

Screen free kids? playtime...what a concept!

MICHAEL RILEYStaff

I HEARD AN INTERVIEW on CBC radio the other day about people's attention spans being diminished due to electronic device usage and too much screen time. This phenomenon is especially prevalent in kids, who may use these electronic devices from dawn to dusk or into the night, with no capacity for limiting their usage as some adults may do. Some parents may tacitly encourage this to keep their kids busy, or be too busy themselves working long hours to even notice their kids are logging thousands of hours a year on their phones, PCs or video game consoles. And of course, the pandemic has had a huge impact on screen time for kids, with COVID-19 restrictions keeping them confined to their homes and schoolwork being done virtually via their computers or laptops. I'll probably sound like an old fart saying this, but in my day... No, seriously, I played outside with the other kids in my neighbourhood when I was a kid. My friends and I would run and jump and play games for hours on end, without an iPhone or video game in sight, and we were really happy, felt a true sense of belonging and were downright exhausted by the time our parents called us back home as the streetlights went on. The Canadian Paediatric Society and the Canadian Society for Exercise Physiology recommend the following daily limits for screen time in kids and teenagers; under two years of age no screen time, aged two to four years less than one hour a day of screen time and aged five to 17 years a maximum of two hours per day in screen time. More than half of kids, 55 per cent, aged five to 17 years exceed screen time recommendations, and that number is even higher for preschoolers at 76 per cent, according to a 2018 ParticipACTION study. A conservative estimate based on this study is that these kids aged five to 17 years are spending 3.4 hours a day on screens or 23 hours per week. According to the Hospital for Sick

Kids website, www.aboutkidshealth.ca, in addition to having attention shortfalls due to screen time over usage, it becomes unhealthy when parents notice the other symptoms of being in front of the television, computer or phone too much. These signs are; they may appear lonely, sad, overly tired, stressed or fearful, isolated from friends and family, withdrawn, nervous, agitated or tense and aggressive or angry. They may also have emotional outbursts and have problems making and keeping friends. While I'm not advocating that all electronic devices be taken away from kids or even some adults, prodigious usage would be a great idea to help them boost their attention spans, be more present in their daily lives with friends and family, get more necessary sleep (which is vital for a growing brain and for improved concentration) and just to be more content overall. To counteract too much screen time in kids and teenagers, experts recommend taking frequent breaks from screentime and avoiding long periods of sitting. While some screen time may be unavoidable, especially with COVID-19 restrictions and at home learning becoming prevalent over the past two years, making sure this e-learning is done in moderation is key to preventing too much screen time for kids. An Ontario study published in the Journal of Affective Disorders Reports in 2021, looked at the summer of 2020 and found that kids' screen time was three times the recommended amount due to the pandemic and its restrictions. Experts at Sick Kids' Hospital also suggest parents maintaining or setting limits on web browsing or video game play, and to model appropriate screen use as well. So don't chastise your kids for their video game screen time and then spend hours playing Call of Duty yourself! Nature Canada also had some suggestions for limiting screen use, like having screen free zones in the home like the dinner table or bedrooms, no digital device interaction at least one hour before bedtime, encourage outdoor playtime and other non-screen activities and plan family activities that are screen free like walks after dinner or nature hikes over the weekend. So, while screen time and electronic devices are certainly not going anywhere or should they be banned outright, limiting their use is a great idea, not only for kids everywhere but also for adults too. As a wise person once said; 'There's no WIFI in the forest, but you'll find a better connection.'