



When early childhood is spent in front of screens

The impact of excessive and unregulated screentime

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Wherever it is that most of us find ourselves these days, there is one scene that is common almost everywhere we go: a child lounging about, their eyes glued to a screen. It is not uncommon for children these days to be given access to screens even before they can speak in full sentences. While we may be compelled to blame parents for this choice of theirs – perceiving them to be aloof – what we must reckon with is that modern parenting is stretched thin between tiredness and social pressure. The truth remains, however, that a device used for convenience can devolve into dependence. A predicament which cannot be taken lightly for the well-being of both children and parents.

Fatema Akter Sweety, mother of two (a three-year-old and a one-year-old), recalls how her older son was once very active and loved playing outdoors before being introduced to digital devices. “Whenever we try to take him out now, he refuses and comes up with various excuses,” she says. “Sometimes he claims he is hungry, knowing he can watch videos while eating.”

Initially, Fatema avoided handing over devices to her son, but during her second pregnancy, she found it challenging to keep him engaged through other means, as she was unable to attend to him as closely as she used to be.

She does mention a few positive observations, though, stating that her son has learnt the names of colours through the videos he watches on YouTube. Nonetheless, Fatema remains wary as she still monitors her child’s screentime at all times: “Whenever videos in foreign languages pop up, or he swipes to short-form content, I immediately change it, or ask him to turn it off. Sometimes he reacts aggressively and refuses, but other times he listens. This behaviour, however, seems to be specific to devices. If I take away a book he’s flipping through, he is far more cooperative.”

For young parents, it seems the experience is a shared one. Saba Tasnim, mother to a two-and-a-half-year-old son, shares that she allows her child access to screens when he is eating: “My son is only allowed to watch YouTube Kids, and that’s mostly on the television.”

Saba further adds, “We have restricted his usage of mobile phones. It’s only when we are travelling and inside the car that he has access to these videos. Even then, it’s for educational purposes only.”

Sara*, mother to a two-year-old and a six-month-old,

also confirms that her children are only allowed to watch YouTube Kids. Sara says, “The internet is a strange place, so it is essential that I keep a check on what they are watching on it, especially at their age. I make sure that they only watch videos from which they can learn the alphabet and poems.”

“While having access to these videos has allowed my children to learn things from a very early age, there are some downsides too. My daughter, for instance, imitates a lot of negative things from a character called Cussly,” she adds.

Screen addiction amongst children, driven by highly stimulating, dopamine-inducing content, is a growing concern, with children averaging several hours of daily screen time, far exceeding recommended limits.

To understand the impact of excessive and unregulated digital device use on children’s mental well-being and developmental growth, we spoke to Mostak Ahmed Imran, who is the first-ever and only British Association of Play Therapists (BAPT) approved Play Therapist in Bangladesh, and a child psychologist at MindSheba. According to him, when screentime replaces responsive human interaction during the early stages of development, the risk of speech delay and social withdrawal increases. While not all children exposed to screens experience developmental delays, the likelihood of such concerns rises when digital engagement substitutes relational communication.

“In one case, I was working with a school-going child who spent prolonged hours on her mobile device. Gradually, her communication style began to resemble the digital content she consumed. She spoke in dramatic tones, almost mimicking serial dialogues or YouTube characters. Spontaneous, emotionally connected conversation was limited. When advised to keep the device away after 11 PM, she agreed but responded that she would throw her parents’ phones out the window if they used theirs. This indicated not only dependency but also emotional dysregulation and modelling,” he says. “Excessive exposure can reduce attention span, increase irritability, disturb sleep, and limit social engagement. Children may prefer virtual stimulation over peer interaction, which affects social integration. Besides, children learn through observation. In clinical settings, I often notice that parents who struggle with their

child’s screen overuse also have significant digital habits themselves.”

He continues, “In a separate case, I treated another child of around three-and-a-half to four years of age, who would constantly hover his thumbs in the air resembling a scroll-like motion, even without a device present. His expressive language was significantly delayed. Later, we came to learn that, during his parents’ working hours, he was frequently handed a phone by his caregiver.”

Mostak emphasises that children require quality time with their parents but acknowledges just how exhausting it can be for parents. This remains a real challenge. However, solutions do exist.

“Sustainable alternatives could include routinely structured connection time involving children in simple household chores, rotational toys and creative play, outdoor activities, or reading together. The most powerful alternative is relational presence. When a child feels emotionally engaged and connected, the need for constant digital stimulation reduces naturally,” he explains.

Often, parents find it difficult to restrain children who have already developed a dependency on screens. Addressing this issue, Mostak explains that sudden or forceful removal of devices is not advisable, as abrupt restriction often increases behavioural resistance. Instead, he recommends more effective strategies, such as family-wide digital boundaries, scheduled screen time instead of unlimited access, starting small with device-free meals and bedtime, and encouraging imaginative and sensory play. The goal should not be punishment, but rather strategically replacing the overuse of devices with meaningful engagement.

Amidst the constantly shifting tides in the lives of parents, there is a lot they need to keep track of. In that long list, they are now required to be mindful of the ubiquity of screens as well. Although substituting them can be difficult, it is possible through emotionally engaging with them.

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