

Technology use and the mental health of children and young people

Guidance for parents

- Although technology can be a positive and unifying experience for families, many parents worry about its potential impact. Technology will continue to evolve but there are core principles of parenting that can be maintained and applied to the use of technology. Maintaining a dialogue with your child about the pros and cons of the use of technology is important, as well as thinking about the needs and vulnerabilities of your individual child and their stage of development.
- From a young age encourage discussions within the family on content viewed online.
- Pick your battles, be flexible and choose the right moment to discuss technology with your children. Remember, the younger the child the easier it is to develop good habits around technology use, for example around the use of screens at bedtime.
- Provide a positive perspective on healthy routines e.g. having beautiful skin from a good night's sleep rather than discussing the negative consequences of poor sleep.
- You may feel that your children know more about technology than you do but remember you know a lot about being a parent and this is just another opportunity to use your parenting skills. Resources such as MindEd provide helpful advice about parenting and technology.
- Think about the images that you post of your children and remember that they may see those images in years to come. Consider asking your child's permission before posting their image.
- Be open about your concerns and seek advice if your child is engaging excessively with online activities and becoming more withdrawn.

Screen time boundaries

- Think about the developmental needs of your child. Try to decide what is the right age for your child to own a smartphone or tablet. If your child is using your smartphone or tablet ensure that you have set the controls for appropriate content access.
- Sleep is central to healthy functioning. Screens should be kept out of the bedroom and children should spend one hour away from all technology conducting relaxing activities before bed.

Promoting a balance of activities

- Try to promote offline activities e.g. talking and playing games together. Remember technology can also be a positive parenting strategy, for example by watching educational programmes together and talking about the programmes you have seen.
- Children can often spend large amounts of time sitting in front of a screen. However, we know that physical activity is very important for children and young people's College Report CR225: Technology use and the mental health of children and young people 14 physical and mental health. Try to encourage your child to take breaks from the screen and take regular exercise.
- Support your child to enhance their social and emotional development by promoting the development of offline relationships with family and friends. Online relationships can be an important way for children to keep in touch with friends and family but face-to-face relationships are vital for the development of social and communication life skills.
- Ensure that you build in times of the day without devices e.g. mealtimes.

Parents modelling a balanced approach to technology

- You can model good screen use by moderating your own use of technology and avoiding phones at certain times e.g. at mealtimes and during face-to-face conversations.

Safeguarding

- Think about your child's online safety, for example: by reviewing privacy settings; sharing of their location; sharing of personal information and images; and discussing how children can block unwanted messages.
- Provide general guidance about the internet and ways of interacting safely online, for example, oversharing information, online identities and meeting people they don't know offline.

Younger children

- If boundaries are set at an early age then it may be easier to support children to develop routines.
- Keep very young children's use of screen time to a minimum: the World Health Organization (WHO) recommends that 1-year-olds should not have access to screen time and 2 to 4-year-olds should have a maximum of one hour a day, although 'less is better'.
- Ensure that children are using age-appropriate apps, games and television.

Older children

- Dialogue around boundaries becomes increasingly important as a child becomes older. Maintaining a positive parent-child relationship is important in providing a space for children to be open and discuss any worries they may have related to technology use e.g. cyberbullying, unwanted messages, inappropriate images, worries about missing out. If your child is able to discuss their worries this will be an opportunity to offer support and help your child with maintaining boundaries around screen use. College Report CR225: Technology use and the mental health of children and young people 15
- Work with your child to set boundaries around the amount of screen time and the times when screens can be used. Encourage self-observation of screen time involvement through the use of self-monitoring apps.

Safeguarding

- Support young people to manage the potential impact of hurtful comments and other experiences which may be stressful, such as viewing distressing content, comparing themselves to others, worries about their self-image and the impact of fear of missing out.