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Experts warn screens affect children's development

by Gail Johnson on Oct 15, 2014

Authors caution that tech screens are highly addictive and can affect kids' relationships, behaviour, well-being, and more.

When Gabor Maté and Gordon Neufeld published *Hold On to Your Kids: Why Parents Matter* in 2004, they sounded an alarm about how young people were putting far too much emphasis on connecting with their peers. That was before the rise of Facebook and Twitter.

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Combine social media with TV, video games, and smartphones, and screen time is replacing human time more than ever. It may take a village to raise a child, but that village, increasingly digitized, is vanishing.

Maté, a Vancouver doctor and public speaker whose other books include *Scattered Minds: A New Look at the Origins* and *Healing of Attention Deficit Disorder*, is worried.

"Technology is changing so rapidly that culture cannot keep up with it," Maté says in a phone interview with the *Georgia Straight*. "There are no safeguards to protect us from the deleterious effects of those rapid changes.

"It's scary," he adds. "There are a billion people on Facebook. That's one-seventh of the world's population. It has its own seductive power. Facebook has complicated something that's been around for a long time. We need to wake up."

Maté and Neufeld, a Vancouver developmental psychologist, have since revised *Hold On to Your Kids*, now subtitled *Why Parents Need to Matter More Than Peers*. They've added two chapters that explore the ways in which technological advances are causing what they call a "major cultural setback".

They're just two of many health professionals who are concerned about the impact of screen time on kids' development, behaviour, relationships, and well-being.

North Vancouver naturopathic doctor Cameron McIntyre says that at its most basic, screen time disrupts our ability to sleep.

"A lot of the neurological research that's coming out shows that all of our screens keep our brains in beta state," McIntyre says by phone. "Beta state is a state of alertness, awakeness, and, in higher levels, agitation. The more screen time we have during the course of the day, the more challenged our brains are to get out of beta mode into alpha mode, which is the start of the sleep state, a calmer brain.

"Kids are wired on handhelds," he adds. "Technology is just woven into the fabric of our society. From a sleep perspective, it's a big problem for a lot of people, especially kids."

In *The Village Effect: How Face-to-Face Contact Can Make Us Healthier, Happier, and Smarter*, Montreal developmental psychologist Susan Pinker discusses other ways that more screen time and less personal contact are harming children's physical and mental health. Throughout her book, the author of *The Sexual Paradox* points to study after study that supports her view.

According to a study published in Pediatrics in 2007, for instance, kids who watch more than two hours of TV a day at age two-and-a-half are more likely than other kids to have behavioural and social challenges when they start kindergarten. Every additional hour of TV exposure among toddlers corresponded to other future ill effects, the study found, including less success at math, a reduction in classroom engagement, a more sedentary lifestyle, and increased victimization by classmates.

Victimization is rampant on the Internet, of course, and it's another area Pinker addresses. The way she puts it, online bullying "amplifies" what's already going on at places like schools and playgrounds.

Not surprisingly, cyberbullying is more prevalent among teenagers who spend much of their time online, according to a 2008 study published in the academic journal *Deviant Behavior*. Cyber victims have higher rates of clinical depression than "standard" bullying victims, a 2011 study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health found*.

Then there's the addictive effect of screens. A 2012 *Psychological Science* study found that tweeting and checking email may even be more addictive than cigarettes or alcohol.

Studies have surfaced over the years suggesting that activities like playing certain video games can have positive effects on cognitive and motor skills. Maté, however, doesn't buy it.

"There's not a shred of evidence that those improvements are linked to video games or wouldn't happen anyway with normal development," Maté says. "Fisher-Price came out with a new baby seat with a holder for an iPad in it [the iPad Apptivity seat]. That's actually toxic. Those kids are going to be addicted.

"Tech screens are highly addictive, and the more people do them the more they want to do them," he continues. "They actually suffer withdrawal when they don't have them. They're irritable, depressed, and moody."

Although the research about the negative effects of screen time is enough to make even the calmest parent anxious, there is, obviously, no turning back. And there is no sense shielding kids from devices altogether, says Arlene Pellicane, coauthor with Gary Chapman of the new *Growing Up Social: Raising Relational Kids in a Screen-Driven World*.

"Some parents need to get really worried because they're not worried enough about the impact of so much screen time," Pellicane says in a phone interview. "What's happening emotionally, mentally, relationally if your child is on screens all the time? On the other hand, you don't want to be scared of this technology either. You don't want to say 'Never Skype Grandma,' or 'Don't touch that phone.' It really is a call for balance.

"Put things in place: maybe it's screen-time limits on how much time in the day you want your kids spending in front of screens," she adds. "Or it's content: take charge of what your kids are watching rather than just saying, 'Everybody does it and I don't want my child to be left out.' "

For all the time kids are texting, sexting, poking, liking, viewing porn, playing video games, watching TV, and playing on their parents' phones, they're missing out on the kinds of everyday interactions that are vital building blocks for later in life.

"When my kids are in their 20s, I want them to be able to look people in the eye, to have conversations very comfortably without feeling awkward," Pellicane says. "I want them to be able to go to their job interviews and look at interviewers rather than look down at the ground or at their phone."

Spending so much time on the Xbox or Wii, with all their quickly changing landscapes and images, means that kids have less chance to develop parts of the brain that allow for sustained concentration, Pellicane says.

"They lose that perseverance," she explains. "They're not able to endure boredom—and, for a child, that's very valuable. In your work life and real life, you're not always stimulated and excited. It's the opposite: you're waiting; you're patient. All these things fight against your child's development."

Aside from putting screen-time limits in place, Pellicane says it is paramount that parents take an honest look at their own digital habits. If we're constantly on our phones or at the computer, it's no wonder our kids will want to be too.

"What does it look like from the eyes of our child?" she asks. "We want to get closer to becoming a model to our kids: looking people in the eye, being completely present when they come to us instead of on our phones. Otherwise, you'll always be checking something that seems important. There's always something to look at, but we can escape to that rather than doing the hard work of parenting sometimes."

In *Hold On to Your Kids*, Maté and Neufeld note that the kind of activity for young people that's the most important from a developmental standpoint is "emergent play", also known as free play. It's beneficial not just for young kids but for youth as well, they say in the book, and is when a person's "true, creative, curious, and confident self emerges".

Maté says that putting limits in place at home isn't enough. He says what needs to come first is a focus on curiosity, creativity, and meaningful human connections.

"As long as kids need screen time, they shouldn't have it," he says. "If screen time is filling emptiness in their lives, they shouldn't have it. As soon as you see signs of compulsion or addiction with young kids they need to be off it right away.

"You wouldn't encourage premature sexual activity, so why would you encourage premature Internet activity, which, by the way, very easily gets sexualized in the hands of immature people," he adds. "Parents' decisions should be based on: 'What will serve my child's human relationships and what will undermine them?' If they don't even ask that question, they're going to reap a lot of heartache and difficult parenting later on."