

## PSYCHOLOGY WORKS Fact Sheet: Teens and Screens

### Effects of Screen Use

It is well-known that screen use, and social media, are particularly interwoven into the lives of adolescents in modern society. Due to early access to smartphones, design features meant to keep youth on games and sites, and adolescents' affinity for feedback from their peers, it is difficult to monitor their screen use and the impact on their mental health. Like younger children, teens who spend a great deal of time on screens tend to spend less time doing healthy activities that promote their development, such as socializing in-person, exercising, and reaching their academic potential. While technology provides access to helpful information, tools to get things done, and entertainment, it can also have a negative impact on teens. Here is a sample of some of the most common effects we have discovered so far:

- Social media can support connection and sense of community, particularly for youth who feel marginalized.
- Video game use can provide positive socialization and improve some cognitive skills.
- Excessive, problematic, or passive viewing such as scrolling, is associated with:
  - symptoms of depression and/or anxiety
  - reduced self-esteem
  - sedentary lifestyle and possible weight gain
  - distraction from school
  - addictive use leading to increased interference with daily functioning such as getting enough sleep, eating well, and getting to school on-time

### Recommendations for Use

Here are some recommendations to help reduce the likelihood of the negative effects of screen use. Remember, screen and social media use are developmental skills, like many other tasks of adolescence, your teen will make mistakes and need support to learn and grow in this area.

- First, watch for signs of problematic or excessive use. Examples of signs include:
  - inability to put devices away or unplug
  - not engaging with others in-person and/or social isolation
  - not engaging in physical activities
  - grades dropping or other signs of academic difficulties
  - lying to get more access
  - difficulty sleeping or reduced sleep
- Because of the serious effects of social media on many young adolescents' mental health, it is critical to monitor their use of social media – protect from harmful and hateful behaviour.



- Due to positive social support and sense of connection, do not completely remove access to devices. Instead work towards setting age-appropriate limits both to content and amount of time on screens.
- As most adolescents are students, it is important to support them in their study habits. For example, teaching them to avoid “digital multi-tasking,” such as surfing while studying by placing their phone away from their study area.

## Caregiver Strategies

It can be challenging to know how best to implement screen limits with teens. Here are some parenting strategies that can help:

- Role model healthy screen behaviour: Caregiver screen use is associated with child screen use and more negative effects.
- Have whole family, regular screen-free time: Everybody Unplug!
- Develop proactive structure and limits around screen use. Start when children are young.
- Teach adolescents social media literacy include who is safe to talk to and what is appropriate to post.
- Allow screen time only after completing other necessary tasks, for example, homework, physical activity, social activities.
- As teens display appropriate behaviour, provide intermittent periods of unsupervised access - with time limits and content monitored for young adolescents. Timing and tracking devices may be of use here.
- Do not extend the screen time in response to protests – validate their feelings of sadness and disappointment, coach them through regulating their emotions if upset and stick to the limit.
- Learn and practice emotion self-regulation strategies to cope with teen protests, for example, mindfulness, self-compassionate statements, and calm breathing.
- Teens may need to be reminded that screen and device access is a privilege, not a right and as the adult you are in charge and their well-being in your top priority.
- As older teens show ability to manage their screen use and literacy, more freedom is earned. Caregivers can gradually reduce content surveillance and screen time limit monitoring.
- Even with more freedom, check-in monthly to review the rules and how things are going. Praise youth for appropriate behaviour. If signs of problematic use emerge, time and content limits should be reinstated.
- Make sure to stay calm and approachable around discussing screen use so that teens feel comfortable to come to you if a mistake is made or a rule is broken. It is most helpful if teens come to you so you can problem-solve collaboratively how to move forward in a healthy way.



- Continue to monitor for signs of cyber-bullying as well as social exclusion. These may be similar to the signs of problematic or excessive screen use described above. Additional signs may include more serious mental health symptoms such as sudden changes to participation in activities, mood, and self-care. Similar to other times when your teen needs help, get involved in an active way, seek out mental health supports if needed, and work with your teen to set-up increased safety protocols using other strategies suggested here.
- Establish a safety and support protocol so that if they get into a risky situation or an incident occurs (much like “call home if you or your driver is unsafe to drive”) they will connect with you. This way your teen is able to get the timely support they need and problem-solve for the future, rather than hiding/making things worse due to fear of having phone/social media use removed.
- No screens in the bedroom/overnight (or ensure all notifications are turned off, and overnight usage monitored). Ideally all household electronics (parents too) go to a central location for charging overnight.

## Additional Resources

We know that parenting around screen time and digital media use can be hard. Technology and programs are designed to be rewarding and make it hard to stop. Using these strategies will take time and practice but are worth the effort. Below are some additional resources to help. If you are concerned about the mental health and wellbeing of anyone in your family, please seek out additional professional support.

- Canadian Pediatric Society Digital Media Resources
  - <https://caringforkids.cps.ca/handouts/behaviour-and-development#digital-media>
- American Pediatric Society Family Media Plan
  - <https://www.healthychildren.org/english/fmp/pages/mediaplan.aspx>
- Media Smarts: Canada’s Centre for Digital and Media Literacy
  - <https://mediasmarts.ca/research-reports>



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**You can consult with a registered psychologist** to find out if psychological interventions might be of help to you. Provincial, territorial, and some municipal associations of psychology may make available a referral list of practicing psychologists that can be searched for appropriate services. For the names and coordinates of provincial and territorial associations of psychology, go to <https://cpa.ca/public/whatisapsychologist/PTassociations/>.

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Your opinion matters! Please contact us with any questions or comments about any of the **PSYCHOLOGY WORKS** Fact Sheets: [factsheets@cpa.ca](mailto:factsheets@cpa.ca)

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