatives.

Functionally, a trust alters the rights and obligations to an asset without observing the formal rules of property law; it thus creates a shadow property right. Establishing a trust requires an asset—such as land, shares, or bonds—and three personas: an owner (settlor), a manager (trustee), and a beneficiary. The owner transfers legal title (though not necessarily actual possession) over the asset to the trustee, who promises to manage it on behalf of the beneficiary in accordance with the owner’s instructions.

Nobody else needs to know about this arrangement, because there is no requirement to register the title or disclose the identities of the parties. This lack of transparency makes the trust the perfect vehicle for playing hide and seek with creditors and tax authorities. And because legal title and economic benefits are split among the three personas, nobody willingly assumes the obligations that come with ownership.

The trust became a favoured legal device for global elites not through some invisible hand of the market, but rather by purposeful legal design. Attorneys pushed existing legal boundaries, courts recognised and enforced their innovations, and then lawmakers (many of them presumably beholden to wealthy donors) codified those practices into statutory legislation. As previous restrictions were stripped away, trust law expanded its remit.

These legal changes ensured that an ever-greater array of assets could be held in trust, and that the role of the trustee could be delegated to legal persons rather than honourable individuals like judges. Moreover, fiduciary duties were curtailed, the trustees’ liability was limited, and the lifespan of the trust became increasingly elastic. Together,



Legal experts around the world have been using the law to protect the ultra-rich and help them hide their wealth.

PHOTO: AFP

these legal adaptations made the trust fit for global finance.

Countries that lacked this device were encouraged to emulate it. An international treaty, the 1985 Hague Convention on Trusts, was adopted with this goal in mind. In countries where lawmakers have resisted the pressure to sanction trusts, attorneys have fashioned equivalent devices from the laws governing foundations, associations, or corporations—betting (often correctly) that

courts would vindicate their innovations.

While some jurisdictions have gone out of their way to be legally hospitable to private wealth creation, others have tried to crack down on tax and legal arbitrage. But legal restrictions work only if the legislature controls which law is practised within its jurisdiction. In the age of globalisation, most legislatures have been effectively stripped of such control, because law has become portable. If one country does not

have the “right” law, another one might. As long as the place of business recognises and enforces foreign law, the legal and accounting paperwork can be channelled to the friendliest foreign jurisdiction, and the deed is done.

National legal systems, thus, have become items on an international menu of options from which asset holders choose the laws by which they wish to be governed. They don’t need a passport or a visa; all they need is a legal shell. Assuming a new legal identity in this way, the privileged few can decide how much to pay in taxes, and which regulations to endure. And if legal obstacles cannot be overcome quite that easily, lawyers from leading global law firms will draft legislation to make a country compliant with the “best practices” of global finance. Here, tax and trust havens such as South Dakota and the British Virgin Islands offer the gold standard.

The costs of these practices are borne by the least mobile and the insufficiently wealthy. But turning law into a gold mine for the rich and powerful causes harm well beyond the immediate inequities it generates. By potentially undermining the legitimacy of the law, it threatens the very foundation of democratic governance.

The more that wealthy elites and their lawyers insist that everything they do is legal, the less the public will trust the law. Today’s global elites might be able to continue to conjure private wealth from law, but no resource can be mined forever. Once lost, trust in the law will be difficult to regain. The wealthy will have lost their most valuable asset of all.

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(Exclusive to *The Daily Star*)

URSULA K. LE GUIN
(1929 - 2018)
American author

It is good to have an end to journey toward, but it is the journey that matters in the end.

CROSSWORD BY THOMAS JOSEPH

ACROSS

- 1 Ravines
- 5 “The Godfather” star
- 11 Diva’s piece
- 12 Dawn goddess
- 13 “The Old Curiosity shop” girl
- 14 Mini burger
- 15 Rainy day wear
- 17 French friend
- 18 Whoop it up
- 22 Pocket beeper
- 24 Disparaging
- 25 Hoppy brew
- 26 Ignited
- 27 Ship stops
- 30 Yarns
- 32 Man of morals
- 33 “— Clear Day”

DOWN

- 1 Street group
- 2 Open space
- 3 The Huns, e.g.
- 4 Bible dancer
- 5 Wild party
- 6 Measuring aids
- 7 Out of bed
- 8 Auction signal
- 9 Dr. of rap
- 10 Crew need

- 34 Home of the WNBA’s Aces
- 38 Shot taker
- 41 Office note
- 42 Wears down
- 43 Magnetic metal
- 44 Adorn in relief
- 45 Inquires

- 16 Knight’s title
- 19 Hamlet residents
- 20 Falco of TV
- 21 “Why don’t we!”
- 22 One of a bear trio
- 23 Lotion additive
- 28 Ohio city
- 29 Some tires
- 30 “Mazel —!”
- 31 Lack of vitality
- 35 Pert talk
- 36 In a frenzy
- 37 Some babies
- 38 Semicircular shape
- 39 Radius setting
- 40 Angry group

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BEEBLE BAILEY

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BABY BLUES

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