- Gadget

When screens become family

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It's a normal scene these days— adults and children glued to their mobile gadgets during meals at restaurants, while waiting in lounges, stuck in traffic, or even while walking around a mall. Heads are bowed—not in prayer, but in full digital absorption.

Conversation, once the heartbeat of human connection, has become a rare and occasional event—usually triggered only when someone sees something share-worthy on their gadget and decides to show it to others. The mobile device, designed as a tool, is now a companion, a pacifier, a distraction, a teacher, and, most troubling of all, a substitute parent.

A mobile gadget today is not just a device—it is practically a member of the family. It entertains restless children, quiets tantrums, and gives parents time to cook, work, or catch a breath. But along with that convenience comes a growing list of problems we are only beginning to fully grasp.

Manila Bulletin columnist Mon Ibrahim recently sounded the alarm, citing studies that show excessive screen time—especially on social media—has negative impacts on both mental and physical health. Blue light emitted from screens interferes with melatonin production, impairing sleep. Cognitive development in young children is also at risk, with prolonged exposure linked to reduced focus, slower learning, and even altered brain structure.

Addiction to screens is no longer just a fear—it is a reality. The term "screen dependency disorder" has entered the conversation. And it's not just children—adults too are caught in the cycle. One study cited an average of 7.5 hours per day spent on smartphones by teenagers, with even younger kids logging nearly five hours daily. Among adults, screen time averages six hours and 37 minutes a day, much of it on social media apps that are deliberately designed to keep us hooked.

Why is this happening? Because screens offer what seems like an easy solution—instant gratification, entertainment on demand, and a dopamine rush of likes, shares, and notifications. But we pay for it in attention spans, sleep quality, physical fitness, and, perhaps most significantly, in our ability to connect meaningfully with the world around us.

Children are particularly vulnerable. Many are exposed to smartphones before the age of five. According to a research study, six in ten parents said their children had started using smartphones before the age of five. The intent may have been harmless— to keep them calm or quiet—but the long-term consequences are no longer deniable. Behavioral problems, reduced emotional regulation, increased aggression, social isolation, and poor academic performance are some of the documented outcomes.

Mr. Ibrahim highlights how social media has morphed from a tool for connection into an addictive validation loop, where kids derive their self-worth from digital "likes" and followers. The platforms know this— and profit from it. The more time a user spends online, the more ads they see.

For tech companies, more screen time means more revenue. For families, it often means more conflict, more silence, more distance.

The problem has reached such proportions that governments are beginning to intervene. In the United States, New York's Attorney General recently proposed new regulations targeting social media feeds for children.

When gadgets become part of the family, it's time we ask: Are we in control of our screens—or are they in control of us?

These rules would require companies like Tiktok and Instagram to verify a user's age, ban algorithm-driven feeds for those under 18 unless parents consent, and block notifications between midnight and 6 a.m. These changes are part of the SAFE for Kids Act, aimed at curbing addictive behavior.

Australia is taking even bolder steps. Beginning this December, social media platforms will be banned from allowing children under 16 to open accounts. The law empowers regulators to fine platforms up to AUD 50 million (₱1.8 billion) for systemic failures to prevent access.

Still, laws can only do so much. Enforcement is complicated. Tech companies are powerful. And digital habits are deeply ingrained in all of us.

So what can we do? We can model the behavior we want to see. If children are to be less screen-dependent, they need to see adults making the same effort. That includes parents putting their phones down during dinner, teachers incorporating screen breaks into learning, and communities creating safe, engaging spaces for realworld interaction.

Mobile gadgets will remain part of our lives. So will social media. But they must be managed, not worshipped. We can't afford to raise a generation that is emotionally disconnected, physically inactive, and mentally overstimulated—while being constantly connected online.

Screens should not raise our children. That is the job of families, communities, and yes, policies that prioritize mental and emotional health over clicks and scrolls.

Because when gadgets become part of the family, it's time we ask: are we in control of our screens—or are they in control of us? (Email: pinky.colmenares@mb.com.ph)