

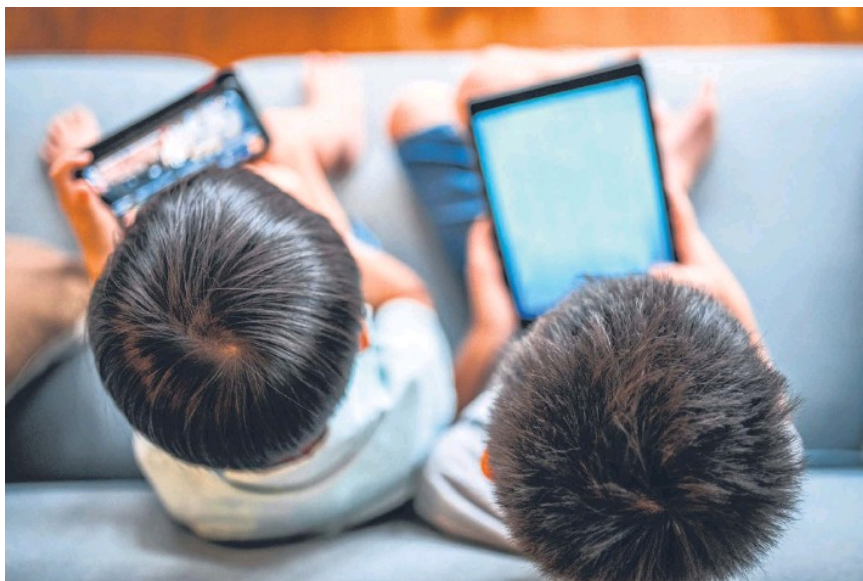
- Gadgets / Child development

My child is a screen addict

As online usage among kids increases, parents have to strike a balance between setting limits on screen time and not being over-controlling

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Children are increasingly hooked to their mobile phones and the online world – and parents are worried.



The rise in social media usage, in particular, has become one of the biggest headaches of parents, who fear their children could become screen addicts or, worse, fall prey to online predators.

Yet, simply banning the use of devices is not the answer in an increasingly digital world. Screen time during the Covid-19 pandemic soared due to online learning and video-conferencing.

Associate Professor Jiow Hee Jhee, a Media Literacy Council member who is from the Singapore Institute of Technology, says being digitally savvy should not be viewed negatively.

“Our children and teenagers are the first generation of digital natives who are accustomed to being surrounded by technology,” he says.

“They depend on this technology to stay in touch with their friends, consume digital content and express their personalities and opinions. In many cases, they can even teach their parents

how to use certain platforms or devices.”

Google’s user education and outreach manager Lucian Teo points out that in its latest survey, more than three in four parents reported that their child had some schooling online in the last year, resulting in the majority of them having to relax house rules to Internet access.

But recent surveys have also highlighted the risks of online spaces, from cyber bullying to unwanted solicitations to harassment.

Eight in 10 parents in a recent poll commissioned by The Straits Times earlier this month said they were concerned about their children’s use of social media.

Nearly half of those with secondary school children feared that setting limits on social media use would affect their relationship or that they would be over-controlling their teenagers.

Mr Mike Wong, 46, who has a daughter in Secondary 1, says: “It’s like her phone is attached to her all the time except when she’s sleeping. As she gets older, it is more difficult to control what she does. We have to reason and negotiate with her.

“I notice a lot of her friends and cousins almost behaving like junkies, always concerned about their phone’s battery life and desperately looking for power banks to charge their devices.”

Mr Wong, a manager in the chemical industry, and his wife set a daily time limit of six hours for their daughter’s device usage. He adds: “In this digital era, we can’t remove devices completely.”

His daughter got a scare last year when an older male student messaged her and a few other girls on Instagram, asking to exchange revealing pictures of themselves.

“She ignored the messages and blocked him, but found out that one of her friends was persuaded by the guy to send some photos,” says Mr Wong.

“This incident was a learning point for her, so she knows the dangers of the Internet and doesn’t get too carried away.”

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MR MIKE WONG, a manager in the chemical industry, who has a daughter in Secondary 1, on her usage of digital devices

Screen time among children and youth during the Covid-19 pandemic has soared, due to on-line learning and video-conferencing. But parents cannot simply ban the use of devices in an increasingly digital world, so they have to manage the limits on their children’s online usage.

1. UNDERSTAND YOUR CHILD

Ms Carol Loi, founder of Village Consultancy, which provides digital-literacy education, says teenagers go through changes such as puberty, new classmates and teachers, increased workload or co-curricular activities.

“All these demands can cause stress in them and, when not managed well, lead to unhealthy use of media and technology as they seek ways to relieve stress.”

Show an interest in your child's online activities instead of being dismissive or passing judgment.

Google's user education and outreach manager Lucian Teo says: "It goes a long way if parents show interest in the apps that their children use and perhaps ask them for a tour.

"Engage in conversation with children about the videos they watch online, the creators they follow and the people they engage with on social media."

Mr Chong Ee Jay, a cyber-wellness expert at Focus on the Family Singapore, says: "Try to understand the culture of platforms like Instagram and what videos or posts are trending. Ask your child for his or her views.

"There's no strict yes or no when it comes to following your children's accounts – it depends on your relationship with them. But if you do, do it respectfully and ask them for permission."

One way, says Associate Professor Jiow Hee Jhee, a Media Literacy Council member who is from the Singapore Institute of Technology, is for families to spend time together online, whether it is following an online workout or taking up a TikTok dance challenge.

"This is a great opportunity for parents to not only monitor what their children are seeing online, but to also actively engage with them and strengthen relationships," he says.

2. SET BOUNDARIES EARLY

Parents should hold back on giving children devices as far as possible, so they have a longer runway to grow in maturity.

Ms Loi says: "Holding our children close – in the tsunami of inappropriate media content easily available in many different forms, while helping them to develop confidence and independence – requires a transitional period.

"Withholding social media till the children are 12 and then suddenly giving them full responsibility at 13 is not helpful to them."

Set family rules early – when children get their first device or social media account, say experts.

Use parental-control software like Family Link or Qustodio to monitor their usage, including how much screen time they get and what content they can access, especially for younger children.

YouTube Kids has features to limit screen time and an option to switch off the search function. The restricted mode on the main YouTube app, for viewers 13 years and older, can also be switched on to screen out mature content.

Rules can also be set for where children can go online, says Mr Teo.

For example, parents can stipulate that online content is watched only on the television in a common area at home.

3. BUILD TRUST

Having open conversations with children from a young age is also key to building strong relationships, say experts, and parenting styles must adapt to the teenage years.

Prof Jiow advises parents to communicate openly with children the expectations they have of their digital-device usage.

Those with older children and teenagers could discuss their schedules, he says, and both sides can come to a mutual agreement and work together to adhere to it.

Mr Teo adds: “Giving them space to make those decisions to manage their own screen time and digital behaviour is crucial even as we continue to provide a guiding hand in their journey towards adulthood.”

For example, adjust parental-control limits over time, he suggests.

“I have known some very enterprising parents to have different levels of family Internet use ‘contracts’ that progressively provide the children more independence as they prove themselves responsible in keeping the rules,” he adds.

Have regular conversations during meal times or outings rather than long lectures about topics such as values and sexuality, says Ms Loi.

Experts also recommend offline activities that families can do together depending on their interests – from sports and cycling to baking and board games – so children have alternatives for leisure.