



SCREENING OUT

Our lives are increasingly and inextricably governed by technology. What effect does this increased reliance on screens have on our children? *Kate Farr* reports

Is your teen addicted to social media?

According to a 2015 paper published by Hong Kong's Centre for Health Protection, the median age in Hong Kong for regular exposure to screens is just eight months old, with an average of 44 minutes of television watched each day. The study also reveals that 23% of primary-aged children spend up to three hours per day in front of a screen, with this figure increasing to 40% by the time they reach secondary school.

So are these figures evidence that we're raising a generation of screen junkies? Not necessarily so, says Discovery Bay resident Jane Faragó, a primary class teacher at Beacon Hill School, who uses tablets in the classroom as a specific, though

limited, learning resource. "I think it does benefit children to experience using different kinds of technology," Jane says. "Being able to navigate around an iPad, knowing how to research and independently use apps that enable them to be creative, for example producing stories and graphics... these are all important skills. Many apps support children's understanding of coding at various different levels, and it is understood that this will be a big part of our children's future."

Danny Harrington, director of educational service provider, ITS Education, agrees. "One of the things that technology is doing is changing the parameters of how we do things... education is no different," he says. "The iPad was never specifically

designed as a piece of educational technology, but it was designed as a mass communication device, and so for educators to incorporate tablets into their classrooms is probably more natural than people may feel."

Danny believes there can be numerous, and often unexpected benefits to utilising screens in education, including engaging children who may in the past have struggled with traditional learning environments. "Screens are interesting," he says, "the colour, sound and movement offer a stimulating environment. They are also a key delivery method for leisure, so there is an opportunity with reluctant learners to draw them into educational experiences." ▶



Are tablets a valid learning resource?



Does your baby love screen time?

Addiction to social media

But as with all things, moderation is key, and this is often where problems can occur as children struggle to manage their own exposure. Clinical psychologist Dr Quratulain Zaidi of MindnLife in Central frequently works with young people who are addicted to screens, and, while she broadly supports the use of technology in education, she is increasingly concerned about the quantity and type of information that teens, in particular, are exposed to.

“We know that information overload increases anxiety, and that being at the receiving end of constant information isn’t helpful,” Dr Zaidi says. “In a recent talk to a group of teens, I posed the question: Over the course of one hour, how much time do you spend working on your device, and what do you do for the rest of that time? On average, they spent just 10 to 15 minutes per hour working, with the rest spent on chatting, gaming or social media.”

It is this that gives Dr Zaidi the most cause for concern. “Social media gives people a false sense of community,” she says. “Teens look

for groups to identify with – a sense of freedom that they can share their secrets within a group – but this often has unhelpful consequences. Studies show that nearly half of all internet users under 35 regret posting personal information about themselves.”

Providing alternatives

Dr Zaidi says that the very best thing parents can do to support their teens is to keep an open line of communication: “Teach your children effective communication by engaging in conversation with them. Support them and talk to them, so they can learn the art of conversation; once learnt, this skill is invaluable.”

Jane agrees that both communication and the development of social skills are key. “It is important to have a balance,” she says. “We always advocate the importance of developing children’s social skills to parents. This can only develop

when they meet, play and converse with others, preferably of their own age. Children need time to explore outside in the real world, such as at the beach or in country parks, and time to create things with their hands, such as artwork, junk modelling and building with blocks or Lego.”

And these words from Danny are a sobering home truth for many of us. “Parents should look to themselves,” he says. “Children copy their parents more than anyone. If you look up from your own screen to shout at them for too much screen time and then go back to your own screen, you are setting yourself up for conflict.”

With that in mind, perhaps we can all benefit from powering down once in a while. **B**

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