

IT'S 10PM. DO YOU KNOW WHERE YOUR CHILD'S SMARTPHONE IS?

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SCREEN TIME VS BEDTIME

Parents, teachers and students: the war has been waged. Electronic screens are robbing our children of important hours of sleep. Research has already shown that—both delayed bedtime and shorter total hours of sleep—the lost hours of sleep result in a variety of symptoms that adversely affect children's ability to focus and concentrate at school, as well as negatively impact their mood and relationships. Our young people (as well as adults) are fighting a war between Screen Time and Sleep Time.

Over the past several years, increased focus has been paid to the general impact of “Internet Addiction” and “Video Game Addiction” on a host of behavioral problems. Whereas in my previous articles I have highlighted specific groups of young people who are more susceptible to the electronic “addictions,” I believe that a much larger percentage of young people may be at risk for insidious problems that can be traced to electronic screens.

In this article, I hope to share some of my clinical experiences (of course protecting the confidentiality of my patients) in the hopes that something practical can be learned. My goal is for this practical knowledge can then be transferred into action that will help our kids.

In many ways, my clinical work has taught me to make simple distinctions. For instance, I believe there are parents who are able to teach and enforce limits with their children and other parents who struggle with this. There are parents who put serious thought into the kinds of technologies they put in their children's hands and parents who don't think much about it. However, all parents—whether they like it or not or want to or not—have to deal with the fact that their children are using electronic screens (either their own or someone else's) and will need to learn how to manage their use in a responsible way. Any child or teen who owns a handheld electronic screen can be considered at risk.

The intersection of young people and handheld electronic screens is messy. As parents, we often don't see problems coming, until it's too late. Ask any parent whose child/teen made “in-app” purchases on their iPhone or smartphone if they could have predicted their kids would be racking up charges on their credit cards with a simple ‘tap’ of the screen. Apple and Google have both faced lawsuits requiring them to pay back millions of dollars to parents for such purchases. Not even these big conglomerates foresaw this problem!

In line with this, I have observed that many parents I meet with are under the false assumption that their children should “just know” the right thing to do with technology. This is, simply put, wishful thinking by adults. I fully understand why we hold onto the wish that our teenagers will “know what's right” and act accordingly when we put a smartphone in their hands. But the fact of the matter is that, although adolescents may intellectually “know” what they are doing (i.e., right from wrong), they are pushed and pulled by neurobiological and social forces that often compromise their ability to act accordingly. Steinberg and Cauffman (1996) refer to this as “Psychosocial Immaturity.”

In other words, teens *know* they shouldn't spend so much time in front of screens. They *know* that sleep is important. They *know* they need a good night's sleep to function at their best at school. They *know* that the more they watch Netflix and YouTube and the more they get sucked into the social networking vortex of updates and messaging, the less time they have to homework. They *KNOW* these things.

But this “knowledge” doesn't change their behavior. If left to their own devices—literally and figuratively—many (not all) will NOT be able to manage the temptations that these devices create. The friend in trouble who texts at 2AM. The one-more-episode Netflix temptation that robs them of yet another 30-60 minutes of sleep. The belief that “I can't fall asleep without it.” Believe it or not, generations of humans found a way to sleep without electronic devices. If it is truly problematic for your child to sleep without the aid of an electronic device, they should be evaluated by a physician.

It is striking to me that the vast majority of teens I meet with have admitted to me that they believe they have lost sleep due to excessive use of their electronic devices. They also admit they believe they need to cut back (sometimes a little, sometimes a lot). But what very few teens will admit to their parents is that they could use some help managing their device. But more often than not, parents will put their teens in full charge of the device; and then later complain when their child is not managing it properly.

Loss of sleep, irritability...grades suffer...less socialization...increase in disconnection...passive activity time increases...less exercise...

Teens can be wily. They can be young lawyers, looking for loopholes in the code. I know this because they tell me so. And, moreover, it's their job to be this way. Their brains are developing to think more abstractly and they are trying out their newfound abilities to formulate and defend arguments with their parents, teachers, and other adults in their lives.

They will try to convince you, Mom and Dad, that they "need" the electronic device. If you try to limit their use of the device, some teens will yell at you. Some will tell you they hate your sweater or your cooking, or that you don't love them. Others will cry, tantrum and turn their back on you, blaming you for making them a social outcast by making them unavailable to their peers from the hours of 11 pm to 7am. In extreme cases (I've seen this), they will get physically aggressive. Any teenager reading this knows what I'm talking about, and they are relating to this because it's simply part of where they are in their development. Again, they know they need limits, but they also know how to manipulate their parents to get more and more time on the devices. No doubt, these are amazing devices. But because the devices are so amazingly versatile and can be used for so many purposes, they can become very difficult for parents to effectively and consistently manage their use.

We are all learning as we go, and what we are learning is that as the devices change and as young peoples' accessibility to these devices increases, so do our habits. As I've written before, we adults have an obligation to teach our youth how to balance electronic screen use. How many of us (adults) touch our smartphones at the dinner table? How many do it while we drive? How many of us take our devices to sleep?

Our children WATCH what we do. If we see them doing the same and they call us out on our own bad habits, it's no longer good enough to say, "Well I'm an adult and I pay the bills, so I can do whatever I want." That is the best way to create distance between you and your child. Instead, acknowledge how hard this must be for them. Most parents did not have access to these kinds of devices when they were younger.

CHALLENGE yourself to teach them by your example. SHOW them the difference between work use and play use. Teach them balance by putting the device away when you eat, when you drive, when you're out in nature. Talk about it together. Work it out together. I truly believe this is the best thing we can do to properly prepare them for their future.

I don't believe there is anything different, per se, about teenagers today than those of 20 or 30 years ago. Since the advent of the television set, people have been discussing the ill-effects of too much time in front of the TV screen on young people. However, the quantity and quality of screens that our young people today are expected to manage is apples and oranges different from that world. Teens aren't different, the world certainly is.

So here's my takeaway message:

For Parents:

Be aware of where your child's smartphone is—especially at night. Chances are you pay the bill for it. Talk with your child about how you expect it to be used. Set limits. Enforce the limits. Do it with the purpose of the well-being of your child. Do it with love.

For Young People:

Think about how you are using the technology that your parents put in your hands. Try to establish good electronic habits that allow you to balance your school work, your family and friendships, your activities and your health. If your parents let you drive a car, you would (should) respect that privilege. Think of this the same way. Show your

parents (and yourself) how responsible you can be. Pay attention to that ‘feeling’ you get when the phone is not in your hand, in your pocket, or at arm’s reach. Ask yourself, “How long could I go without my screens?”

We are all learning as we go. Most importantly, let’s keep the dialogue open with our children so we can master the technologies in our lives, and not let them master us.

PARENTAL TIP: Don’t let your teen convince you that they “need” their device for an alarm clock. Buy them a separate alarm clock and discuss with them why it is important to turn in their device at night. If they “need” their device for “music” to help them to “relax” so they can fall asleep, set a limit on this, check on them, and have them turn over the device at the end of the time limit. Most of all, try to talk together with your teen in a calm way about what I’m saying in this article so it doesn’t turn into a tug-of-war argument over the electronic device.