Technology, Youth and Mental Health

Youth and Technology

The internet, and related technologies, have become essential tools for families, enhancing our lives. Technology can provide ease of communication, access to information, learning assistance, as well as entertainment. Today's youth have grown up using smart phones, tablets and computers, and have been called 'digital natives,' having never known a world without digital media.

Problems and Warning Signs

Studies indicate that youth are spending a significant and growing amount of their day in front of a screen, often at the expense of other healthy activities. This can impact sleep, physical and mental health, and relationships. Some youth are exposed to risk through online bullying (cyberbullying), the sending/receiving/forwarding sexually explicit messages (sexting), and exposure to violent images.

Some youth have trouble limiting their use of technology, which can interfere with their quality of life. Look for warning signs of problematic media use such as:

- sleep difficulties
- poor eating habits
- neglected hygiene
- decreased physical activity
- changes in weight
- increased conflict
- decreased social activities
- decreased interest or performance in school

Strategies for Caregivers

There are actions you can take as a caregiver to support your child if you feel problems are arising. The goal is to promote a healthy balance, to maximize the benefits of technology while reducing the negative impacts and potential risks. The Canadian Pediatric Society has placed recommendations around screen use in four categories: the 4 M's—**Minimize, Mitigate, be Mindful,** and **Model**.

Minimize

- Encourage daily **"screen-free" times**, especially for family meals and socializing.
- Encourage activities that develop **social skills** and promote **physical activity and health**.
- **Avoid screens at least 1 to 2 hours before bed**. Remove devices from your child's bedroom as the blue light emitted from screens can alter their natural sleep cycle, and notifications can interrupt sleep.
- Involve your whole family in setting consistent parameters around screen time. The American Academy of Pediatrics has developed a tool for building a **family media plan** to create a balance of healthy activities throughout the day. https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx

Mitigate

- **Educate yourself** about the technologies, games and social media platforms your child is using and potential risks.
- Keep devices in **common areas** when possible.
- **Speak proactively with your child** about acceptable and unacceptable online behaviours. Help them understand the serious consequences of online bullying, making threats, or engaging in sexualized behavior through social media.
- Help your child to choose **age-appropriate content**.
- **Warn youth about scams** and educate them about personal security and **privacy settings**.

Be Mindful

- Become **conscious consumers of media** through active participation and communication. Go online with your child; talk with them to better understand their media choices.
- Turn off screens when they're not being used. Avoid using them as "background" noise. Discourage multi-media multitasking.
- Help your child become **a critical thinker** and to ask questions about what they see and hear.
- Help your child be aware of their habits / triggers; **help them see how media use affects them**.

Model

- Monitor your own media use habits. Children are influenced through the choices they see parents make. **Model positive habits.**
- Help your child to use media in active ways such as through music, writing, or art; teach them to become **creative producers**, not just passive consumers.

Remember . . .

Technology use is not a simple issue. Computers, smart phones and our access to instant communication and information have normalized our use of these technologies. Through **open communication** and **consistent support**, we can guide youth to make healthy choices around media and technology.

Resources

- Common Sense Media: http://www.commonsensemedia.org/
- Child Mind Institute: https://childmind.org/article/how-using-social-media-affects-youthagers/
- Media Smarts: http://mediasmarts.ca/
- Youth Mental health: www.youthmentalhealth.org
- Center on Media and Child Health: http://cmch.tv/
- Get Cyber Safe: www.getcybersafe.gc.ca
- Canadian Pediatric Society: https://www.cps.ca/en/documents/position/screen-time-and-young-children
- Healthy Children: https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media/Pages/default.aspx