- Screen time

How screen use can be vicious cycle for some children, adolescents

The Sun (Malaysia) · 17 Jun 2025 · 22

TO cope with behavioural problems linked to excessive screen use, such as aggression or anxiety, some children take refuge in screens. While this vicious circle aspect of the screen phenomenon is not widely discussed, it has been highlighted by a comprehensive Australian study published last week.



French health professionals have recommended zero screen time for children below the age of three. – ALL PICS FROM PEXELS

It has long been known that screens are harmful to children. Excessive exposure (several hours a day) has been linked to cognitive development delays, as well as learning, language and memory disorders. And in adolescents, excessive screen use may cause manic symptoms, such as mood disorders and sleep disturbances. But a new meta-analysis highlighted a lesserknown problem. The study reported excessive screen use can exacerbate socio-emotional problems – anxiety, depression, aggression and hyperactivity – in children, driving them to screens to cope with these issues. This vicious circle mainly affects children aged six to 10, and seems to be more prevalent in boys than in girls.

Conducted by psychology professors at the University of Queensland (Australia), the research examined around 100 studies involving more than 292,000 children from around the world and the findings are published in the journal Psychological Bulletin. Most of the studies included in this research were conducted in the US
(41 studies), Canada
(13), Australia (11), Germany and the Netherlands (seven each).

Effects of video games

The researchers found video games are associated with higher risks of developing behavioural disorders compared with other screen-based content, including those intended for educational or recreational purposes.

"As a kid I loved video games – they give you a challenge and powerful feedback when you are doing a good job. For this reason, games are particularly tempting for children having problems and (is) especially hard to get children away from," said UQ's School of Psychology associate professor and study senior author Michael Noetel.

While it is true some video games have an educational dimension with some of them being recognised as a vehicle for mental well-being among teenagers, excessive use can be counter-

productive.

“Noetel said parents and policymakers have long debated whether screens cause problems, or whether children with problems were simply drawn to screens,” the press statement revealed.

“Our review shows it is both,” he added.

Noetal said only addressing one side of the equation – “cutting down on screen time but overlooking anxiety or aggression that leads kids to screens” – risk leaving children stuck in a cycle.

However, the researcher tempered this by pointing out that the emotional and behavioural disorders can also be explained by other factors, such as exposure to alcohol or drugs.

Follow 3-6-9-12 rule

In France, some health professionals now recommended keeping children under six away from screens entirely, which is three years longer than the current official recommendations (no screens before three).

To help parents limit their children’s screen time, French pediatrician Serge Tisseron has invented the 3-6-9-12 rule, designed according to children’s age and stage of cognitive development.

The rules are as follows: no screens before the age of three, no personal consoles before the age of six, no internet before the age of nine, and no internet without supervision before the age of 12.

Other initiatives have recently emerged to encourage children and teenagers to detox from digital devices, such as the challenge of spending 10 days without using any screens at all, in favour of activities that promote relaxation and creativity. – ETX Studio