

INSIGHTS

Prioritising mental health in the digital world



Whilst there may not yet be conclusive evidence linking digital media use to poor mental health outcomes there's no denying that it's one of the chief concerns facing parents and educators of children and adolescents, growing up in a digital world. The contradictory research findings confirm that this is a complex topic.

There's certainly consensus in the research that young people are heavy technology users, which comes at a cost of their psychological and physical needs. Their digital behaviours eat into the time that was once available for three pillars of mental health – sleep, relationships and exercise.

Minimising sleep disruption

Sleep is vital for mental wellbeing and emotional regulation in childhood and adolescence. Inadequate amounts or poor-quality sleep can cause mental health issues. Studies consistently show that Australian children and teens aren't getting enough sleep. Digital device use is also linked to sleep disruption, impacting the sleep-wake cycle. The Lancet study suggested that nearly 60% of the impact of young people's psychological distress could be attributed to disrupted sleep and exposure to cyberbullying.

Parents need to remind children and young adolescents about the critical role sleep plays in their psychological wellbeing. Parents can help adolescents foster healthy social media habits by establishing a digital curfew, keeping devices out of bedrooms and discouraging teens from 'bookending' their day with social media as it can easily trigger the stress response at these times.

Maintaining healthy relationships

Positive relationships are fundamental to a young person's psychological wellbeing. Adolescents are biologically wired for relational connection. They want to be part of a tribe. Whilst teens and pre-teens may insist that technology connects them and caters for their relational needs, if used excessively or inappropriately, technology use can compromise their relationships and deteriorate their mental health.

Parents need to encourage and sustain opportunities for real interactions amongst adolescents. When we connect in-person the brain releases oxytocin, the social bonding hormone, which isn't replicated online. The need for keeping a balance between digital and face-to-face interactions is paramount.

Ensuring sufficient exercise

Sedentary social media and digital consumption frequently replaces physical movement on weekends and after school, which are the opportunity times for kids' sport, free play and outdoor activities. Brain science now informs us that physical exercise boosts serotonin and neurotransmitters such as dopamine and norepinephrine that play a critical role in regulating adolescents' mood. Lack of exercise is now being linked to the current anxiety epidemic that we are seeing in young people.

Parents need to ensure that children experience a minimum of 30 minutes exercise, and teens a minimum of 60 minutes. “Go outside and play” is a term that this generation needs to hear as frequently as children in past eras.

In closing

The research into the links between kids’ digital technology use and their mental health presents a complex picture that defies simplistic conclusions. Blanket statements and headlines that suggest screens and social media are to blame for kid’s poor mental health aren’t helpful as technology is now a part of all our lives. However, there is enough evidence to suggest that the key pillars of mental health outlined above can be severely impacted by the overuse of digital technology. All things in moderation, a common guideline for healthy living, is best when considering kids’ social media and digital technology use.



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Dr Kristy Goodwin is a digital wellbeing and performance speaker, author and researcher (and mum who also deals with her kids’ techno-tantrums!). She’s the author of *Raising Your Child in a Digital World*, and a media commentator who doesn’t suggest that we ban the iPhone, or unplug the gaming console (digital abstinence isn’t the solution). Kristy translates research into essential information and realistic strategies for parents to ensure kids and teens thrive in the digital world. For further details visit www.drkristygoodwin.com.