

## **Pediatricians Weigh In on Children's Screen Media Overuse**

*By George T. Lynn and Cynthia C. Johnson  
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Sometimes complex problems have simple answers.

In our professional roles—George is a psychotherapist, Cynthia is an educator—we have occasion to ask our parent-clients about their children's issues with recreational screen media, such as video gaming and social media. Usually the first response will be a downward glance and a sheepish grin followed by a minimalizing comment to the effect that things are just fine and that *their* children do not have a problem with screen time! “Well, not that big a problem, but...”

You know where this is going. After a short while of getting to know the family, it turns out the children are using recreational screen media at about the norm for all children their age in the U.S. That norm is 8 to 10 hours per day for a child in the sixth grade, which is somewhat less for younger children and more for adolescents. Seriously.

This is a real problem. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) advises parents to limit their children's screen time to no more than two hours per day with no more than one hour being highly recommended. More use than this can have a negative impact on children's intellectual development, mood, and sleep, with depression and anxiety being two of the most frequently seen diagnoses for screen-dependent children.

There are also implications for moral development of children because of violent screen media overuse. The AAP's Council on Communications and Media 2016 statement says that although violent recreational screen media does not make a particular child violent, it does diminish his or her sense of empathy and can make him or her more aggressive in daily life. The presence of a good measure of empathy is required for both the survival of our culture and the social and emotional development of our children.

Most parents would love to see their children develop interest in something other than recreational and social screen media, but they do not know where to start. They feel they have no solutions or lack control. They believe that outright prohibition is a battle they cannot win, but aside from this, they have no solutions. Or they say, “Recreational computer overuse is no different than TV watching overuse was years ago, and our progress has not stopped because of it.”

Today's recreational screen media overuse has more severe impacts on children's development than does watching too much TV. Unlike TV, the media children use today is interactive and gives them a false sense of accomplishment and connection with other children and adolescents, often in the context of virtual violence. It is also portable with handheld devices now becoming the technologies of choice. These features create a powerful pull toward dependence at the expense of normal development.

The American Academy of Pediatrics is very concerned about this issue and probably embarrassed by the fact that things are so out of control with children's use of screen media. One can see all the doctors meeting to discuss the problem, knowing that their own children are home pounding away on Minecraft! But thank goodness for their effort because they are now pointing all of us toward a basic solution to the problem: *Pay attention to your kids*.

The AAP advises parents to get to know all the media their children use and what their children are posting online. Gathering "intel" is important. It all starts with good intelligence as to what is going on. Children will pour their hearts out in their media. Parents who pay attention do not get blindsided by sudden failure at school or distressing psychological symptoms.

But paying attention involves more than staying on top of psychological events in a child's life—it is going into *heart-to-heart communication* with him or her. It means noticing and asking about a child's feelings. It means insisting on compliance with reasonable standards of behavior and caring. It means the parent is *present* for the child and not just dealing with the child as a momentary interruption.

Ask any psychiatrist or mental health counselor and they will agree: when parents pay attention, when they receive their children's emotional expressions this way, there is a better chance that children will deal with their issues successfully and will get through all the temptations, torments, and stresses of adolescence with less pain.

When parents pay attention this way, something called "limbic resonance" occurs. This is a term found in the book *A General Theory of Love*, by Drs. Thomas Lewis, Fari Amini, and Richard Lannon, that describes what happens in the human brain when people link emotionally in the physical presence of another. These writers suggest that when this invisible link occurs between two people, and it can *only* occur in the presence of another, the nervous system of both parties comes into balance. This results in greater emotional stability and stress resilience. The experience of limbic resonance enables the child to regulate him- or herself emotionally and develop a sound personal and social identity. It is a requirement for the child's intellectual and emotional development.

Unfortunately, this kind of communication is eroded by screen media dependence. In families facing this issue, the pattern typically is seen in a lack of real family connection. After school and on weekends, the kids hunker down on their devices and avoid other family members, attending only to their "virtual" or social media "friends." In many homes, parents are doing the same or are using their devices to extend their workday into the evening. There is very little sense of contact, connection, or caring felt in the home.

The good news is that when parents pay attention to their children, they are actually participating in their children's brain-building process. When a child feels the attention of the parent, when he or she gets acknowledged, the deep human longing to experience acceptance and connection (what is falsely promised by social media) is fulfilled. We have noticed that after the experience of being real with a parent occurs, many children will be less enamored with the virtual reality provided by their media and will seek out real rather than virtual experience in their lives.

People pay attention to each other in ways that express the family's culture and the dynamics may not be what one would assume them to be. Paying attention to a child may come in the form of not giving up on making her do homework and by working with her to develop creative ways to get through a chore. It may mean having fun by arm-wrestling him to determine who does the dishes.

Limbic resonance occurs in soft and hard moments, but however it occurs, things always change for the better.

If we follow this line of thought as parents, the solution to the problem of too much recreational screen media becomes primarily a matter of how parents tune in to their children. It means that parents let their children know that they themselves are not slaves to their devices and they will not let their children develop unhealthy dependence on their media.

The first step is for us parents to get clear on our own values in the matter and let our children know we are in it for the long run because our role is to steward them to adulthood well equipped to deal with life. We let them know that we love them and this love gives us a sacred duty to move them forward in life, and even when they challenge us, we will not abandon our duty. We will persevere.

We have been fortunate to observe many families who have met this challenge. In practical terms, parents of these families model the use of digital devices as tools for moving their lives forward. Parents in these successful families do not let their devices disturb their sleep-wake cycles and contact with each other, and they require the same of their children. Most important, they do not let their children avoid the challenges they will face in life by taking refuge in screen media overuse. These challenges are the isometric required for children and adolescents to develop on cognitive, emotional, and spiritual levels. Making sure our children get these opportunities for growth is the most loving thing we can do.

About the authors: George T. Lynn and Cynthia C. Johnson are authors of *Breaking the Trance: A Practical Guide for Parenting the Screen-Dependent Child* (Central Recovery Press, 2016). They both live in suburban Seattle, Washington.

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