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Reducing kids' screen exposure

Reducing kids' screen exposure should start with a look at how parents interact with their devices.

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EXCESSIVE screen time among kids and adolescents is a perennial issue, but what if managing young ones' digital exposure is about governing parents' own screen time?



Between parents scrolling on Tiktok, Instagram and binge-watching Netflix series, sometimes they themselves are guilty of unrestricted digital device usage.

Sunway Medical Centre clinical psychologist Evelyn Ngui Ailing says sometimes, parents are hooked on digital devices for several reasons, including work and entertainment.

"So they give their kids smartphones or tablets for some peace of mind," she says. "Sometimes, some parents are not even aware of how much screen time their kids have."

She says while parents are very careful about what they say (in her office), their description may not reflect what happens at home.

Phubbing – the practice of ignoring others in order to pay attention to one's digital device – is detrimental to kids because it denies kids time, attention and communication that are necessary for their development.

"Young kids require a lot of attention, connection and activities done together with their parents, like playing or building; parental screen time takes this away from them," she says.

Ngui says there are several factors why phubbing happens and why kids are allowed screen time as parents go online.

"They include parental attitude, like convincing themselves that a gadget helps kids learn. Some parents are also struggling with domestic issues like marriage and financial troubles, and giving kids digital devices help them manage these situations," she says.

However, as this continues, kids who are given smartphones will be glued to their screens more and parents will eventually feel helpless.

Cultivating family values

Ngui says habits are not formed in a day and parents should make sense of the situation and ask themselves what they want in their lives.

"If they want to connect with their kids and the obstacles are the gadgets, then they need to take devices out of the equation and in turn, spend time connecting with their kids," she advises.

"This is not easy and requires a mindful shift... but it's necessary," she says.

Universiti Malaya senior psychology lecturer Dr Nordinah Mohd Kassim agrees. Parents, she says, "need not be perfect, but they need to be present".

"Being present doesn't mean

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Evelyn Ngui Ailing

being in the same house as your child. It means actually being present in conversations when your child talks, playing with them and really listening to them," she says.

"There are some parents who are always with their kids, but who are not present. Likewise, some busy parents are always present when they are home."

Ngui says parents need to take the rein in developing family values.

"These include setting rules and boundaries, like designating the dining table as a no-screen zone, no screens before bedtime and reserving a weekend morning for family activities, like breakfast or exercise, no device included," she says.

She adds that parents should develop these habits and values and set boundaries, because kids don't know when's and what's enough.

"They should not give kids free rein on what they watch and how long they are on a device," she says.

"Parental control has to come from the outside in, especially with younger kids who don't know what's good for them," she says.

Nordinah adds that parents need to set digital rules that align with their family values.

"If we want to reduce the screen time of our children, then they mustn't see us glued to the phone all the time," she says.

"Children learn based on what they see, not what they are asked to do, so it is imperative that parents themselves set a healthy example when it comes to screen time," she says.

Tool, not replacement

Nordinah says parents' excessive screen time may eat up the time they have to teach their kids life skills like doing age-appropriate house chores.

"I think life skills are very important to teach early on. They empower kids and teach responsibility. But these are kids and they are still learning, so parents need to allow mistakes," she says.

"Life skills are crucial in building resilience," she adds.

Ngui says parents should treat digital devices as learning tools, and not let them take the place of parents.

"Visual information can be engaging, but it should be complemented with parental presence to explain, converse and interact with the child. Interactive learning should happen with parental involvement and conversations. It is parents who should be teaching and assuming their parts in interactive learning," Ngui adds.

She says no single kid is the same, so parents need to decide on the age when their child needs a smartphone or a digital device, and how long can the child spend on it.

"Parents can use this to teach kids about consequences and responsibilities. These are opportunities for the family to work together; to give kids some autonomy and opportunity without relinquishing parental responsibilities," she says.

"I believe if parents start to do this consciously while the kids are younger, it would pave a way to better communication and screen exposure as the child grows into a teenager, when smartphones will become an integral tool for their communication," she adds.