

PROMOTING HEALTHY SCREEN HABITS AMONGST CHILDREN: A GUIDE TO MITIGATING EXCESSIVE SCREEN TIME AND PERCEIVED ADDICTION

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Abstract

The extensive espousal of digital technologies has transformed the socialization and learn patterns of children; leading to substantial increase in screen time. Obviously, the easy access to various technological devices and their appealing nature, has amplified children's susceptibilities to their uses as interactive and teaching models. However, children's excessive screen time has become a global concern; due to the substantial risks it poses on their physical, emotional, and mental well-being. The aim of this study is to provide effective strategies that could save children from excessive screen time and its perceived addiction. This study is a quantitative survey that used simple percentage to analyse the questionnaire items administered to one hundred randomly selected parents in Owerri Municipal. Attachment theory and the concept of Screen Time Addiction gave credence to the fact that excessive screen time is capable of disrupting children's socio-psychological development. Hence, it critically examines the risks and implications on the developmental process of children, which include but not limited to; sleep deprivation, physical inactivity, social isolation, academic distractions and possible addictions. The paper establishes the need for tactical solutions towards children's excessive screen time. This could be achieved through the implementation of measures such as; screen time limits, physical activities, indoor games, and other cognitive behavioural therapies. It recommends the collaborative efforts of parents, caregivers, educators and healthcare professionals to create and enforce strategies that could mitigate the complexities of this subject matter, in order to promote healthy screen habits among children.

Keywords: Children, Digital Technology, Excessive screen time, Perceived addiction Healthy Screen habit.

Introduction

The spate of emergent technological devices in the last two decades are phenomenal and revolutionary; influencing all aspect of human socialisation processes, which under pins the functionalities of modern society. These have enabled the manufacturing of completely new values and behaviours in the world; as people depend on various technological devices to shape their lives. Consequently, technological dependency is fast transforming every society, by creating knowledge that influence the way people live and interact with one another. Perhaps, the significant impact of this present reality that affects most individuals is the associated pressure to adapt and develop responsible approach towards the use of these modern facilities. In effect, exposure to technological devices has become a common place and a necessity to human existence; as the environment is saturated with their various forms.

As socializing agents, they have enhanced the development of human potentials, learn patterns, and provide timely information within an environment. These technological devices have enabled easy flow of information on daily occurrences from pin to piano. They have added speed and multi-media to the information which was previously in print format. These are major technological breakthroughs that combine human intelligence with the cutting edge technology. Boh and Adoka assert that:

The command and knowledge of digital technologies has become a necessary skill for success in the 21st century. The technological innovations and their tools are rapidly affecting, influencing and changing virtually every facet of human life; constructing new and innovative ways to use technology to improve professional operations. With emerging technological developments and enhancements, the collection and distribution of information can be accomplished at lighting speeds in almost every location, and within a global network; which have altered the ways that many individuals and businesses function (27).

While these technological devices offer numerous benefits to humans, including easy access to educational materials, social connections and entertainment, excessive screen time of children has become a major concern to parents, caregivers, educators and health care professionals. In the context of this paper, the term children refer to the demographic classification of humans between the ages of one to twelve years old. At the same time, excessive screen time refers to the amount of time spent using digital devices, such as; smart phones, tablets, computers, and televisions that exceeds recommended limits or interferes with daily activities. However, the American Academy of Paediatrics recommends that children within the ages of 2-12 years old, limit their screen time to one to two hours per day, while children under the age of 2 years old, should have no screen time except for wireless games.

Despite these professional guidelines, parents and caregivers have allowed their young ones to exceed these minimal recommendations. It is disheartening to note that many parents aid this habit by allowing their growing children to basically rely on various devices as baby sitters and nannies. These obvious substitutions of parental duties to their young ones have left a wide gap in the upbringing of most children. Perhaps, these parents are more concern about their professions and private businesses, rather than paying adequate attention to the basic needs and upbringing of their children. As such, they willingly and ignorantly provide these gadgets, and allow their children to spend significant amount of their time screwing and scrolling through them. Evidently, the devices are more or less surrogate parents to the children. It is on this light that the paper believes that when children are constantly in touch with these devices; there are no doubts that their levels of dependency and excessive screen time will be uncontrollable and incontrovertible. This compromise is as a result of biological immaturity and lack of parental guidance. Ododo believes that:

When children are left to themselves to acquire and interpret norms and values without parental critical and logical intervention, the children are likely to attach false values to some social currencies. Social discipline is not all essentially about regimentation, but about congenial constant review of social trends with one's children or wards (159).

In essence, the onus of this paper lies on the need to salvage children from excessive screen time and its perceived addiction. This could be possible through the incorporation of concepts, strategies and measures by relevant authorities to control these destructive habits. The paper suggests measures like; screen time limits, physical activities, indoor games, cognitive behavioural therapy, and many more. These are considered necessary because; children's excessive screen time has been linked to a range of negative outcomes like; obesity, sleep disturbances, social isolation or withdrawal syndrome, and decreased attention span etcetera. Consequently, this has become a growing concern for mostly parents, as their children experience symptoms of anxiety and depression whenever they are deprived access to their screens. As such, the concept of this perceived attachment and addiction to devices are therefore complex and requires urgent attention, in order to save children and ensure normalcy in their developmental process. It is on this premise that this paper highlights the dire consequences of excessive screen time on children's physical, emotional, and mental well-being, and equally advocates that parents, caregivers, educators and healthcare professionals should create, adopt and enforce strategies that can mitigate the risks associated with this menace.

Theoretical Clarifications

The paper adopts Attachment Theory propounded by John Bowlby, in the year 1958. The theory posits that children form attachment with their caregivers based on interactions. Unfortunately, today's children are growing up in a highly technological environment, where most learning's are technologically based. Therefore, the heavy consumption and dependency of children on divers' digital devices is unavoidable. Despite the fact that these devices have the capabilities to effectively persuade them to think, feel, and behave in certain desirable and undesirable ways, they also detach them from bonding with their parents and families as a result of their exclusiveness. Some studies have pointed out that human beings remember more of what they see, than what they hear. This idea increases the vulnerabilities of children; as they fall victims to the influences of what they perceive from these devices.

Attachment theory believes in cognitive and emotional development of children, as well as their social security. There is no doubt the fact that, children form attachment or bond with their parents and caregivers through physical connections. This is because they naturally seek proximity with parents, caregivers and immediate family members. Children feel more contented, self-assured and could develop sense of security in the midst of trusted people around them. Suffice it then to say that, attachment to parents and caregivers foster a sense of self-worth in children. This bond enables children to explore their environment, and take on challenges without excessive fear or anxiety. By so doing, their emotions are regulated, and their social skills and competences flourish. **Social competences** such as; communication and empathy help children to integrate and interact with one another, understand social cues, and form positive relationships. Okafor observes that “as children continuously bond, socialize and rely on their caregivers for support and guidance, their cognitive development and sense of securities are heightened, and better equipped to cope with stress and adversities” (97).

Apparently, Bowlby believes that the earliest bond formed by children and their parents have tremendous impact on their developmental process; which continues throughout their life journey. This bond is crucial because; it helps in shaping the social psychology of children, and at the same time, foster healthy relationships and resilience. Attachment theory believes that when these factors are absent in the nurturing of children, they may encounter difficulties in subsequent stages of their development. Based on this assumption, the paper reiterates that, when children's lives are extremely dependent on technological devices, especially at the early stage of their development, they are automatically disconnected from the realities of their immediate environment. Presumably, what controls their social and psychological behaviours at that material time and thereafter, are those intimate and exclusive interactions with their devices, and messages that gratify their needs. Anokam observes that:

The effects of electronic devices and print media have become a devastating influence in the life of growing children. Most of them are occupied with activities in the internet like Facebook, twitter, you-tube, Instagram, bingo and television. As such, most children are faced with challenges and stress of the use of these devices (98).

Consequently, many children spend more time corresponding on social media, rather than thinking or focusing on activities that could expand and challenge their existence. Therefore, it may be right to say that, these aspects of communication and interaction lack basic social skills, and do not guarantee adequate security to children. Attachment theory gives credence to this argument when it implies that, the basic need of children is to form bonds with their parents and caregivers, more than any other means of communication or interaction. Obviously, excessive screen time is perceived by this paper as a negative influence on children, and poses serious danger to their development. This could be factual because; it reduces face to face interaction that breeds empathy; it also intensifies the levels of mental health issues such as; anxiety, depression, decreased attention span, obesity and many more complications.

Conceptual Clarifications on Screen Time Addiction

Screen time addiction equally known as digital or internet addiction can be described as the compulsive and excessive use of digital devices; which could lead to negative consequences on social, physical and mental well-being of an individual. It could be ascribed to a situation, where people abuse the use of technological or media devices, and become dependent on them. Screen time addiction can also be labelled as a pattern of behaviour, characterized by undue and obsessive use of digital devices such as; smart phones, tablets and computers irrespective of their negative consequences. Needless to say that, this technological age comes with lots of human dependency on devices and gadgets as both interactive and educative models. Okorie describes digital device as:

A piece of physical equipment that uses data. It is an electronic device that can create, generate, send, share, communicate, and receive, store, display or process information. Today, myriad of devices are digital. Some of these include smart phones, servers' televisions, computers, smart watches, and any similar storage device which currently exist as technology development (70).

Suffice it to say that, the existence of humans in this mass mediated environment has both compensations and drawbacks. These innovations have provided soft lives and ease of information to the public from diverse outlets simultaneously, on different issues of life on daily basis. As new communication technologies are developing, their increasing sophistication and powers are enwrapping people from different parts of the world into a global village. Okunna views that "the level at which information travel round the world, has given rise to communication phenomenon as superhighway, which is limitless" (27). In the same vein, Soola acknowledges the powerful effects of mass media when he views that "the mass reach and simultaneity of the mass media have remained unparalleled by any other medium... the media therefore remains the most potent means of information transmission to a far- flung population" (49)

By implication, children are growing up in a highly technological age, where most learning's are digital and internet based. With their personal devices, they can log into any medium of their choice at their own time and pace. There is no doubt fact that these innovations have formed the basis for human existence in contemporary times. As such, for children to remain purposeful and focused, it is paramount that they should be aware and also properly guided on how to socialise with these devices. It is the opinion of Uzundu that "this novel approach to learning requires creative and critical thinking, problem solving and communication in collaboration with technological skills. The concept of digital learning is geared towards productivity and efficiency in teaching and learning, with knowledge explosions that will help individual to meet up with the global challenges" (73).

In opposition to the idea of this novel learning, many children abuse the privilege, by spending their most precious times on frivolities on internet. The most alarming consequences of these acts are their perceived addictions. Screen addiction encompasses many technological addictions, which include social media, video games, internet sobbing, pornography etcetera. Perceived addiction can be described as the experience of being unable to control or reduce screen time, irrespective of its negative consequences. The paper has noted that, constant availability of the screens, and the ease of accessing digital contents have helped in fuelling this perceived addiction in children. Many authorities have attested to the fact that, excessive screen time endangers children's healthy development. This is because; they could stay at a particular spot or place, watching and scrolling their devices for a long period of time. This act portends great risk on children's mental health and physical development because; it hinders the activation of psycho motor domain in their learning process. Maras et al observe that "excessive screen time in children "is often accompanied by physical inactivity, contributing to a range of physical and health problems, including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases, anxiety and depression. It could also lead children into social isolation, as face to face interaction and empathy is drastically reduced" (230).

It has been observed that many children abuse their screen time mostly at night. These children enter their rooms in pretence of sleeping and engage with their devices without the knowledge of their parents. This has led many children into various levels of fixations and addiction. Most parents are already displaying agitation and anxiety over these habits. Cain et al opines that "most parents have shown worries on their children's excessive screen time, delayed bedtimes, and decreased sleep quality" (210). This substantiates the standpoint of Attachment Theory which stipulates that the detachment of children from physical realities of their immediate environment could hinder their social and emotional development. Again, exposure to screen and blue light put a lot of strain to the eyes and interfere with sleep patterns. Uzundu observes that many children are presently suffering from sleep deprivation or insomnia; as using screens before bed time affect a person's sleep quality. In support of this assertion, the American Academy of Paediatrics proposes that "the blue light from technological devices can delay melatonin production, leading to lack of sleepiness" (211). In effect, it affects the eyes and disrupts critical thinking.

The paper equally notes that pornography and video games are part of the factors that contribute immensely to children's excessive screen time. The exclusiveness of these devices avails children of the opportunity to engage with both decent and indecent contents unguided. This habitual engagement has driven many children into different stages of addictions. Instances can be drawn from children who are pornographic freaks. The paper therefore opines that, early exposure of children to pornographic contents, potentially desensitizes their psychological and emotional well-being. Thus, the constant availability of pornographic contents could force children into compulsive behaviour, as they may feel driven to continue watching or seek out new contents. Exposure to pornography can affect the brain development of children, particularly in regions related to reward, motivation, and impulse control. Uko-Aviomoh views that "Internet facility has numerous advantages. A typical example of the disadvantages is the case of pornography...it shows sexual acts and images in a way that is intended to make people feel sexually excited. It creates appetite where none existed before, and cravings that should never be satisfied" (68).

Pornography is a highly addictive behaviour that could lead children on, till they advance from soft to hard core contents, without the prior knowledge of their parents and care givers. Hinkley et al posit that "Perceived addiction can hinder social emotional development in children, leading to delays in empathy, self-regulation and relationship" (109). This idea equally agrees with the postulations of Attachment Theory adopted by this paper.

Children are naturally fun seekers and game freaks. Playing video games stimulates and engages them in diver's levels of the enterprise. This is because; these games provide instant rewards such as; points, badges, and level ups. As such, it activates their brain's reward system that encourages continuous playing. Its multip layer configurations offer exciting social interaction to children. This is a powerful motivator; as they feel the pressure to keep playing, in order to maintain social connections with the already established online communities. Online video games help children to fondly connect, interact and engage with their mates from different locations at the same time. When children are playing these online games, they usually feel more alert and unnecessarily agitated over the outcome of the game. The game releases the feel good hormones that creates or stimulates pleasurable sensations, thereby motivating children to play more. This is the strong hold of Attachment Theory because; video games are characterized by compulsive and problematic gaming behaviour that leads to addiction. Addicted children may choose to play video games over tending to other obligations or responsibilities, such as domestic chaos, academic exercises and other social interactions. They may become angry or irritable when their gaming behaviour is criticized or their ability to game becomes compromised.

The appealing nature and design of these devices have majorly contributed to excessive screen time of children. These smart devices often incorporate features that encourage prolong use, such as; infinite scrolling, notifications, and rewards. As such, they hold a person's attention for long period of time, leading to addictive tendencies. The consequences of screen time addiction can be severe and far-reaching. The paper notes that most children exhibit tremor and anxiety when they are denied access to their devices. Kuss supports this argument when he views that "perceived addiction can increase the risk of mental health issues, including anxiety, depression, and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD)" (91). This establishes the necessity for urgent attention on the frequency and duration of children's screen time engagement.

The purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide effective strategies that could save children from excessive screen time and its perceived addiction. Some specific objectives are to

- Awaken the consciousness of parents to the dangers with the provision digital screens to their underage children.
- Generate information and knowledge on the need to monitor children's engagement with the media.
- Mitigate perceived addiction from excessive screen time of children.

Research questions

1. How do children engage in excessive screen time?
2. What are the effects of excessive screen time?
3. How can children's excessive screen time be controlled?

Research Design and Methodology

A survey research design was employed by this study. The population consisted of one hundred parents that are randomly selected from different categories in Owerri municipal. The researcher administered questionnaire items to one hundred people who voluntarily accept to respond to the questions. The instrument was a fifteen item questionnaire designed for the investigation. However, one hundred copies of the instrument were given out and eighty were retrieved and used for the study.

Demographic Characteristics of 85 Respondents

Age of Respondents

20 - 40 years = 26

40 – 60 years = 59 = 85 Respondents

Gender of Respondents

Male – 24

Female – 61 = 85

Level of Education

Secondary Level – 32

Graduate Level – 53 = 85

Data Presentations and Discussion

The instrument used for the study was titled: **Children's Excessive Screen Habits and Implications**

Simple percentages were used in analysing the 85 responses from the fifteen questionnaire items.

1. The provisions of digital screens to children are necessary for 21st century skills and competences.
Yes – 70%
No - 30%
2. Many parents are substituting their parental duties by providing digital screens to their young children as nannies and surrogate parents.
Yes - 56%
No – 44%
3. Many children spend more time corresponding on social media, rather than focusing on more profitable activities.
Yes – 60%
No – 40%
4. Digital devices enable children to learn better and faster.
Yes – 45%
No – 55%
5. Children who are constantly in use of digital screens develop social isolation and withdrawal syndrome
Yes – 57%
No – 43%
6. Many parents are experiencing concern towards their children excessive screen engagement
Yes – 60%
No – 40%
7. Excessive screen use contributes to children's sleep deprivation and physical inactivity
Yes – 71%
No – 29%
8. Excessive screen time of children consciously or unconsciously contributes to their distractions in their academics.
Yes – 58%
No – 42%
9. Many children are addicted to digital screens
Yes – 70%
No – 30%
10. Screen addiction affects children's socio- psychological development
Yes – 63%
No – 37%

11. Screen addiction affects the mental stability of children.
Yes – 51%
No – 49%
12. Can indoor games, physical activities and other cognitive behavioural therapy help in the control of excessive screen time of children?
Yes – 63%
No – 37%
13. Do children display anxiety and depression whenever they are deprived of screen use?
Yes – 73%
No – 27%
14. Can effective monitoring and guidance of children help in checkmating screen time addiction?
Yes – 74%
No – 26%
15. Can awareness campaigns help in reawakening the consciousness of parents to the dangers associated with excessive screen time and possible addiction?
Yes – 63%
No – 37%

Discussion of Result

The first item of the questionnaire investigates whether the provisions of digital screens to children are necessary for 21st century skills and competences.

In response to item 1 of the instrument, 70% of parents affirmed that digital devices are important and necessary for 21st century challenges, while 30% believe that people survive without technological devices.

Item 2 of the questionnaire tries to find out if some parents, as a result of their work schedule and profession directly or indirectly substitute their parental duties to their children by providing digital screens to them. 56% of parents responded to positively to this, while 44% disagreed.

Item 3 views that many children in recent time spend more time corresponding on social media, rather than focusing on more profitable activities. 60% of parents agreed to this, while 40% disagreed.

Item 4 stipulates that digital devices enable children to learn better and faster. From the responses, 45% of parents agreed to this assertion, while 55% disagreed. This means that screens or devices do not aid children to either faster or better learning capacity.

Item 5 states that children who are constantly in use of digital screens develop social isolation or withdrawal syndrome. 57% of parents affirm to this view, while 43% disagreed.

Item 6 opines that many parents are experiencing concern towards their children excessive screen engagement. 60% of responses were generated from parents who agreed to the view, while 40% disagreed.

Item 7 emphasised that excessive screen use contributes to children's sleep deprivation and physical inactivity. The responses gathered for this shows that 71% of parents agreed, while 29% declined.

Item 8 views that excessive screen time of children consciously or unconsciously contributes to their distractions in their academics. While 58% of parents responded positively, 42% were negative.

Item 9 emphasized that many children are addicted to digital screens. While 70% agreed, 30% disagreed.

Item 10 investigate whether screen addiction affects children's socio- psychological development. 63% of respondents agreed to this view, while 27% rejected the view.

Item 11 tries to understand whether screen addiction affects children's socio- psychological development. While 63% respondents agreed, 27% disagreed.

Item 12 investigates whether indoor games, physical activities and other cognitive behavioural therapy could help to control excessive screen time of children. Responses from parents show that 63% agreed, while 37% disagreed.

Item 13 investigates if children display anxiety and depression whenever they are deprived of their screen use. Responses generated from this item shows that 73% of parents were positive, while 27% were negative.

Item 14 tries to prove if effective monitoring and guidance of children could help in checkmating screen time addiction. The responses generated from this proved that 74% of parents agreed, while 26% disagreed.

Item 15 examines whether awareness campaigns could help to awaken the consciousness of parents to the dangers of children's excessive screen time and possible addiction. While 63% affirmed to this, 37% rejected the opinion.

The Need for Digital Detox of Children from Excessive Screen Time

Digital detox refers to a period of time when a person voluntarily or forcefully refrains from using digital devices such as smart phone, computers, televisions, and other electronic gadgets. The aim of digital detox is to disconnect addictive people from the digital world. This ideology gives the people a period of time to relax their minds, recharge their faculties and refocus on their physical world. This could be the best option for children who have excessive screen time or addicted to the screen. This idea is not opposed too necessarily tilted towards giving up all screen use. Rather, it is a strategy that encourages users, especially children to cut down their screen time to avoid extreme devastation in their developmental journey. Perceivably, it is an effective way of resetting and creating healthier habits and relationships with screen use, in other to eradicate or avert the looming dangers associated with the act. It is on this light that the paper elucidates on some of the strategies that could enabledigital detox on children.

The first approach is for parents and caregivers to ensure that their children will not have access to sophisticated digital devices at early stage of their development. This should be in accordance with the recommendations of American Academy of Paediatrics because; providing these gadgets to children at infant stage, displaces their duties as parents. The idea of children perceiving digital devices as surrogate parents, and their limitless engagement could lead to addiction. There is need to understand that children have tender frames that may not be able to deal with some extreme contents or rationally inculcate screen time management.

The second approach is for parents and caregivers to set boundaries for those children that are of age to access the screens, in order to limit their engagements. Therefore children's screen time should for optimal effects, be limited to one to two hours per day. This is because; taking breaks from screens can create an overall healthier relationship, and changes the perception of looking at screen time as a necessity to an activity of choice. Consistently enforcing these limits and boundaries will help children to understand the importance of balancing screen time activities.

Thirdly, educating children on digital and online safety, and practicing mindfulness therapy are crucial to enabling digital detox. Parents and caregivers should expose children to the potential dangers associated with excessive screen time, such as; pornography, video games, social media and internet abuses. Practicing mindfulness therapy and its strategies could go a long way in helping children to make informed decisions on stress and anxiety management, which are often common triggers from screen use. Children will be more present and aware of their thoughts and feelings if screen times are reduced.

Fourthly, engaging in creative and imaginative indoor games is essential to children's cognitive, social and emotional development. **Cognitive behavioural therapy (CBT)** encourages children to change their thoughts and behaviours related to screen use. CBT can help children to develop new and healthy coping skills, and learn to utilize their time and energy more appropriately. This involves the provision of creative materials such as; arts and crafts supplies, building blocks, dolls etcetera. The act of engaging in creative plays helps children to develop problem solving and critical thinking skills. These are necessary skills that will help them be constructive, rational and develop healthier relationship with their devices. In essence, finding new hobbies and interests is capable of reducing dependency on devices.

Most importantly, there is need for timely intervention whenever children start exhibiting signs of addiction. Therefore, seeking professional assistance is essential to digital detox in children. On this note, parents and caregivers are required to consult with healthcare professionals, such as paediatricians or therapists, at the slightest suspicion of a child's screentime addiction. Professional help can provide the necessary support system and guidance that will encourage healthy screen habits.

Conclusion

This paper explored the concerns of parents and caregivers on the impact of excessive screen time on children's physical, emotional and mental well-being. It opines that understanding the causes, consequences and preventions is a core pathway towards grooming or nurturing well-adjusted children. This is because; excessive screen time has led many children into perceived addiction, social isolation, and decreased physical activities. However, it states the relevance of promoting healthy screen habits amongst children by providing practical tips and strategies that will help children to inculcate positive relationship with the screen. The paper also advocates that parents, caregivers, educators, and healthcare professionals should collaborate to ensure that the strategies are functional in homes, schools etcetera. This will go a long way in achieving children's healthy screen habit.

Recommendations

Parents and caregivers should stick to the recommendations of American Paediatrics Association, which stipulates the regulation of children's screen time engagement, in order to limit the chances of addiction. Parents should provide censored and educational tablets for their young ones, instead of giving them sophisticated smart phones with internet facilities as birthday gifts. It is equally the duty of parents to ensure that moral rectitude is entrenched into the social development of their children. Hence, educating them on the negative effects of excessive screen time and perceived addictions is paramount. The paper establishes the need for children to balance their screen time by engaging in extra-curricular activities as coping mechanisms.

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