SCREENS AND KIDS
WHAT'S ALL THE FUSS?

THE AVERAGE 12 YEAR OLD SPENDS 29 HOURS A WEEK ON THEIR SMARTPHONE

THAT EQUATES TO 2 MONTHS OF THE YEAR

We hope that the information in this leaflet means that you can make an informed choice about what is best for you and your family. There is information here for everyone, wherever you are in your tech journey.

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HEALTH PROFESSIONALS FOR SAFER SCREENS

As a society seeing children with personal screen devices has become the norm. This leaflet has been produced by a group of healthcare professionals who are concerned about the impossible position parents are in, and the impact screens have on child health and wellbeing. We are not the only professionals with concerns, as many lead police and educators have also witnessed the issues first-hand.

WHAT ARE THE CONCERNS?

There are **three main areas of concern** - the **content** of what children are seeing, **who** they are in contact with and the value of their **time**.

1 What are kids looking at?

The majority of children do not go looking for harmful content. They are usually exposed through large messaging groups or targeted by known and unknown individuals. Children using social media can access unrealistic curated images that they can compare themselves to, leading to **low self esteem** or worse, **body dysmorphia**. Evidence shows that children are frequently exposed to graphic content on social media that they may be worried to talk about.

Children are brilliant at questioning the world around them and with the developmental and hormonal changes that occur in adolescence, it can feel difficult to establish their identity. This makes children vulnerable to **catfishing and grooming** through social media apps and chat functions on games.

2 Screens and child mental health

Children today have more mental health concerns than ever before. There is a rise in **self-harm, anxiety and depression** as well as an increase in disordered eating. Increased screen time is linked to mental health issues. Studies show that early use of smartphones or tablets can lead to more problems as young adults and is associated with a rise in **eating disorder symptoms**.

3 Sleep

We all know how important sleep is and how we feel when we miss a vital hour or two. For children poor sleep quality can lead to **mood changes, anxiety, irritability, inattention and emotional dysregulation.** It is also known to affect how well the immune system works and **increases the risk of obesity**.

Using screens in the hour before bed suppresses the natural sleep inducing hormone melatonin as well as affecting the quality of sleep overnight. Even if a child does not use their phone but charges it overnight in their room, it has been shown to disrupt sleep. Even if a child only charges their phone at night in their room, their sleep has been shown to be disrupted.

4 Behaviour changes with screen use

Dopamine is the feel good hormone that is released in anticipation of a reward. The more we have the more we want!

Video games and social media apps have been designed to tap into this dopamine reward pathway. The business model of social media is to capture your attention for longer using design features that stimulate dopamine release such as 'likes', re-tweets, infinite scroll and push notifications. It is very difficult to resist the pull of these features and it is well known that children find this harder than adults. Over time the **real world cannot sustain the same levels of dopamine that a device can**, and children often tell us that all they want to do is use their device or game, and that everything else seems boring. **This cycle and escalation is the description of a behavioural addiction**.

Watching short videos and images on TikTok, gaming apps, Instagram and YouTube Shorts has been linked to **issues with focus, completing tasks, retaining information, self-regulation and impulsive behaviours**.

Neurodiverse children often seek out dopamine stimulation. They enjoy using screens but families, and the latest research, tell us that it seems even harder to remove the devices as the child withdraws from the dopamine hit, leading to a cycle of increasing use with difficult behaviours to manage in between.

5 The value of your child's time

Social media is free to download because we pay for it with our time and attention. Most adults with a smartphone can describe 'falling down a rabbit hole' and losing time - not realising how long they have been on a device.

The average 12 year old spends 29 hours a week on their smartphone which when scaled up equates to 2 months. Are we paying too much for social media? There is significant concern that children are missing out on seeing friends, hobbies and real life experiences.

With **the average 12 year old receiving 247 notifications a day on their smartphone and it takes them 23 minutes to refocus** after each notification, it is also clear that devices can interfere with completing tasks especially in an education setting. It is this and the safeguarding risk that has led many schools to make phones inaccessible during the school day.

ALTHOUGH IT FEELS THERE IS NO CHOICE, THE GOOD NEWS IS THERE ARE IN FACT LOTS OF OPTIONS

Firstly, parents are not to blame. The screen industry has been designed to hook us in. This is a whole society issue that needs working out.

1. **Delaying -** if your child does not already have a personal screen device or smartphone then delaying as long as possible buys you time to consider the options and wait for possible safety features to appear over the next few years. Finding other parents to do this with helps make this easier.

2. **Consider a simple phone -** a communication device with no internet access. Makes calls and texts to keep in touch without the risks from unrestricted internet access and social media.

3. **Smartphone safety -** work through any inbuilt safety features, although remember that unfortunately these can be bypassed by children. Consider investing in parental control software - there are starting to be phones that are designed directly for children, which have added protections built-in. Consider buying one of these, but remember that nothing is completely safe. Consider controls on home WiFi - layer the security from router to device.

4. **Set rules -** plan the rules you want before giving your child a device. Suggestions include:

    a. No devices in bedrooms (buy an alarm clock)
    b. Time limits for apps and the whole device - stop an hour before bed and an hour after waking up
    c. Phone free times e.g. meal times
    d. Parent in control of which apps are downloaded

5. **Social media -** this includes WhatsApp and YouTube as well as TikTok, X and Snapchat and other messaging services. Set safety/privacy features and talk to your child about only being in contact with people they know in real life. Organised crime groups outside the UK are currently targeting UK children through social media for financially motivated sexually explicit images. Consider exploring the apps yourself, viewing them from a child's perspective. It is suggested you introduce one app at a time and plan a review with your child to reflect on any impact or issues with it. Looking at a child's group messages with them can really help to model how to manage cyberbullying and explicit images.

6. **Time -** chat with your child about remaining in control of the device and apps - can they complete a challenge to temporarily delete their favourite app? And if not why not? Challenge the family to work together to reduce screen time and explore alternatives like clubs and sports, games, outdoor activities and meeting up with friends in person.

7. **Education -** schools do a great job of teaching children about online safety but in reality when it comes to a risky situation many children do not recognise it and most do not report it either. Keep discussing examples of inappropriate contact with your child and as above consider using their own messages as a basis for calm conversations. Children often feel like they are to blame when they have a bad online experience - it is important they know that whatever it is they can always come to you to help work it out.

8. **Family digital health plan -** work as a family to consider what you like and do not like about the tech you have and what you would like to work towards. Reflect on your own tech use and how you model this. There are free family digital health plans available on the Health Professionals for Safer Screens website.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS:

Is this just anti-tech? - not anti-tech, but pro-asking tech to create safe spaces for children. Being aware and making informed choices as a parent means you are giving your child more, not taking something away.

My child needs a smartphone for a medical reason - this remains the case for some medical conditions. Consider making the device as safe as possible. We are working on educating all medical professionals to advise parents appropriately on this once a device is needed.

I need to track my child/they walk to school alone - the need to track children divides parents with some feeling that tracking children is telling them the world is not safe or that the child is not trusted. Other parents feel too anxious not to know where their child is as they gain independence. Consider what your reasons are for tracking your child and be open with them. Tracking devices are available separately from a phone, and new non-internet-enabled phones which include tracking are starting to become available.

My child has two homes and needs to communicate with them both at all times - consider simple phones or laptop/home computer/tablet for video calling. Although the risk with internet connectivity remains, they are less private and portable compared to smartphones which decreases the risk and run off WiFi which can have additional safety features/be turned off at night.

I don't want my child to miss out - this is the really difficult issue for parents. It is normal for adolescents to want to fit in - this is why it is a societal problem. Try and find other parents so your child is not the only one. Basic phones can keep your child in contact with friends without the additional issues with internet access. There are several parent support movements now which you can join to discuss these issues. Talk through with your child any concerns you have and options available. The phrase 'it's not never, just not now' has been useful for some families.

Children need to learn to use devices, they are here to stay and the world is now digital - there are many things children learn about before trying or owning them. Schools are educating children to be digitally literate and these devices are so intuitive and easy to use, there are videos available showing primates using them! It is suggested that children are better at spotting the issues with social media with age so delaying social media use does not disadvantage a young adult, it empowers them to use it appropriately at the right time.

How are children with no smartphones managing? - there are lots more children now using simple phones. Although initially the decisions can be difficult, many families are reporting the benefits become clear as they see other families struggling with online related issues. They feel more confident that when their child is home alone after school they know they really are safe.

Useful links to make devices safe:

www.teched-off.com - videos of making iphone and android devices safe as well as Roblox, Snapchat, TikTok
www.internetmatters.org - guides on setting controls on devices, apps and games
www.CEOPeducation.co.uk - advice regarding child sexual abuse online and how to talk to kids about the risks
www.nakedtruthproject.com - advice on making devices safe from 'XXX' content

This leaflet has been developed by clinicians from Health Professionals for Safer Screens, led by Dr Emily Sehmer, Consultant Child and Adolescent Psychiatrist, and Dr Louise Milne, Consultant Paediatrician. For more information and advice visit www.healthprofessionalsforsaferscreens.org.

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