

Childhood must not be trapped in screens

Take measures to stimulate children’s mental and physical well-being

The findings of a new study by icddr,b on screen time and its impact on the health and well-being of children in Dhaka is quite distressing. According to the study, conducted between July 2022 and June 2024, a staggering 83 percent of the children surveyed spend over two hours on screens daily, which is the internationally recommended limit for recreational screen time. The study surveyed 420 children aged 6-14 years from six schools in the capital for the research, but it sheds a light on a bigger social problem: our collective failure in engaging our children in mentally and physically stimulating activities.

The study found that, on average, the daily screen time of these schoolchildren was 4.6 hours on smartphones, tablets, gaming devices, televisions, etc. Such long hours exposed to screens affected the children’s mental health and might have led to obesity, eye problems, headaches, and sleep deprivation. Children with daily screen time averaging over two hours were getting about 7.3 hours of sleep at night, lower than the 8-10 hours recommended for the age group surveyed. Experts opine that persistently getting fewer hours of sleep can affect children’s memory, concentration and learning ability, emotional regulation, physical growth, and overall mental health. Perhaps that is why it is not surprising to see that about 31 percent of students surveyed reported at least one mental health issue, such as specific phobia, generalised anxiety, depression, deliberate self-harm, and hyperactivity. Besides, one out of three children reported having eye problems, and 80 percent mentioned headaches.

The sedentary lifestyle of most children in Dhaka and their attachment to screens are not entirely of their own choosing. A megacity of nearly 3.66 crore people does not even have 300 playgrounds. Let alone neighbourhood parks or fields, even many schools in the city don’t have a playground or a yard. Add to that our failure to ensure security for children. The high incidence of violence against children does not give parents the confidence to let their children play unsupervised in community spaces within residential buildings or on neighbourhood streets. For nuclear families with both parents working, ensuring supervised playtime for children is even harder.

Sadly, our governments and policymakers have focused solely on megaprojects and infrastructure development. Very little thought has been spared for children’s well-being, creating safe playgrounds and open spaces for them. The icddr,b study should be an eye-opener for all. We urge the government and city corporations to formulate and implement a detailed area plan for this megacity to make it child-friendly. Also, the government can follow in the footsteps of other countries that are enacting policies to limit children’s screen time and encourage families to spend more off-screen quality time together. We must make every effort to bring our children back from virtual spaces into the physical environments.

Attacks on law enforcers concerning

Public confidence in policing must be restored

We are indeed alarmed to see the rise in the number of attacks on law enforcement officials around the country. Per a report by this daily, at least 213 cases of assault on law enforcers were recorded in the first four months this year. Recent incidents in Brahmanbaria, Natore, Dhaka, and Narayanganj districts demonstrate how organised criminals are becoming more aggressive and emboldened. In one such case, three members of Rapid Action Battalion (Rab) were allegedly held hostage and assaulted for hours by a criminal gang while conducting routine intelligence work in plainclothes in Brahmanbaria. In Natore, suspected drug peddlers reportedly attacked Rab members during an anti-drug drive. In Dhaka’s Mohammadpur, police officials were attacked while chasing suspected muggers. Earlier this year, a Rab officer was beaten to death during an operation in Chattogram’s Sitakunda. These incidents raise a serious question: why are criminals becoming so desperate and reckless?

Part of the answer may lie in the weakened state of our law enforcement agencies after the 2024 political changeover. As experts have noted, police and other agencies are still suffering from lesser operational capacity, low morale, uncertainty over postings, and declining public trust. Criminal groups, many of which are operating under political or economic patronage, may be working under the impression that the state is still in a vulnerable phase. The rise of “mob culture,” where large crowds openly challenge state authority, has made the situation worse.

Another issue is the use of plainclothes during operations without any visible identification. While some intelligence work may require plainclothes, this practice can create confusion and misunderstanding. According to the 2016 Supreme Court guidelines, law enforcers must identify themselves before making an arrest and are not permitted to carry out arrests in plainclothes. These safeguards exist for a good reason. In a climate of mistrust and heightened tension, unidentified individuals carrying out raids or arrests can easily be mistaken for rival gangs or criminal groups, which can quickly lead to violence. Adherence to clear operational protocols is therefore essential.

What is necessary now is professional and disciplined policing. Law enforcement agencies must strictly follow operational rules and strengthen accountability to rebuild public trust. At the same time, the government must send a clear message that attacks on law enforcers will not be tolerated. All such incidents must be properly investigated, and those responsible must be brought to justice. Experts have also called for the wider use of specialised units in joint operations against organised criminal groups. Above all, restoring public confidence in law enforcement agencies is essential.

THIS DAY IN HISTORY

Antarctic ozone hole discovered

On this day in 1985, scientists announced the discovery of the Antarctic ozone hole, sparking global action against ozone-depleting chemicals.



BLOWIN’ IN THE WIND

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A recent post by a colleague who had to pay Tk 2.5 lakh as an admission fee for his child at a reputed English medium school made me reflect on an anomaly that we have gotten used to. The financial strain faced by parents of English medium schools is nothing new. It became critical during the Covid pandemic when we had several pleas and protests lodged by parents. There has been a High Court ruling to stop the malpractices and exuberant charges. Then again, just like everything else, we have transitioned to a new normal with the issue of tuition fees shelved out of sight.

My colleague thought aloud to rationalise the annual amount that was charged in addition to the monthly tuition fees. It does not include books, uniform, lunch, stationeries and accessories, or transport. Tk 2.5 lakh was charged to facilitate the sacred ritual of entering school. As a young parent who will have to worry about sending two more kids to school, he pondered: what exactly happens at admission? Does the school provide the child with a start-up grant? A small equity portfolio? A tea garden in Sreemangal? Is the child being quietly converted into an offshore educational asset?

To be fair, quality schooling costs money. Qualified teachers need to be continuously trained and upscaled. They deserve decent pay. Then the learning ecosystem—involving laboratories, libraries, security, playgrounds, co-curricular activities, technology, and landscaping—requires heavy investment. The government is happy to milk the schools for taxes, not thinking how they impact the guardians. Good schools are good sources of revenue. And parents will sweat blood to make sure their children get the best

possible education. Who in their right mind and affordability would send their children to “free” or “cheap” schools when cheap means careless and no quality? But there has to be a line between “quality education” and “premium gated housing project with homework.” My colleague is cross because that line is continuously being crossed.



VISUAL: SALMAN SAKIB SHAHRYAR

The monthly fee in many elite schools is set in the range of Tk 20,000-30,000, which means parents pay around Tk 3 lakh or more a year before they yoke of re-admission clamps down. The irony becomes sharper when we compare these charges with higher education. Getting a child into certain schools may cost several times more than entering some of the country’s premier private universities. Apparently, learning the alphabet has become more exclusive than graduating with an undergraduate degree.

The situation doesn’t end there. Once school kids reach their academic finishing line, the ferryman demands

more coins. The international examination economy starts. For instance, a student sitting for seven O Level subjects may easily face exam registration costs in the range of Tk 1.7-2.2 lakh before coaching, school mock exams, guidebooks, transport, and the cost of parental blood pressure medication. If the child takes A Level later, the meter restarts. If a subject is repeated, the meter shows no mercy. Of course, it is the franchise that administers the exams. Where does the money come from? The household budgets, postponed vacations, broken fixed deposits, and compromised comfort of parents all contributed to this situation. They come from parents who quietly stopped buying things for themselves because “the child’s future” is non-

or rant on social media. Then they make sure to pay before the deadline to avoid late fees. They know the game is unfair, but they are also aware that their children are participating in the game.

The General Educational Development (GED), in theory, could have offered a cheaper alternative for some students as a terminal secondary credential. It is flexible, shorter, and accepted by many foreign universities. But in 2018, the University Grants Commission ((UGC) decided that a short GED route could not be treated as equivalent to the two-year HSC or A Level course. Yet, my experience tells me GED students sometimes outperform full-course students. As a result, parents who might have considered GED are pushed back towards the two-year courses; they become less of an academic choice and more of a structural compulsion. This is how the opportunity cost multiplies.

Concerned citizens have tried the High Court route to discipline the fee culture. The High Court even imposed a ban on re-admission fees when students advance within the same institution. The engine that runs these schools has protective shields against criticism and court orders alike.

Demonising elite academic institutions or English medium schools is not the objective of my reflection. Some of these schools have brought laurels for the country in all sectors. Many schools work sincerely. The British Council and other international boards provide standardised assessment, global recognition, and administrative reliability.

But the grievance highlights another reality: why is our national education ecosystem so dependent on expensive private schooling and foreign examination pipelines that middle-class parents must mortgage their peace of mind for their children’s academic progression? Education should cost, but it should not extort. A school is not a luxury condominium. A child is not a captive consumer. And a parent’s anxiety should not be the most profitable commodity in town.

Smooth information flow can make development sustainable



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Development projects are designed to improve people’s lives through better infrastructure, education, healthcare, livelihood opportunities, and social welfare. However, many projects fail to achieve long-term success due to weak information flow among stakeholders. The gap in communication between government agencies, donors, local authorities, implementing organisations, and beneficiaries often creates misunderstanding, mistrust, and ineffective participation. As a result, the sustainability of development projects becomes questionable.

In the modern state system, governance is not limited only to decision-making or policy formulation; it also depends on how those decisions are communicated to the public. The effectiveness of a state is reflected at two levels: one is actual governance, and the other is public perception. When there is a mismatch between these two dimensions, even successful initiatives may appear as failures in the eyes of citizens.

This situation can be better understood through the lens of Informational Flow Theory. According to the theory, state information flows through three important stages. The first is the policy-making stage, where decisions are finalised. The second is the communication stage, where those decisions are interpreted and presented to the public. The third is the reception stage, where

people understand and respond to the information. In most cases, crises emerge at the second stage. If communication remains weak, unclear, or politically distorted, the entire flow of information collapses.

This reality is highly relevant in development projects. A project may have adequate funding, skilled manpower, and advanced planning, yet poor communication can still lead to failure. In many cases, local people don’t receive proper information about project objectives, implementation procedures, or expected outcomes. Decisions are frequently made at the top level without consulting the communities who are directly affected. Consequently, beneficiaries may feel excluded from the process and become less interested in maintaining the project after external support ends.

One common problem is the “top down” approach in development planning. Government officials and international donors often design projects based on statistical reports rather than local realities. Field-level information may not reach policymakers accurately due to bureaucratic barriers or institutional negligence. At the same time, community feedback is often ignored or treated as less important. This creates a disconnect between policy formulation and ground realities. For example, irrigation projects, rural housing schemes, or sanitation

programmes sometimes fail because planners overlook local cultural practices, environmental conditions, or economic capacities.

Another major issue is lack of transparency. In many developing countries, beneficiaries don’t know how project budgets are allocated or how decisions are made. Corruption, political influence, and misuse of resources become easier when

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information is not openly shared. This weakens public trust and reduces community participation, both of which are necessary for sustainability. Development should not merely be about constructing infrastructure; it should also build ownership among people. Digital inequality further widens the information gap. Although many development agencies now use digital platforms for communication, rural and marginalised communities often lack internet access, digital

literacy, or technological resources. As a result, important information fails to reach the people who need it most. Sustainable development cannot be achieved when communication systems exclude vulnerable groups.

The consequences of poor information flow are visible in many development projects worldwide. Roads remain unused, water facilities become abandoned, and social programmes lose effectiveness after donor withdrawal. Without proper communication and local engagement, communities fail to develop a sense of responsibility towards project maintenance. Sustainability requires not just financial continuity but social acceptance and participatory governance as well.

To overcome this challenge, development practitioners must prioritise participatory communication. Local communities should be involved from the planning stage to evaluation. Information should flow in both directions: from policymakers to people and from people to policymakers. Regular consultation meetings, transparent reporting, local language communication, and community monitoring systems can improve accountability and trust. Moreover, strengthening grassroots institutions and promoting digital inclusion can help bridge communication gaps.

So, development is not simply about delivering services; it is about empowering people. A project that ignores effective information flow may achieve short-term outputs but will struggle to create lasting impact. Sustainable development depends on transparency, participation, and continuous dialogue among all stakeholders. Without these, development projects risk becoming temporary interventions rather than meaningful social transformation.