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Socials shrink kids' brains

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Repetitive use of social media can cause critical parts of children's brains to shrink, affecting their ability to manage emotions, control impulses and maintain focus.

One of the nation's leading screen addiction experts has warned these physical changes triggered by too much time on devices is similar to that of drug addicts.

Macquarie University School of Psychological Sciences developmental psychology professor Wayne Warburton said prolonged use of social media did not use all parts of the brain, which could lead to those areas shrinking.

"If parts of the brain are not being used, then those areas can shrink and you start to lose grey matter," Dr Warburton said.

"What we find in kids with a screen addiction is a measurable loss of grey matter, which presumably, is due to the fact that the things that they're doing on the screens are repetitive and they're not really challenging those higher functions in the brain.

"Where you see the loss, most notably, is in the prefrontal cortex and the frontal lobes of the brain, where we have those higher functions, like abstract thinking, managing your emotions, controlling your impulses, focus and attention.

"You see a loss of cortical thickness. You see similar losses in drug addicts and in other addictions as well."

Dr Warburton said the human body including the brain required face-to-face interaction and stimulation in the physical environment to stay healthy.

He said people like screen addicts who didn't have any "real world contact" were at risk of serious ailments.

"Their immune system doesn't work as well. They find it hard to fight off diseases … They get ill more often. The illnesses are more severe. On average, they die younger. They're more likely to have a cognitive decline earlier in life, so there is a big price to pay."

He said the number of people reaching clinical levels of device dependence had become a serious public health issue, with some social media users spending more than 15 hours a day on devices.

"When you're using it, you're generally on automatic pilot," he said.

"You can have somebody reel and click through TikTok for several hours and then say 'tell me something that you saw', and they can barely remember a single thing."