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Screen addiction: Health experts say excessive amounts of time spent on phones, tablets can affect childhood development

Health experts say excessive amounts of time spent on smart phones and tablets can be addictive and affect childhood development.

Smart phones, tablets and laptops have made life easier for many Australians but health experts are now monitoring and trying to limit exposure from the age of two onwards.

Jazz musician Sinj Clarke says screen addiction derailed his passion for music.

He says limiting the amount of time spent on social media made him feel more connected to his family and friends.

"At the point where it was worst, and I didn't realise how much it was controlling my life, instead of sitting down and doing an hour or two of solid practice, it would be interspersed with checking my phone. It wasn't just with music, it was with reading or anything," he said.

"It's a massive addiction. But you know people don't notice it because it's also quite culturally acceptable to use your phone all the time. It's expected."

He says he would sometimes wake up in the night and check his phone.

"[I'd] go to dinner, check it there, go out with family, check it there, go out with my friends, check it there," he said.

"[It was] ridiculous. I couldn't go anywhere without it."

Screen time releases 'happy chemicals' in the brain. Spending large amounts of time on tablets, smartphones, laptops and applications like Twitter, Facebook and Instagram can change our brains over time.

Psychologist Jocelyn Brewer works as a counsellor for school kids and has helped depressed children shake their screen addiction.

She says screen time stimulates happy chemicals in the brain and can leave users anxious and distracted.

"It works similar to other addictions in that there is a reward pathway that dopamine sets up. If you're doing any activity that feels really good, you would want to do more of that activity and continue to have that good feeling," she said.

"I think it comes down to not just the device necessarily, but it's what people are doing with the device.

"Similarly to someone with a gambling problem, it might not be the racecourse, but it's what you do at that racecourse.

"The negatives can be the in-built addictive qualities that some of the apps have that get you to want to be in them all the time and make them really hard to put down."

Digital and real-life play 'need to be balanced'. There are now guidelines on how much screen time children as young as two should have.

Education expert Kate Highfield says it is important children balance digital and real-life play.

"It's not about children at two years of age being addicted to the media," she said.

"I'd probably just say they're having a bit too much of it and we need to revert to a balance."

Ms Highfield says while tablets, computers and mobile devices can be useful educational tools some children are overly relying on digital media.

"Some of the concerns can be with eyesight, fine motor skills and pencil grip... and other skills [such as] posture, as children lean down to look at [tablets]," she said.

"The big issue though it the time it takes away from other play. It can displace other key skills.

"If I'm engaging with digital media, playing games and reading digital books, it might mean that I'm not building with blocks or painting with real paints or running outside and playing."

She says a combination of technology and tradition is the best approach for parents.

"These devices, tablets and mobile technologies, have incredible benefits for parents and for children," she said.

"For parents they can give you that five minutes of free time you just need. But for children they can also bring enormous educational benefits."

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