
CHILD WELL BEING AS WE EMERGE FROM THE PANDEMIC

Susan Rvachew | January 26, 2021

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Concern about Canadian children has been increasing on several fronts for some time now. There is evidence that academic achievement is falling, obesity is rising, and mental health needs are being unmet. It has been tempting to attribute changes in children's well being to the doubling in screen-time use over the past decade. Now, during the pandemic, screen time exposure has doubled again in less than a year. Concern about children's physical and mental health and their academic progress continues to rise but is muted by the focus on preventing the spread of the virus. We can expect that a strong emphasis on child health and well being will return, stronger than ever, when the pandemic recedes. What is the role of digital technology in our planning for children's well being, now and in the future? Do we wean children off screen time, planning for a screen-free post-pandemic future? Or will digital tools continue to be fully embedded in our daily lives as they are now? The path we follow will depend upon our values and on a clear reading of the scientific evidence. What is the relationship between screen time and child health?

It is common to hear that excessive screen time will harm children's physical or mental health. These claims are based on surveys that correlate estimates of daily screen time with questionnaire responses. As an example, young people might report whether they agree with the statement "I feel unhappy a lot of the time." These studies find very small effects: children who spend more than two hours a day on recreational screen time activities are likely to say they are more unhappy or worried or dissatisfied with life than those children who spend less time with their devices. They might also read less well and be heavier than children who have lower screen time participation. The effects are very small however and other aspects of the children's lives have much bigger impacts on well being. These studies are not designed to determine whether screen time causes poor outcomes for children.

Parents are advised to limit their child's screen exposure as a solution to problems such as obesity or anxiety. It is often assumed, without evidence, that screen time is harmful because it displaces healthier activities. Research shows that removing digital devices does not typically have the desired outcome. For example, children who do not exercise will not move more when their devices are taken away unless other interventions are in place. However, the specific ways that children use their devices may be a factor. One child might be couch surfing and eating while watching videos while another is learning new yoga poses. One child might be bullying her friends on social media while another is receiving valuable social support. One child might be scrolling mindlessly through frightening headlines while another is creating a popular blog. Overall, the research suggests that moderate amounts of digital participation that involve socializing, creating, and learning can benefit children and young people.

Nonetheless, we should be concerned about the mental health of children during the pandemic and into the future. Young people are experiencing distress during this significant crisis in our society. Children and young people are suffering from social isolation, thwarted goals, and fear for their own health or the health of their family members. Some children who cannot go to school have no respite from crowding or violence in their own homes.

Parents who are worried about their children’s mental health may be grasping for solutions. Limiting screen time may seem like a tangible strategy especially if their child is substituting video games for school or sleep. The difficulty lies in assuming that screen time limits will solve the problem. Parents need to consider their children’s health and well being in a wholistic fashion. Promoting a healthy lifestyle and family cohesion are more powerful than limiting screen time. A healthy family routine and supportive family relationships are much more important to children’s well being than any amount or type of digital media exposure. In fact, digital devices can be used to connect children to their parents, other family members, and friends in the community to ensure a strong supportive network to keep children grounded in uncertain times.

Parents in collaboration with their children should identify reasonable screen time limits, developing a family plan that reflects their values and a balanced mix of important activities each day. However, it is not helpful to suggest that screen time limits will address significant concerns about children’s development and well being. There is no substitute for carefully integrated policies and programs that connect and support children, their families, and their communities.

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