

Connected, Protected Kids.

Navigating Smart Tech
& Social Media Together



Introduction:

Navigating Smart Tech & Social Media with Kids

The internet has become a part of our lives and is not going away. While the internet undoubtedly presents fantastic opportunities for children, it is equally clear that there are valid concerns about children spending too much time online, accessing inappropriate content, and communicating with people with intent to harm or exploit them. As our society becomes increasingly digital more red flags are appearing as to the dangers of the internet and screen time.

Here we will outline some of the research findings in relation to screen and internet use in children. This is not delivered as a means of frightening parents but as a way of educating so that informed choices can be made.

Why Be Screen Aware?

As the evidence base around screen use and our children grows research is showing links between screen use and worrying cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural outcomes. Studies tend to have small sample sizes and are generally not causal, yet experts across the world and government bodies are beginning to take note and make changes. As parents, it is important that we too become aware of the research so that we can use it to inform our choices. Research has found that risks linked to screen use is the top child health concern for parents. Interestingly in research with adolescents, the majority of young people stated that spending too much time online was a problem for teens.

The human brain evolved in a non-digital world. Today humans have largely the same apparatus to work with as our stone age ancestors. While our world is vastly different to that of our ancestors, our brain and its development is not.

During their school going years children are learning a vast array of cognitive, social and emotional skills. They are also learning the foundations of independence and self-control.

Evidence Base:

Research is showing links between screen use and worrying cognitive, emotional, social and behavioural outcomes.

The most important ways for children to develop the skills they will need in later life are:

- Physical play
- Socialising with peers
- Making mistakes
- Taking risks

Unstructured, unsupervised play is one of the primary means of learning for children and is a way for them learning about their world, overcoming anxieties and taking on challenges. A lack of play has negative social, cognitive and emotional consequences. One of the passive ways that too much screen time damages children's development is by taking away the time that they need to develop skills through play, essentially screens have a capacity to take away the time for play, real-world interactions and boredom – all to the detriment of our children's development.



Risks of Screen and Internet Use

Children in middle childhood (primary school age) are less frequently studied than their older and younger peers. This period, however, is arguably as important as others and is the period that we are concerned with here. Children are thought to be at higher risk of the negative impacts of screen use due to the increased plasticity of their brains.

Research suggests that screen-based digital technologies present both benefits and risks to children and teenagers. Some screen use can benefit not only learning, but also health and wellbeing, particularly for adolescents. Accessing health promoting information, connecting with friends and exercise-based gaming (such as Wii) are just a few examples. For school-aged children, some screen use can support development, particularly when it is educational, appropriate to the child's age and especially when an adult is sharing the experience. Specific and selective use of digital technologies also have the potential to support neurodiverse children, and to make learning accessible for students with special learning needs.

Why risk it?

Children are thought to be at higher risk of the negative impacts of screen use due to the increased plasticity of their brains.

However, frequent and extended screen use is linked to negative impacts on learning, health and wellbeing. Numerous studies report negative physical and mental health outcomes associated with frequent and extended screen use, including:

- Poorer eye and ear health.
- An increased risk of behavioural problems including inattention, and lower cognitive skills in young children with higher screen use.

Changes to the brain including:

- Alterations to the reward centre of the brain that may increase susceptibility to later addictions.
- Changes to grey and white brain matter.
- Mental health difficulties including anxiety, depression and low self-esteem.
- headaches.
- obesity.
- Frequent screen use and bedtime screen use are linked to sleep disturbance in children and teens.



Higher frequency of screen time/ smartphone use has been associated with:

- Early exposure to adult content including sexualised and violent images, images around self-harm and suicide.
- reduced memory functioning, including visual, working, spatial memory.
- Difficulties developing and mastering social skills, including a reduced ability to empathise, and more difficulty making friends.
- Many families are experiencing conflict, tension, and disagreement in relation to screen-based device use and setting limits around social media



Children with access to the internet have been shown to be vulnerable to:

- Cyberbullying
- There are issues concerning children's privacy and data harvesting. Data harvesting refers to the collection of information from every interaction a child has with an electronic device.

Inappropriate content access, including:

- Primary school-aged children are accessing inappropriate and R-rated content during school hours, as reported by both teachers and parents.
- Research suggests that children as young as 8 years old have seen inappropriate sexual content. The impact of viewing pornography for children can have both immediate and cumulative problems.
- Pornography exposure is thought to be shaping young people's sexual attitudes and behaviours and redefining sexual norms.



Social Media and Children's Specific Apps

Social media platforms are designed to be easy to use and to be addictive. The creation of digital content that manipulates human behaviors, neurological (brain) functioning, and beliefs is referred to as “persuasive design.”

Apps and programming that use persuasive design to manipulate children's attention, attitudes, and desires threaten healthy development.

Most apps and programs categorized as “educational” have no evidence to support that claim. They also take time away from real-world experiences proven to be educational for young children.

As parents our natural desire is to keep our children safe. The best online safety strategy, regardless of age, is to talk with your child and to engage with them about what they are doing and who they are doing it with.

Social Media Apps

Use persuasive design to manipulate children's attention, attitudes, and desires that threaten healthy development.

Harm Prevention

The safest way to protect our primary school age children is to limit their use of screens, monitor and curtail internet use and heed government and expert guidance around the age of consent for social media (16 in Ireland, 13 with parental permission). The National Institute for Clinical Excellence (NICE) guidelines suggest limiting children's screen use to less than two hours per day (including TV and screens used during school hours) in addition to having some screen free days. Children do not have the developmental capacity to exercise self-control over their screen and internet use, as parents we have to do this for them.

Children mirror their parents behaviour and observe how parents interact with tech. Therefore another means of harm prevention is to monitor your own use of screens and the internet. Where you notice an over-reliance on screens it might be worth considering making changes in your own behaviours both as a means of improving your own wellbeing and as a means of modelling healthy screen use to children. Developing family media plans may help to find solutions that work for your family.

Children mirror their parents

Therefore another means of harm prevention is to monitor your own use of screens and the internet.

Harm limitation

Device use is about balancing the advantages of learning and entertainment with responsible device use. Ways to help families develop healthy device use patterns include:

- Prioritise play, outside activities, social and peer facing activities and hobbies.
- Begin family discussions and conversations on apps and devices use at school or at home, to create openness and interest in device use from early days.
- Co-viewing content can help nurture interest and further conversations.
- Negotiate family time limits with parental controls to monitor screen use.
- Have screen free times.
- Monitor use through usage apps.
- Red flag if device use interferes with child's ability to continue with activities of daily living, sleep, or usual routines.
- Try to avoid using devices as a means to calm or soothe children or as a way to help them fall asleep.
- Do not use screen media to reward or punish children
- Promote family meal times and try not to use screen media while eating.
- Turn devices on grey scale to reduce scrolling, this decreases the reward received while on a screen.

Finally

Grace Park Educate Together school has a voluntary smart phone ban in place and we urge all parents to sign it both as a means to protect your child and the wider school community.

Resources

We know that there's no end of information online to help parents protect their children online, but sometimes it's hard to know where to start. This is a guide to some of the resources that are available, and a description so you can decide which might be helpful to you.

Supports for managing technology

Check the appropriateness of movies and tv programmes as judged by parents and kids

<https://www.common sense media.org>

Information about age ratings on digital games

<https://pegi.info>

How to manage parental controls across Apple devices

<https://support.apple.com/en-gb/guide/personal-safety/welcome/web>

Google's recommendations for families to open conversations with kids

https://beinternetawesome.withgoogle.com/en_ie/families

Device/App Controls

Google Family Link

<https://families.google/familylink>

Apple Parental Controls

<https://support.apple.com/en-us/105121>

Amazon Kids

<https://www.amazon.co.uk/ftu/home>

Nintendo Switch Parental Controls

<https://www.nintendo.com/en-gb/Hardware/Nintendo-Switch-Parental-Controls/Nintendo-Switch-Parental-Controls-1183145.html>

Microsoft Family Safety

https://www.microsoft.com/en-ie/microsoft-365/family-safety?ocid=family_signin

Sony PlayStation

<https://www.playstation.com/en-ie/playstation-network>

EPIC Games - Fortnite Controls

<https://www.epicgames.com>

SnapChat Parent's Guide

<https://parents.snapchat.com>

TikTok Guardian's Guide

<https://www.tiktok.com/safety/en/guardians-guide>

Instagram Parent's Guide

<https://about.instagram.com/community/parents>

Taming Gaming

<https://www.familygamingdatabase.com>

Education & Safeguarding

Huge resource for parents to follow step-by-step

<https://www.cybersafekids.ie/samerulesapply>

Basic ways to keep children safe online

<https://www.barnardos.ie/resources/protecting-safeguarding-children-online>

National Parents Council website

<https://www.npc.ie>

Education about authenticity of information and misinformation

<https://www.bemediasmart.ie>

Direct support for parents

<https://parentline.ie>

Advice from the NSPCC

<https://www.nspcc.org.uk/keeping-children-safe/online-safety>

Monthly 'Talk, Listen, Learn' - opportunity to discuss online safety with your kids

<https://talklistenlearn.webwise.ie>

Includes supports for SEN parents and carers

<https://nationalcollege.com/categories/online-safety>

A huge resource full of information for parents, students and teachers

<https://www.webwise.ie>

A contract for families to agree screen use

<https://www.healthychildren.org>

Understanding the psychology behind the problems

<http://childrenandscreens.org>

A US-based campaign for a brand-free childhood

<http://fairplayforkids.org>

Basic overview for parents

<https://www.tusla.ie>

Reporting tool

<https://www.cnam.ie>

A good article explaining why kids shouldn't have devices

<https://www.theatlantic.com>

Reporting site to combat child sexual exploitation

<https://www.hotline.ie>

Excellent resource for parents about how to talk to older kids about content, behaviours and where to get help.

<https://www.keepitreasonline.govt.nz>