



SCREEN TIME AND ARRESTED SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT ACROSS ALL AGES

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Abstract:

In recent years, the exponential increase in screen time across all demographics has sparked significant concerns among psychologists, educators, and parents alike. The digital world has opened unprecedented opportunities for connectivity, learning, and convenience, yet it has also introduced new challenges that touch every stage of human development. One major issue is the impact of screen time on social development, which is critical not only for children and teenagers but also for adults who are experiencing arrested social development in various ways. This editorial explores the potential risks of excessive screen time and advocates for mindful usage across all age groups.

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Introduction:

“Screen time” can be defined as activities done before a screen, such as watching TV, using a cell phone or tablet, working on a laptop, computer, or console or playing video games in different screen-containing gadgets.¹ Screen time is a sedentary activity, which means a person is physically inactive while sitting down. Physical energy loss is very limited in screen time. Maximum American children spend approximately 3 hours a day watching TV. Added together, all types of screen time can be a total 5 to 7 hours a day for American people. According to Consumer News and Business Channel (CNBC), they reported “Asian users are most “Screen Crazy”. An Asian user logs 439 minutes, or over 7 hours, of screen media per day compared with the worldwide average of 417 minutes. Out of those 7 hours, Asian users spend nearly 2 hours looking at a second digital screen while watching television.² This crazy adaptation has led to the failure of psychosocial development, speech delay, less intelligence in preschool children to adolescents even in the older generation. A randomized controlled trial results in improving of parenteral education which is an effective intervention for reducing screen time and improving sleep quality and attention among preschoolers.³ Greater sedentary time is associated with an increased risk for diabetes, and several other cardiometabolic risk factors in adults

too.⁴ Anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and detachment from family and social activities are increasing day by day with the added screen time. Experts are looking into pits and falls of screen time and its long-term mental and social health and how to improve such situation to prevent unwanted complications.

Understanding the Digital Dilemma

The expediency of digital interaction has reduced the need for face-to-face communication. Younger children are growing up in a world where social cues are not as easily observed and interpreted through screens as they are in person. The early years are crucial for developing empathy, conflict resolution, and verbal and non-verbal communication skills. Children who spend hours on tablets, smartphones, or computers may miss essential in-person experiences that contribute to emotional intelligence. Studies show that the lack of direct human interaction in these formative years can delay social skills, resulting in increased instances of anxiety, depression, and other social challenges later in life.⁵

Teenagers, often even more immersed in digital worlds, face their own set of tasks. Social media can create a distorted sense of reality and self-worth, often prioritizing online validation over genuine personal growth and face-to-face influences. This can lead to

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feelings of isolation, low self-esteem, and difficulty forming real-life friendships. For many teenagers, screens have replaced traditional spaces of social learning—such as sports, clubs, and community involvement—thus impacting their ability to relate to others and function in group settings effectively.

Adults are not resistant to the effects of excessive screen time, either. In the workplace, the rise of remote work, although offering flexibility, has also minimized physical interactions with colleagues. This shift may hinder team dynamics, reduce empathy between coworkers, and create a sense of professional isolation. Furthermore, in personal relationships, the misuse of screens can cause splits, often replacing family time and bonding with solitary digital pursuits. Middle-aged and older adults who rely heavily on screens for entertainment and information may also face difficulties maintaining real-world relationships, leading to a gradual loss of essential social skills.

The Science Behind Social Development Delays

The human brain is wired to learn and adapt through social interactions. Research has shown that specific areas of the brain related to empathy, decision-making, and emotional regulation are activated and strengthened through meaningful social exchanges.^{6,7} The overstimulation from screens, especially during early development, can cause sensory overload and impair these crucial areas of the brain. For example, the “dopamine feedback loop” created by social media and other digital interactions may give a sense of instant gratification, replacing the need for real connections, which require effort, patience, and empathy to build.⁸

Strategies for Reclaiming Social Development

While technology will continue to play an integral role in modern society, strategies to balance screen time with in-person interaction are essential. For children and teenagers, setting limits on screen time and promoting outdoor activities, hobbies, and group sports can be effective ways to foster social skills. Schools and communities should encourage participation in clubs, volunteer work, and other social initiatives that allow young people to engage with their peers meaningfully.

Adults can benefit from setting digital boundaries, such as designated screen-free times during family meals, weekends, or vacations. Employers should consider encouraging in-person meetings or team-building

activities for remote workers. For older adults, community involvement, social clubs, and volunteer opportunities provide alternatives to passive screen time and encourage active social participation.

The recommended screen time varies by age group, as outlined by health and pediatric organizations like the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the World Health Organization (WHO).^{9,10} These recommendations aim to balance screen use for learning, social connection, and entertainment while protecting physical and mental health. Here's a breakdown:

Infants (0-2 Years)

- Recommended Screen Time: No screen time, except for video chatting with family members.
- Reason: Early screen exposure can interfere with crucial developmental milestones such as language, motor skills, and social interaction. Babies need real-world interaction to develop properly.

Toddlers (2-5 Years)

- Recommended Screen Time: Up to 1 hour per day of high-quality programming, such as educational content.
- Reason: Limited exposure helps ensure that young children still engage in essential physical activities and in-person interactions that are key for development.

Children (6-12 Years)

- Recommended Screen Time: No more than 1-2 hours per day outside of schoolwork.
- Reason: At this stage, kids are developing social and cognitive skills that benefit from physical activity, hands-on learning, and social play. Excessive screen time can interfere with sleep, increase sedentary behavior, and reduce attention span.

Teenagers (13-18 Years)

- Recommended Screen Time: Ideally 2 hours per day outside of educational or work-related activities.
- Reason: As teens navigate social relationships and self-identity, screen time should be balanced to allow for physical, mental, and emotional health. This includes promoting offline interactions and managing exposure to social media, which can impact self-esteem and mental well-being.

Adults (18-64 Years)

- Recommended Screen Time: No strict limit, but should aim to limit recreational screen time to about 2 hours per day.
- Reason: While work may require more screen time, recreational use should be balanced with physical activity, face-to-face social interactions, and rest. Prolonged screen use can lead to issues like eye strain, poor posture, and reduced physical activity.

Older Adults (65+ Years)

- Recommended Screen Time: No specific limit, but should prioritize physical activity, social engagement, and mental stimulation outside of screens.
- Reason: For older adults, screen time is often less of a developmental concern but may still impact physical health and cognitive function if excessive. Encouraging time with family, hobbies, and light exercise is beneficial for well-being.

General Tips Across Age Groups:

1. Set Screen-Free Times and Zones – Designate screen-free times, such as during meals or before bedtime, and screen-free zones, like bedrooms.
2. Prioritize Quality – Choose educational and meaningful content, especially for younger users.
3. Model Healthy Habits – Adults should set an example by following screen time guidelines themselves.

By setting age-appropriate limits, we can create a balanced approach to screen use that fosters healthy development and well-being across all age groups.

Conclusion

The challenge of balancing screen time with social development is multifaceted, but it is indispensable for the well-being of all age groups. Digital devices have undeniable benefits, but when relied upon excessively, they can hinder the social growth essential for emotional health and well-being. By espousing mindful approaches to technology and prioritizing real-world interactions, society can work towards a future where technology complements—rather than compromises—our capacity for social connection.

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