



October Counsellor's Corner

Tara Ryan, B.Ed. M.Ed. (and Sam)
District Outreach Counsellor



October's Topic: If It Sounds Too Good To Be True...

Let's be honest, most of us can think back to a time (perhaps even at this moment) when screen time for our kids has given us a moment to catch our breath, read the mail and have a brief sigh of relief. A truth we can probably agree on: parenting is not an easy gig and we all need little breaks from time to time. Simple daily tasks that often have parents pulling out their hair and lamenting, "Nobody told me it would be this difficult!" include getting groceries with a tired toddler, trying to have an important phone conversation, making supper, and just simply trying to get through the day.

Introduce: screen time. It's given us all that chance to have a moment's relief to regain our energy to be the best parents we can be. Some of us (myself included) have been known to indulge a moment or two on that old fashioned favourite, Facebook. It lets us relax, zone out, escape reality and have some fun connecting with friends. Further, it makes difficult tasks much easier! I see toddlers in grocery carts happily watching a downloaded favourite cartoon or playing a game. Kids in restaurants don't fight anymore when they each have their own tablet or phone in front of them. Parents are smiling, kids are content. This all seems like a perfect solution to the trials of parenting.

So....are there any drawbacks?

Unfortunately, yes. One quick Google search will provide all kinds of information to support whatever your position on screen time is; however, the question is: how does your child manage without screen time, particularly at school and in social settings?

What I have noticed over the years in my work with children is that some of those behaviours that we are trying to sidestep by using screen time are the exact behaviours that end up escalating in the absence of screen time. More eloquently put, Dr. Aric Sigman (British Psychological Society and a Fellow of Britain's Royal Society of Medicine) states that excessive screen time early in life can unintentionally result in a *permanent* negative change in a child's brain. It "is the very thing *impeding* the development of the abilities that parents are so eager to

foster through the tablets. The ability to focus, to concentrate, to lend attention, to sense other people's attitudes and communicate with them, to build a large vocabulary – all those abilities are harmed."

MRI scans show that several video games (popular with today's youngsters) "can have a similar effect on children's brains as drug abuse or alcoholism" (Hymas & Dodds, 2018, *The Telegraph*).

Video Game Addiction is now listed as a mental health problem by the World Health Organization.

Seems over the top? In the Comox Valley, I often engage children and families in conversations around screen time. My observations include:

- Many of our students report spending 3+ hours a day on screen time. Few report watching television; rather, individual tablets/phones/laptops seem to be the norm with preferred activities being interactive-on-line games, youtube, and social media (Instagram/Snapchat).
- Many of the games being played have aggression and violence in them – even screen time without violence has an impact on a child's brain
- Many children have a hard time expanding their conversation past their favourite video game

A child's nervous system will react to even moderate amounts of screen time, activating the stress response in his/her brain. Although your child might be laughing and enjoying the game, his/her brain will be in an elevated state of fight/flight; particularly in response to more aggressive games, but also with milder "educational" screen time with lots of stimulation (lights, sounds, rewards, points). This can result in your child seeming "revved up", having more frequent meltdowns, full-blown rages, becoming oppositional, defiant, disorganized, irritable, and struggling with social skills/creativity/impulse control. Further, children's interests can narrow, they can have a hard time with simple tasks like grocery shopping/dining out in the absence of their screen, will often have behavioural reports from school and/or teachers concerned about their lack of focus and heightened impulsivity. (Victoria L. Dunckley, M.D. *Psychology Today* 2017)

This all seems pretty scary. Does it mean we should throw all our devices out and declare a ban? No, I don't believe so, but I will offer a few suggestions to consider. Please know that, depending on your

child's resistance to change screen routines, these suggestions may take some time to build up a tolerance for screen-free time.

- Have before school time dedicated as screen-free time. Use other incentives to help children get ready for school in a timely fashion.
- Set age-appropriate limits for after school time. I recommend screen time doesn't occur until homework is done and a mandatory reading time is finished. If your child insists they need "down-time" on their screen before they do homework, remember that screen time is "up-time" not "down-time" and know that there are great benefits in being "bored" during relaxation time. Comic books, playing a game of solitaire, helping cook supper, walking the dog, mowing the lawn, learning how to play Checkers, etc. are a few options for "down-time".
- Have dinner an electronic-free time (for parents and kids)
- Make sure screens are off an hour before bed (research shows that the light from screen time impacts our quality of sleep)
- Have kids plug in their phones/electronics *outside* of their bedrooms – many of the kids I know admit to checking their phones in the middle of the night.
- Consider a "screen free" day once in a while for your entire family. Brainstorm options for how you will spend your time in the absence of screen time. Don't be scared off by the comment, "I'm bored!" and don't try to fix that boredom for your child – teach them to embrace it! Creativity and out-of-the-box thinking often come from boredom!

Finally, know that you are not alone if you are trying to shift dependence on screens. Talk to your child's teacher or school counsellor for suggestions or help.