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Children's Mental Health: Technology and Cyberbullying

Today, digital technologies are everywhere. Technology has created some beautiful things, like communications assistive technology for children who don't use speech as their primary communication method. At the same time, there are also some problematic aspects to navigate, like cyberbullying. This article will explore where children are currently sitting with the effects of digital technology predominantly within four groups: babies and toddlers, school-age children, teens, and young adults. We'll share tools you may find helpful to support your child interacting with technology in a way that is developmentally-appropriate and supports their overall health and well-being.

Living in today's digital age

Every generation experiences technological advances that have a significant effect on their era as they become popular. The first computers were large enough to fill entire rooms. But processing technology advanced exponentially, doubling and compacting the size of circuits roughly every two years.¹ Today, devices and their seamless integration with the Internet are awe-inspiring. However, if you think about how we have become acclimatized to today's technology, we haven't necessarily followed our past experiences. There is a pattern, though:

- **Innovators** are the first to figure out different ways to use the technology.
- **Early adopters** are fast followers who crave to be at the front of the line.
- **Early and late majority** is where most people tend to operate.
- **Laggards** tend to join in after much observation and consideration. They are almost conceding that there could be a small application of the technology in their lives that would be useful to them, maybe.

We've also seen a tendency to apply expectations about competencies relating to ability and seamless usage stereotypically between different levels of adaptation. These theories originated within the education and business sectors and have always incited debate as to whether younger people naturally adopt the technology more readily when compared to older people. It might partly show a bit of bias from older people to assume that all young people know exactly how to accomplish tasks using technology.

How is technology affecting children?

Babies and toddlers

Early on, parents and caregivers can see the possibilities that introducing their children to technology at a young age can have. On one side, there's the aspect of wanting your child to learn and grow. On the other hand, there are times when you may be looking for a chance to have their kids use technology as a distraction, perhaps to amuse themselves. Regardless, children tend to develop skills from a very young age, and are very good at observing and mimicking.

Babies and toddlers are also entertaining and appealing, so parents may try and share funny situations involving their children through their own social media accounts. Consider the longer-term repercussions of doing so. What's cute now may become a source of embarrassment for them as they are older. It may be best to respect their privacy and choice as to when or if they enter digital social spaces in the future. It can be challenging for extended family members to understand why parents want to protect their children's privacy, especially when geography keeps them apart. There are always options to share these photos directly to family members via email or messaging. Remind them that your child's privacy should be protected.

School-aged children

We see that children respond well to digitized educational games and activities that help them learn language arts, mathematics, and science. Children this age begin to explore online gaming through popular sites like Roblox, Minecraft, Fortnite and Pokémon. Parents should show interest and observe their habits, friends, and interactions online to ensure they understand how to play safely. It is also necessary with this age group to have conversations to help develop an awareness of abnormal or concerning behaviours kids could encounter while online. Tech familiarity will help school-age children get together with friends who share similar interests in school and different physical and virtual social settings. Establishing screen-time limits is very important for school-aged children. Parents and caregivers can establish loving limits on when and how technology is used (e.g. what time of day and for how long). It can be an excellent way to introduce the concept of balance and boundaries.

Older children

Teens and young adults tend to be quite comfortable with the technology in their lives. Still, parents may be concerned about how connected they are to devices such as smartphones. Engaging with older children who seem wholly absorbed in digital spaces can be pretty challenging. It can be quite difficult to reinforce screen-time boundaries and limits. Some educators observe that teens and young adults struggle with critical thinking and problem-solving. It may be because they have ready access to all the information they could ever need. Problems can

show up in basic written and interpersonal communications skills too. Secondary and post-secondary students struggle with diminished confidence in spelling, vocabulary, and grammar. They may also be uncomfortable with certain conversation techniques, such as maintaining eye contact and interpreting body language. Many prefer using instant messaging and visually based social media and are reluctant to engage with parents in these spaces. A more significant issue perhaps is the amount of screen time this group engages in. Some teens and young adults will even proudly declare that they are addicted to their devices. It's a problem that parents need to tread cautiously.

Mental health concerns

School-age children, teens, and young adults are particularly vulnerable to stressors. The Internet can offer exposure to inappropriate and upsetting content that could contribute to mental health concerns like mood disorders, depression, and anxiety. For example, exposure to the Internet may contribute to:

- Body image issues - caused by comparing oneself to others.
- Eating disorders - influenced by misinformation in advertising and observing celebrity endorsements of diet and weight loss products.
- Dissatisfaction and disillusion with current lifestyles – arising when observing social media influencers and expressing a desire to find fame.
- Shortened attention spans - from consuming tremendous volumes of content through constant scrolling.

To help, parents and caregivers should first examine their habits and consider modelling appropriate levels of interaction and engagement as they interact online and through their devices.

How has COVID-19 influenced online behaviour around education?

Students experienced shifts to online learning at different times during the pandemic. Their experiences have been strained from a lack of social interaction and the difficulty of replicating physical classrooms through virtual formats. School-aged children required a lot of parental involvement to manage virtual learning and the complex schedules between times of independent work and convening in video classrooms. Some teens and young adults expressed worries about this learning format and missed important milestones and socializing opportunities. However, some students have determined that they prefer online learning. It has been an excellent way for students with anxiety to engage without feeling the pressures they have felt in the past at school. Young adults pursuing post-secondary studies have been able to find a better balance between school and work. It's allowed them to save money on transportation and other living expenses.

Problematic aspects of technology

Non-traditional sources of income (work)

It can be difficult for parents and caregivers to understand how their older children can be drawn to technology. Like the Metaverse, the interactions and ideas can be a bit abstract. Consider the number of teens and young adults seeking online ways to generate income. A decade ago, monetizing your online presence as a career wasn't mainstream. Now, there are many examples of people who have taken interests and hobbies online with the hope of making it big and having something they load go viral on the Internet. As a result, parents and caregivers may find that older children are chasing the dream of becoming Internet famous, or at least getting the subscriber and engagement volumes needed to be paid by companies to post. They hope it will attract coveted attention to help them reach an "influencer" level of fame.

Cyberbullying

Any form of harassment that occurs while using technology to connect with people in online spaces is considered cyberbullying. It has disastrous effects on people's mental health and, in some cases, can contribute to people coping with self-harm, develop depression, and experience anxiety. There have been cases of cyberbullying that have affected some so severely that they have taken their own life. Cyberbullying isn't limited to older children and teens, but school-age kids can experience it too. Parents and caregivers need to recognize and investigate changes in their children's behaviours. Some signs of online harassment could include:

- Suddenly losing interest in online activities they once enjoyed
- Being easily distracted
- Not wanting to attend school
- Being very sad, withdrawn or emotional

Cyberbullying can take many forms but here are just a few examples:

- Making prank calls on a mobile phone
- Sending mean messages through texts, instant messaging, or social media applications
- Editing photos to create memes and publishing them to intentionally harm or embarrass someone
- Posting someone's private photos online or sending them to other people
- Spreading misinformation and rumours about someone in an online space
- Relentlessly attacking someone in an online game

- Stealing or hacking into another person's online account to impersonate them
- Initiating or participating in a ranking or rating of someone's appearance or popularity
- Creating fake social media accounts for the purpose of sharing malicious information
- Tricking someone into providing personal information and then threatening to release the details

Parents and caregivers should know that there are legal consequences to cyberbullying. The person who is bullying can be charged and held liable for their actions, resulting in a payment for damages or prison. Some cases of harassment can receive charges under the Criminal Code.²

LGBTQ+ youth often experience a disproportionate amount of online harassment and cyberbullying that's often quite severe and can be present in addition to physical bullying. Victims of cyberbullying are also less likely to report it. They fear reprisal and rejection from their families or peers because it could "out" them and create additional complications within their day-to-day relationships. Maintaining connections to online spaces can be a way to build self-esteem, allow for self-expression, and provide a sense of community when they are feeling isolated. It's a lifeline that offers support, understanding, and compassion. When it comes to setting limits on technology use, parents and caregivers should take into consideration the beneficial role that technology can offer LGBTQ+ youth to have connection and a safe space.

Cyberstalking

Cyberstalking is a persistent form of predatory online behaviour that can involve threats of violence, sexual harassment, extortion, and even physical stalking. Cyberstalking is often more unrelenting, more deliberate, systematic, and escalating in its threat levels to incite fear and have their target comply with their demands. Cyberstalkers are also usually quite technically savvy and use this to their advantage to avoid detection. They will start initially by exploring their target's on and offline behaviours. A few examples include:

- Following their target person online, performing similar activities and suggesting common interests and activities to join.
- Messaging and tagging their target person excessively.
- Asking their target person to send photos and/or videos.
- Asking their target person to share valuable information, such as their full name and address and ID cards (driver's licenses, health cards, financial information, and online account passwords). Such details are valuable and can be sold to help people assume someone's identity or hack into accounts.

- Sending unwanted gifts.
- Hacking into the target person's laptop camera or phone to watch them.
- Suggesting that they meet in person.
- Tracking their target person's movement.

Like cyberbullying, this kind of harassment is illegal. If you believe that a cyberstalker may have targeted your child, contact the authorities, and let other family members and friends know so they can offer support. While it may seem disturbing, never delete any of the evidence of the harassment, as you may need to show police proof.

How can I find out what my kids are doing online?

The ethics of monitoring Internet use are tricky. Many parents and caregivers fear what their children encounter while using online technology and demand to review their actions and accounts. Suppose parents or caregivers are the ones who have funded the purchase of devices and cover ongoing costs. In that case, they may feel entitled to regular usage reviews. But they need to weigh their oversight with trust and privacy and help educate children to become responsible online digital citizens. For younger children using a shared device in the household, talking about what they are looking at online and who they are speaking with (if they engage in any online communities or gaming) can be an excellent first step to encouraging dialogue. The goals of these conversations are to educate and instill self-discipline, so modelling good online behaviour is essential. Work on establishing boundaries and demonstrating trustworthiness to have kids feel more comfortable sharing information when they are unsure or possibly in trouble. This approach can help respect their child's privacy.

Teens often have a reputation for being rebellious and more whimsical when taking high-risk actions. Parents or caregivers may become more worried and insistent on finding out what their teenager is up to. Some resort to desperate measures, demanding passwords be shared on devices and accounts and even going so far as to install tracking applications to locate their whereabouts. Most teens are aware of these attempts to raid their personal space and deactivate or mask them. Remember that while it may be uncomfortable, teens and young adults are entitled to privacy. Their independence should be to be met with the support and connection of their parents or caregivers. It's important to make an effort to connect with your teen and work on nurturing the relationship.

What about parental controls? Do they work?

Some parents or caregivers may choose to invoke parental controls on devices or Internet access. It can make sense for younger children to keep them from accidentally stumbling upon inappropriate content. Still, it can also incentivize older children

to enforce boundaries and screen time limits or restrict Internet access. You might want to consider:

- Setting timed access to household Wi-Fi through settings in their modem by device IP addresses.
- Using family management apps to associate completing household chores with earned screen time.
- Setting screen time monitoring in devices and reviewing activity with your child weekly.

Most experts agree that school-age children need to know how to be responsible for their online actions. Of course, this also extends to teens and young adults, especially for social media accounts. For parents and caregivers to provide guidance, they should become aware of:

- The additional data, including device IP addresses and geotags in photos posted online.
- How to activate privacy settings on accounts and devices to restrict access.
- Spam/alias accounts that teens and young adults create and keep secret to have unfettered privacy on social media, away from parental views on their main named accounts.
- A new form of relationship trust where people trade devices and divulge their passcodes and passwords so that they can each review the other's text and social media messages as "proof" that there is no cheating happening.

There's a lot of value in keeping information private

Unfortunately, friendships end and relationships sour. It may not be until something happens that children realize the value of keeping information private. It could help if you encourage great discretion in providing contact information such as phone numbers or email addresses. One parent spoke about a breakup where their child was harassed every two minutes by their ex because they opted to stop replying to messages. This "O-bombing" (opening a message without responding immediately) and "ghosting" encouraged the ex to continue the behaviour. In these kinds of incidents, parents and caregivers need to encourage their children to:

1. Take screenshots of conversations because attempts to contact them or through friends may need to be collected as evidence.
2. Provide instructions to friends to discontinue contact and keep all personal information about their friend confidential.
3. Block the person on apps and devices.
4. In extreme cases, you may need to contact a service provider and change phone numbers.

Raising healthy and fully aware digital citizens

One of the best things you can do is speak openly to your children about technology and online safety and share your concerns. As a parent or caregiver, staying informed and showing your children that you are interested and aware of the challenges and experiences they face may be one of the best things you can do. This may help them view you as an ally rather than a threat. Talk openly, using age-appropriate language about interactions with friends that you may not have heard them mention before. Explain how you are looking out for them and helping them learn how to be safe, kind, and respectful online. Talk about how things uploaded to the Internet are there forever, even if they decide to delete them. While you don't want to make them fearful, talking about normal and appropriate behaviours for adults and kids is important. It's a way to broach the topic of cyberstalking, cyberbullying and other predatory behaviours they may encounter online.

It's also incredibly healthy to have designated "no-tech" times. It could be when everyone gathers to eat dinner, play a game, watch a movie or program, or visit family members without devices in their hands. To get used to this, it may help to have a basket that devices go into for the duration of the activity. Finally, there is one more realization that parents and caregivers can embrace. They are preparing their babies, toddlers, school-aged children, teens and young adults for roles that may not exist yet in an ever-evolving world.

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