

The Connection Between Screen Time and Mental Health

Conversations around screen time and its impact reflect a widespread struggle for both children and adults in limiting electronic use. A [Western University](#) report highlights a direct correlation between increased screen time in children and symptoms of anxiety and depression including heightened worrying, social stress, fear of the unknown and a loss of interest in daily activities.

IS IT AN “ADDICTION”?

According to Today’s Parent article updated on January 17, 2025, [Signs of Screen Addiction in Kids](#), classic signs of addiction to screens have similar symptoms as addiction to substances for adults:

- Unable to control screen use
- Loss of interest in other activities
- It preoccupies their thoughts, conversations and behaviors
- Interferes with socializing in person
- Screen time interferes with activities with family or friends
- Usage causes serious family arguments
- They are deceptive about their screen usage
- Screens are used as a temporary mood booster or as an escape from boredom or challenging situations

When screens are removed or significantly limited, signs of withdrawal may look like: irritability, changes in mood, sleep difficulty, headaches, depression and anxiety

HEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEDIA/TECHNOLOGY

When it comes to evaluating a child’s use of screens, [American Academy of Pediatrics](#) created an easy to remember, age based tips referred to as the [5 C’s of Media Use](#):

1. **C**hild - Consider your child’s personality and how screen time, gaming and social media influences them, if it supports their interests or worsen any challenges they may already be experiencing.
2. **C**ontent - Evaluate the quality of content your child consumes. Learn about what your child plays or watches or who they follow. Help them think about the amount of violence, role-modelling, unrealistic standard or commercialism they are interacting with. [Common Sense Media](#) is a great resource for information about videos and games.
3. **C**alm - Recognize if screens are a primary coping tool to manage strong emotions and sleep. If screens, games, social media becomes the main go-to strategy, talk to friends, pediatricians, therapists or other supports to learn how to calm their brains and bodies down.
4. **C**rowding Out - Are screens crowding out other things your family cares about? Rather than just focusing on reducing screen time, discuss and implement what your family could or should do instead: more quality family time, visiting others, sleep, time outdoors, playing with pets, starting a new hobby. Help your child understand screen time has

“hooks” that are designed to keep all of us online as long as possible. Create a realistic, concrete plan about where and when to use screens every day.

5. **C**ommunication - Talk about screen time (games, videos, social media) early and often. By building digital literacy you will be able to identify when your child or teen is struggling.

REALISTIC STRATEGIES TO MANAGE SCREEN TIME

- Be aware of **guidelines** and **research** on connection between screen time and children’s mental wellness
- Monitor screen time exposure so you and your child are aware of **exactly how much time** is spent on electronics
- Establish **screen-free zones** in your home, especially bedrooms
- Schedule **screen-free times**. Particularly at family meal times and before bedtime
- Identify the apps and websites that are **used the most and reflect on why** they are the most commonly used
- Look for **patterns** of usage: before bed, weekends and plan for alternative activities to change the habit
- Set **screen time caps** and then begin limiting screen time gradually
- Schedule **internet downtimes** in your home simply by unplugging the router
- **Turn off notifications** that trigger phone checks
- Utilize a **Family Media Use Plan** to include everyone in the decision making process
- **Model the behavior** you want to see in children

As a mother of four children, I understand the constant battle with screen time. It can seem drastic to restrict electronics excessively, but if a child is struggling, it is necessary to allow their nervous system to return to a more natural state of calm and foster resilience.

This article was written by Tammy Charko BA, BSW, RSW. She is the Division Social Worker for Northern Gateway Public Schools and supports and advocates for students and families to promote wellness and success in school. Tammy has been a Registered Social Worker for more than 25 years and is a mother to 4 children; 1 in high school and 3 in university.