

SCREENAGERS

By Tanya MacIntyre

I was recently invited by the Gateway Centre of Excellence in Rural Health to facilitate a post-viewing panel discussion on Screenagers. The 2-part, award-winning documentary series by Dr. Delaney Ruston is helping families create healthy boundaries around their time spent on digital devices. It's interesting to note that there are different challenges with kids around screen-time, and those challenges are often dependant on their gender!

A recent survey found that boys and girls differ in their use of video games and social media. For instance, boys spend about 90 minutes a day playing video games, while girls spend an average of about 40 minutes a day playing video games. While, on the flip side, girls spend an average of 90 minutes a day on social media while boys spend about 50 minutes per day on social media.

After viewing the Screenagers documentaries, I was surprised to learn that first-person shooter games (the ones that boys tend to really like) were developed by the military to desensitize soldiers to shooting people before sending them to war zones. We've had countless studies in the past 2 decades to show that violent video games not only desensitize the users, but they also decrease empathy and increase aggressive thoughts and actions.

At the best of times, most adults are spending one third of our lives in front of some sort of screen... a computer, a tablet, a phone, or a television. All the experts have told us that, when it comes to managing screen time for kids, it's important to realize the effect of screens on developing brains. One study from 2017 suggests that no child under 2 years old should be exposed to digital screens, and children between 2-5 should have limited exposure amounting to no more than one hour per day. The recommended allowance for teens is only 2 hours, and kids aged 8-18 are now spending an average of 7 hours a day looking at screens. These are pretty daunting statistics, especially when you consider that the brain is not fully developed until a person reaches their mid-20s!

I don't think it's any coincidence that the parents who work in technology industries don't allow any screen time for their kids!

Dr. Michelle Ponti from The Canadian Paediatric Society says we should treat screens like a car. "We expect our kids to take driver's ed before driving our car, so we need to teach them how to use technology." She suggests that we make screen time meaningful by moving the focus off the amount of time spent on a device to a more balanced overall daily routine. "Determining when and how they're going to use their screens will have more of an impact than saying 'ok, you can be on for 2 hours'."

The rapidly evolving nature of the pandemic has left public health agencies, academic, and community organizations unprepared to fully respond and adapt to the increasing needs of caregivers and children who are coping with these unparalleled challenges.

Strict public-health measures are being encouraged and - in some cases - enforced in order to reduce the transmission of the virus. We're told to wear masks in public places and practice physical distancing from anyone who is not a primary member of the family residence. The pandemic has created levels of stress on the population never seen before. With prolonged isolation periods, combined with widespread economic hardships, there are reports of increased numbers for suicides, drug/alcohol use, child abuse, and spousal abuse.

A recent study done by Hamilton's McMaster University examined the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Ontario families with children. The study questionnaire encouraged parents to share their concerns about their children and the demands of parenting during the 'lockdown.'

The study included 7,434 parents/caregivers, representing 14,000 children across Ontario. Many of the questions posed were related to parents managing their own time - balancing work and caregiving, while maintaining household routines.

One-half of all parents reported moderate to high levels of concern for managing their children's remote learning (48%), screen time (54%), and managing their child's anxiety and stress (48%) and behaviour (31%).

A whopping 57% of caregivers fit the criteria for depression!

And now we're facing a phased approach of reopening schools, but many students are fearful of returning to an "in-class" situation, so the options for "distance learning" are becoming more popular and creating a whole new slew of problems.

Many parents indicate that their children are already worse off in terms of behaviour and mood since the pandemic started. Various factors play into these outcomes, including caregiving stressors related to health, finances, work-child care balance, and distance learning.

Distance learning is now becoming part of our 'new normal,' and that's bringing a whole new element of concern about an already distressing problem of too much screen time for kids.

There was always a tendency to let kids have extra screen time so parents/caregivers could get things done. Since the advent of the television, the screen has always been a sort of

“digital babysitter.” My father used to call the television “electronic valium.” I used to think he was just cynical, until I had kids in my life!

Some suggestions to help navigate this brave, new world:

- (1) Vote with your wallet, and start pressuring the game-manufacturers to make more PRO-SOCIAL games.
- (2) Make a contract with your family that outlines the same rules for EVERYONE, i.e. no phones/devices in the bedroom, no devices at the table, etc.
- (3) Resist the urge to make screen time a reward vs punishment battle because nobody will win that war.
- (4) Watch more films together as a family that will help educate everyone about how society is being manipulated and programmed by the agendas of tech companies. A good start is The Social Dilemma documentary now on Netflix. BTW, the CEO of Netflix was recently quoted as saying, “Our competition is sleep!”

Here are some other helpful resources:

<https://www.getcybersafe.gc.ca/en/home>

Government of Canada - Get Cyber Safe is a national public awareness campaign created to inform Canadians about cyber security and the simple steps they can take to protect themselves online.

<https://www.todaysparent.com/kids/tween-and-teen/screen-time-guidelines-canadian-paediatric-society/>

June 6, 2019 article in Today's Parent by Chris Deacon - The Canadian Paediatric Society has released surprising new screen time rules

<https://www.publichealthontario.ca/-/media/documents/p/2015/parental-support-screen-time.pdf?la=en>

caringforkids.cps.ca (Excellent site, evidence informed)

mediasmarts.ca

<https://www.publichealthontario.ca/en/health-topics/health-promotion/child-youth-health/parental-support-behaviours>

Lots of great parent resources on their website as well: screenagersmovie.com