Digital Safety

A baby's brain development happens in the first 2 years of life. Toddlers learn about their environment by exploring through their senses. In this digital era, our environment includes all the gadgets that we use. Children are exposed to the digital world at a very young age —babies and toddlers are often shown a screen to quiet them when upset, to keep them entertained while parents finish their chores, or during mealtime. Video calls are a common way of communicating. Education and technology often go hand in hand. Yet as the children grow up, screen time and gadgets become a major source of conflict between us and our children.

Let us start by understanding why screen time is so addictive and problematic for our health.

- 'No one can eat just one!' You may remember this catchy line from a famous chips brand. Screen time has a similar effect on our bodies—it increases **dopamine**, which makes you crave more screen stimulation, making it hard to keep the phone away.
- Additionally, engaging content and screen-based social interactions, particularly for teenagers, can make it difficult for them to resist. **'FOMO'- Fear of Missing Out** is what drives the children to keep their phones nearby. Children seek constant **social validation** from others through likes and comments. Screen time has also become a **maladaptive coping mechanism** that helps children to escape from negative feelings such as anxiety, boredom, loneliness, etc.
- A child's brain continues to develop with age, especially the **prefrontal cortex**, which is responsible for **impulse control, judgment, and emotional regulation**. Until it develops fully, children may act without thinking about the consequences of their actions. This can lead to behaviors such as clicking on unsafe links, oversharing personal information, or becoming involved in harmful online activities.
- Using a screen before bedtime can also significantly impact sleep quality. The blue light emitted by screens can disrupt our **circadian rhythm**, which is the biological clock that regulates our **sleep-wake** cycle. This disruption occurs because blue light suppresses melatonin production, a hormone that is crucial for regulating sleep.

Below are some ways in which parents can help children become responsible digital citizens:

☐ **Be a role model**: - According to **Albert Bandura's Social Learning Theory**, children learn by **observing and imitating** the behaviors of those around them- especially parents and significant others. This means that when it comes to **digital usage**, children don't just learn from what we tell them — they learn from what they see us do. Hence, set screen time boundaries even for yourself. If parents constantly check their phones at every ping, overshare online, or react to social media posts, children tend to absorb the same patterns. Conversely, when parents **model balanced screen time**, **use privacy settings**, and **talk honestly about online behavior**, children learn responsible digital practices.

☐ **Set family rules: -**
Digital media usage is a topic for family discussion rather than dictating screen time rules. Have regular conversations with your children about the games they play online, the reels they watch, and the people they interact with online. Be their safe adult to talk to, encouraging your child to talk about anything that's bothering them or doesn't feel quite right, and brainstorm solutions. Spend quality time together doing offline activities as a family. Select an activity that you and your child both enjoy- e.g., sports, going for a walk together, or going to the gym together. Spending quality time with your children means keeping all phones out of sight. A family rule, such as no phones to be used during dinner time or switching off the Wi-Fi post 9:00 pm, will be met with less resistance from children if it is followed by all family members.
Explain why reducing screen time before bed helps the quality of sleep, which is necessary for their overall well-being.

⬜ **Be alert: -**

Familiarize yourself with parental controls and use them. Regularly review the privacy settings on your child's account. Keep an eye on their use of online chat, who they are talking to, and the type of language being used. Encourage them to keep their play private where possible and to play and interact with people they know rather than playing on public platforms. Teach children to set boundaries.

⬜ **Think before you post: -**

Encourage kids to think: "Would I be okay if this post were seen by everyone? "Would I be okay if this were posted about me?" Children often do not realize that once something is shared online, it creates a digital footprint that is hard (sometimes impossible) to erase. Make them understand that hurtful or inappropriate content- rumors, embarrassing stories/ photos is never acceptable, not even as a joke. Discuss the **digital frauds** that occur- phishing, fake lottery and online shopping scams, and gaming scams with children. Share certain experiences, like someone tricking you online, they might steal your personal information, which can be misused to access your accounts or send fake messages pretending to be you. This misuse of photos or information can cause stress for both the child and the family. Sometimes, children may feel scared, embarrassed, or worried after being tricked, which can affect their confidence and emotional well-being. Help children be mindful of such frauds and scams.

⬜ **Online gaming: -**

Many online games are violent. Playing these violent games regularly makes children less sensitive to the pain of others (**emotional desensitization**). They learn that hitting is a solution to solving conflicts. Fast-paced games reduce frustration tolerance in children, and they get habituated to immediate gratification. This need for immediate rewards, quick victory without any effort, will soon reflect in their real life too.

Familiarizing yourself with the PEGI (Pan-European Game Information) rating system is a simple, two-part guide to decide if a video game is **age-appropriate** for your child based on its **content**. Ratings can help you determine whether the game is appropriate for your child. People find a way to misuse the age filters- use abusive language and bully. Hence, encourage children to play only with children they know rather than strangers.

Keep consoles and computers in shared family spaces so you can see the interactions for yourself and support your child if needed.

Digital safety is not about limiting curiosity but nurturing responsible digital citizens who understand the impact of their online actions. By staying informed, actively engaging in your child's digital life, and maintaining a supportive dialogue, parents can turn the online world into a place of discovery, creativity, and security. Together, let us raise not just tech-savvy children, but **digitally responsible and emotionally resilient individuals**.

Just as we teach our children to cross the road safely, we must also teach them to navigate the digital world wisely. Be their guide, not a spy, in this journey.

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