

# Digital screens and children

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## Keywords

digital addiction, screen, children, screen time, WHO

Among the most frequent family conflicts in homes with small children are those associated with adults struggling to tear children and teenagers away from the captivating screens of smartphones and tablets. It is not for nothing that a popular self-help book bears the title of *Glow Kids: How Screen Addiction Is Hijacking Our Kids – and How to Break the Trance* (Kardaras, 2016). Children’s screen time has soared during the pandemic, warned a *New York Times* article already at the beginning of 2021 (Richtel, 2021). During the COVID-19 pandemic, parenting strategies concerning screen time have been linked to both children’s behavioral problems and sleep problems (Oliveira et al., 2022).

In the *New York Times* article, an “addiction specialist” warned that once schools, activities and social life return to normal, there would be “a period of epic withdrawal”. This is a typical role given to addiction specialists in journalistic texts: they are cited for making a point about problematic habits. “Digital addictions” is a concept on the rise, referring to all sorts of repetitive and absorbing habits

pertaining to the use of screens. In education research, screen time has been on the agenda already for some time. Cognitive studies have cautioned against allocating screen time for young children, because clinical research shows that a lot of screen time can delay children’s cognitive development. Screens do not seem to make children learn faster or better than does human interaction (Teichert, 2020).

Education professionals and parents are concerned about the cognitive capacities of children, whose interaction and leisure activities are increasingly taking place in a fast-paced and repetitive online environment. Several scholars have attributed the great rise in depression among adolescents to the amount of time they spend in front of digital screens of smartphones, game devices, tablets and computers (e.g., Shakya & Christakis, 2017; Twenge et al., 2018). In most Western societies, children and adolescents spend hours in front of a screen daily. A study from 2011 reported an average of seven hours a day and the amount is likely to have risen dramatically (Strasburger, 2011). Concerns have triggered health and well-being

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organisations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP), the European Academy of Pediatrics (EAP) and the European Childhood Obesity Group (ECOG) to recommend time limits on screens for youth (Radesky & Christiakis, 2016). In addition, the World Health Organization (WHO) has included gaming disorder in its 11th revision of the International Classification of Diseases.

In 2020, American education and literacy scholar Laura Teichert reported in an autoethnographic study how digital tools were embedded in her and her 18-month-old son's everyday lives (Teichert, 2020). She gives first-hand accounts of the tensions she experienced when grappling with the policy statements on children and media by the AAP, who recommend no digital media use (except video-chatting) for children aged younger than 18–24 months. She describes how the family home is permeated with technology and how adults use smartphones for all connection with the outside world. The son not only becomes internalised in this digitalised communication but also mimics it when he plays. The mimicking of screen activities in children's play was also obvious after the corona crisis when children started to play home office and Zoom meetings.

In her article, Teichert juxtaposes screentime recommendations with the everyday realities of being a first-time mother in the 21st century. How do we, realistically speaking, prevent so-called screen time addiction, when the screens are the modus in which we live? The cyborg – the fusion of humans and technology organisms – is a reality, not a sci-fi construct. In the social and cultural sciences, the worry about how the ubiquity of digital technology will come to shape human life has given rise to new concepts. The inattention economy refers to a decline in the attention span because of repetitive and fragmented movements or immersive involvement in digital portable settings. Many of the new notions bear resemblance to addiction: societal structures start to function so as to aid along a certain discounting of gratification (quick fixes),

becoming swept away and hooked, and answering to a constant craving of dopamine hits. In public transportation, we can see the big city cyborgs being occupied with their screens. In the evening, each cyborg family member lies in their own rooms in the blue light of their personal screens. The many leisure and entertainment apps available in our smartphones just respond to a demand for increasing dependence on digital environments. It offers new niches for commodification and commercialisation.

### **In this issue:**

The ways in which heavy substance users navigate working life have been studied by Gunnarsson and Törrönen (2022). In order to avoid embarrassment and stigmatisation, the participants of the study not only have to hide their substance use but they also have to appear energetic and normal, which entails its own performance.

Lindén and Ervik (2022) unfold the developments following the 2015 Norwegian free treatment choice reform. Contrary to their expectations, the authors found that the new licensed providers have not previously collaborated with public providers through tender agreements. The study suggests that this complicates collaboration.

Høyland et al. (2022) have studied users' perceptions of participating in a Norwegian non-profit establishment that provides a continuing care program for substance use and dependence. Several ways are recognised in which the services should be made more expedient.

A systematic review by Vaihekoski et al. (2022) synthesises adolescents' attitudes towards nicotine products and the ways to influence these attitudes. Tobacco is also the subject of an article by Vedoy and Lund (2022), who investigate the impact of the COVID-19 epidemic on where tobacco users purchased cigarettes and snus in different Norwegian regions. The study shows that for many tobacco users buying tobacco became more expensive and

that the taxes on tobacco to a greater extent remained in force.

Dennermalm et al. (2022) found that some risk factors are consistently associated with adolescent substance use, but their findings challenge the assumption that risk factors are stable over adolescence. The last research report in this issue is a psychometric evaluation of a Swedish version of the Impaired Control Scale for Individuals with Alcohol Use Disorder by Ingesson et al. (2022).


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