



Parents' Guide of Good Practices in the Digital Era

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Chapter 1: Living in the digital era



The alarm on the phone sets off. It is time to wake up! The whole family is on the move with school and work beginning soon. On our way to school and work, we use Waze to find the shortest route. I connect my phone to the car's loudspeaker and the happy music of our favourite Spotify album cheers us up. I am an architect so I use digital programs for designing houses. My husband I basically, work on computers all day long. Our children have computer science, regularly use the smart TVs, tablets and other digital devices at school.

Personal phones are not used during classes. However, once the school program is over, they activate their phones and I can check their location anytime. In the evening, my husband is watching a pod cast, my daughter enjoys a film on Netflix and my son is playing a computer game.

I have just bought some school stuff online and now, I am checking to see how many calories I have burnt today.

Technology is an important part of our lives and it just comes so naturally to use it. Surely, technical devices come with a series of opportunities and benefits for our children and families:

- We can communicate fast and easily;
- We have quick access to information;
- We can share experiences through videos, photos, messages;
- The Internet is the largest bank of ideas and is being continuously updated;
- We get a sense of community though social networking;
- By meeting people from all over the world we can challenge our cultural stereotypes;
- We can develop our own voice;



- Technology is widely used in education and life-long learning;
- Encourages civic participation;
- It is fun and entertaining;
- It breaks boundaries for the socially, materially or physically disadvantaged;
- It is widely used for everyday tasks: tax payment, banking, online shopping etc.

New devices can also replace a series of everyday objects. Let's just think of smart phones! They can replace alarm clocks, compasses, calculators, maps, wall calendars, your personal agenda, letters, greeting cards, copybooks, books, bank credit cards, scanners, telephones, video cameras, a great variety of dictionaries, any kind of device that allows you to listen to music, audio-recorders, mirrors, televisions, radios and the even computers. Phew!

Some real data about digital usage:

- The number of people that own smart and feature phone is 7.26 billion, making up 91.54% of the world's population (Bankmycell.com);
- In US nearly one-in-five parents of a child 11 or younger say that their child has their own smartphone. 95% of US teens own or have access to a smartphone and 45% say they are online "almost constantly" (Pew Research Center)
- According to GSMA real-time intelligence data, there are over 10.57 billion mobile connections worldwide, which surpasses the current world population of 8 billion implied by UN digital analyst estimates. However, the data also implies mobile connections that come from people with multiple devices and a fraction with dual SIM's or other integrated devices like cars. (Bankmycell)



- Despite the discouragement of the American Academy of Paediatrics, 90% of children, less than 2 years of age, have some type of screen time, usually TV. This does not include exposure to 4 hours or more of “background” TV, where the adult has the TV on—whether paying attention to it or not.
- Mobile phones are the most popular devices used to go online, a notable shift over the past decade when in Europe and North America, the first generation of internet users logged on via desktop computers, but the pattern in the global South has clearly been mobile first (UNICEF)
- Among the many activities available online, watching video clips was the most popular for both girls and boys, with over 3/4 of internet-using children watching online videos at least weekly, either alone or with family and friends. (UNICEF)
- Children are twice as likely to watch TV programmes on video-on-demand (VoD) than live TV. Almost all children (96%) watched any type of VoD compared to just over half (56%) watching live TV (Ofcom.org.uk)
- 2,617 is the number of times a user clicks, taps or swipes phone daily and four hours and 10 minutes is the average time a person spends on smartphones daily.

Affecting every aspect of our daily lives, technology is here to stay. Denying access is almost impossible. What we need though is digital literacy and seeing technology as a portal to a new world that also needs to be governed by laws and rules. We need to raise awareness of safe digital habits and develop healthy attitudes towards screen time. The best time to form such habits and attitudes is when children are aged 5-12 and we hope that the present Guide of Good



Practices will help you do it.

Chapter 2: Digital safety

2.1. Main dangers that can affect children

a. Physical effects

Excessive use of digital technology is associated with a variety of physical conditions. It is essential to note that most of these associations are based on observational studies, so it is difficult to determine which is the cause and which is the effect. For example, obesity is associated with extensive technology use. However, research cannot determine whether a present tendency to obesity led to long hours of sitting on a chair and having screen time or whether the child using the technology moved so little that he/she became obese.

Screen use is associated with the following physical problems:

- Deficient posture: the so-called text neck (a repetitive stress injury to the neck caused by having your head in a forward position for extended period);



- Musculoskeletal pains in the back and fingers, joint pains as well as headaches;
- Poor eye-sight;
- Impairment of hearing caused by exposure to noise (observed in 12,5% of American children aged 6-19 according to American Center for Disease Control and Prevention);
- Sleep disorders (Kutscher, 2017);
- Poor eating habits and child obesity;
- Restlessness. (The irony is that children who are more active physically, do better when sitting in desks at school as compared to children who spend a lot of screen time (Kilbey, 2017);
- Accidents because of the misuse of technology (e.g. while walking, climbing stairs, driving, etc.);
- Selfie deaths to take the perfect picture (BBC news reported 259 people between 2011 and 2017).

b. Concentration and attention problems

Why can our children play for hours and be focused and when it comes to writing an essay or solving a test, they have a much shorter attention span? This happens because games appeal to our sensory attention and attract us through motion, colour and design. An essay or a test lack this variety of sensorial stimulation and imply sustained voluntary attention. (Kutscher, 2017).

When talking about concentration and attention problems, we should take into consideration the following findings:

- Internet practices make children shift from one activity to the other, unable to



concentrate on one activity for a longer period of time, especially if this activity is challenging. Probably you have heard that today we have a shorter attention span than a goldfish, which is 9 seconds. This was revealed by a Microsoft Corp. study on 2 000 participants that found that "people now generally lose concentration after eight seconds, highlighting the effects of an increasingly digitalized lifestyle on the brain" (Time.com <https://time.com/>);

- Children exposed more than 2 hours to technology are twice more exposed to concentration problems at school (Swing.E.L., Anderson, C.A, et al., 2010). The same study reveals that these children showed less self-control and are more impulsive;

- According to literature, multi-tasking, does not exist. We multi-switch back and

forth so frequently from one activity to another that we get the sensation that we are doing two things simultaneously, but actually, we are only paying attention to one thing at any given moment (Kutscher, 2017). Checking phones for messages while doing homework can short circuit our thoughts, taking time to recover and reducing our memorizing abilities;

- The instant gratification and bonuses that they get during screen playtime is different from the rhythm in education and everyday life. In real life, strong relationships and work satisfaction are achieved through hard work in a slow process;

- Extensive screen time has a negative impact on school achievement and academic results (Weis R. and Cerankosky, B.C., 2010).

c. Addiction

Have you noticed that your child:



- Wants to use the digital technology excessively, losing sense or time and even neglecting basic needs like hunger?
- Becomes angry, tense or depressed when trying to stop screen-time?
- Craves for better software and hardware to achieve faster and better results?
- Lies, is constantly tired and his academic achievements are low?

According to Young, these behaviours are an indicator of screen-time addiction. While we are having screen-time dopamine, the so-called pleasure chemical is released in our bodies. A recent study showed that video gaming releases a comparable amount of dopamine as drugs such as amphetamines and Ritalin (Kilbey, 2017).

Possible types of addiction:

- Internet addiction According to Statista, as of April 2022, there were 5 billion internet users worldwide, which is 63% of the global population. In total, the average internet user currently spends around 7 hours each day using multiple devices, the equivalent to 49 hours a week or two full days each week (Statista DataReportal, 2021). Estimates suggest that more than 210 million people worldwide suffer from addiction to social media and the internet (Science Direct, 2022). Internet addiction is associated with changes involving emotional processing, executive attention, decision making and cognitive control (Kilbey, 2017);
- Video game addiction Playing video games can lead to improved eye-hand coordination, enhanced spatial visualization and education games can contribute to better academic achievements. Gaming is a huge industry with a game market that generated in 2021 total revenues of \$180.3 billion (Newzoo, Global Games Market Report, 2022) and with more than 3 billion active players.



On average video gamers spend 6 hours and 20 minutes each week playing video games (Limelight Networks, 2020). Addicted gamers play video games between

80 to 100 hours per week (HealthyPlace, 2021). It is common for a video game addict to spend over 10 hours a day gaming, usually well into the night, even at the cost of sleep deprivation (Game Quitters, acquired 2021);

- Nomophobia is the official term for mobile phone addiction. Merriam Webster

simply defines it as the fear of being without access to a working cell phone (Financesonline, 2022). People who suffer from nomophobia can even think that their phone is vibrating or ringing when it is not (DailyWireless, 2020). With almost 18% parents who spend more time with their cell phones than with their children, 45.5% unlocking their phones between 51-100 times daily and a 4h10 min average time to spend on a smartphone daily (Financesonline, 2022),

no wonder mobile phone addiction is becoming a serious problem.

d. Risks of social media

In the last 10 years, children's online experiences have changed considerably, with YouTube becoming increasingly popular, and text messaging giving way to WhatsApp and Instagram. Here are some data that would help us understand the magnitude of the social media phenomenon:

- According to Eurostat, Broadband internet access was used by 90 % of the households in the EU in 2021. There were 2.94 billion monthly active users use of Facebook, Twitter had some 330 million monthly active users, WhatsApp more than 2 billion users in 2021.



- There are over 100 billion messages exchanged on WhatsApp daily (Eurostat) and children spend an average of 44 minutes daily on WhatsApp (Qustodio). The percentage of parents who block WhatsApp on their children's phones varies between 21.65% (in Spain) and just 2% of parents in the USA) (Qustodio).
- In Europe, a considerable number of 9 to 11-year-olds report visiting a social networking site every day, ranging from 11% in Germany to 45% in Serbia (EU Kids Online 2020). Watching videos, listening to music, communicating with friends and family, visiting a social networking site and playing online games top the list of activities that children do on a daily basis. Young people use social media to connect to global communities based on shared interests.

Some of the benefits of social media for children are:

- digital media literacy by developing digital skills and online risks awareness;
- collaborative learning: schools use social media to share educational content;
- global awareness: children become aware of worldwide trends and movements;
- creativity, when children create profile pages, edit photos or videos;
- mental health and wellbeing when connecting to extended family and friends.

Also, connecting to global online communities can give a sense of belonging and lead to impactful civic actions.

Some of the social media risks according to Raising Children Network are:

- being exposed to inappropriate or upsetting content, like mean, aggressive, violent or sexual comments or images;
- uploading inappropriate content, like embarrassing or provocative photos or videos of themselves or others;



- sharing personal information with strangers – for example, phone numbers, date of birth, location, photos and videos;

- cyberbullying; ChildLine has seen an 88% increase in calls about online bullying

over the past five years. Cyberbullying includes sending threatening or abusive text messages, creating and sharing embarrassing images, trolling – the sending of menacing or upsetting message on social network, excluding children from online games or friendship groups, setting up hate sites, encouraging young people to self-harm and others (Kilbey, 2017);

- poor body image and low self-confidence by comparing themselves to real or fictional people, images or storylines;

- harmed relationships as a result of less meaningful human interactions and too

much time spent online;

- distorted perspective of reality given by either constructing a different identity or being the victim of Catfishing (when a person takes information and images from other people, and uses them to create a new identity for themselves in order to trick other people into associating with them or doing business online);

- misconception of reality and manipulation due to the fact that children do not check the truthfulness of the source of information (under half of children aged 8-15 who used search engines could correctly identify adverts on Google searches, and about half realized that some sites within a search engine's results could be trusted and some couldn't. Also, two-thirds of 12-15s



recognized that vloggers and influencers might be sponsored to say good things about products or brands (Pew Research).

Parents should be aware that most social media platforms have age restrictions: the minimum age for Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Snapchat is 13, for WhatsApp is 16 and for YouTube is 18. A recent survey found that 53% of parents did not realize that there was a minimum age and one in five parents were unaware there were any age restrictions at all (Kilbey, 2017).

e. Special groups of children in the digital world

Here, we will refer to children aged up to two, those with ADHD and children that are on the autism spectrum. Children up to two The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) recommends that babies younger than 18 months get no screen time at all, including television. Toddlers 18 months to 24 months old can enjoy some screen time with a parent or caregiver. Children this age can learn when an adult is there to reinforce lessons (KidsHealth, 2022). Several studies have associated heavy TV use at this age with language delay, especially if the child watches alone (Kutscher, 2017).

Children with ADHD and screen time

Children with ADHD cannot block out incoming stimuli resulting in trouble focusing on activities and becoming easily distracted. Their sensory attention system keeps them glued to the movement, sounds, and challenges of digital media, putting them at risk for addiction.

Scientists estimate that addiction in the ADHD population runs as high as 25%—much higher than in the control population (Kutscher, 2017). Digital games, for example, seem to have a double negative impact on children with



ADHD: they reinforce the negative traits such as lack of patience and the need for immediate rewards, and diminish opportunities to develop the positives such as sports or outdoor play. When online, ADHD kids, lose out on opportunities to practice

controlling impulsivity, attention, socialization, and self-control issues (Kutscher, 2018).

Unfortunately, internet and especially gaming activity is in line with the persistent deficits in social communication and interaction of children with autism. In the virtual world, there is no need to read or convey body language or emotions and no need to understand relationships. On the other hand, there is time to formulate the response at your own pace and re-invent yourself as you want. Games and online activities can fuel the need for repetitive patterns, intense or fixed interests and visual fascination with lights or movement. Communication and coping with the pressures of the real world is easier via digital media with the majority of people with ASD. It is like a buffer that helps them process information in the real world more easily. The result?

Research says that autistic children spend more time on screen than children who do not have autism (Autism Parenting Magazine, 2021).

On the other hand, there are also benefits associated with using digital devices. Video games are based on repetition of a particular scenario, they are predictable and thus, induce calming effects for children with autism. Digital devices also provide autistic kids with a setting where they can control the audio and visual stimuli. Many times, technology is used in the rewarding system and different apps serve as a tool for therapy.



2.2 PRACTICAL ADVICE FOR PARENTS

How do I model a healthy, safe screen time for my child?

a. Role model and limit your own screen time. Ask yourself the same questions:

Do you check or talk on the phone during meals? Do you interrupt a conversation with your child only because the phone rings or you get a message? Do you have more than 2 hours of screen time entertainment? Do you keep the TV / computer on when you are not really watching it?

b. Talk to your child to raise awareness about screen time risks and dangers;

c. Treat media as you would any other environment in your child's life (Healthy children.org):

- Set limits of what to do and what to watch (kids need and expect them);
- Know where they "go", meaning what platforms, software and apps your children are using, what sites they are visiting and what they are doing online; some parents even befriend their children online, but this does not always lead to positive results;
- Co-view, co-play and co-engage. Show interest in their online activities both to show that you care and for their safety;
- Encourage children to confide in you, no matter what problems they may encounter.

d. Model kindness and good manners online;

e. Design some definite screen-time areas in your home. Mind that there should



not be screens in the bedroom and children should not view a screen for two hours before bedtime. The reason is a screen's blue light can prevent the brain from knowing when it's time to get ready for sleep.

f. Set healthy limits like:

- Use parental controls on hardware and software to limit content and time;
- Pay attention to age limitation and content ratings. In order to find out the ratings you can use free ESRB Rating Search App);
- Set explicit rules regarding time, content and placement of devices before acquiring or using technology for the first time and re-set these rules whenever new technology is introduced; these rules can also be reset when the children go or finish their holidays or when children enter a different age category;
- Avoid multi-switching by establishing times for screen time and time for homework or work;
- Agree as a family on the terms for using screen time and design a written Family

Screen-time Agreement or a Family Media Use Plan to be signed by all parts (state time, place, content of digital technology along with fair consequences to comply with the rules);

- Monitor technology with technology: filter using software and renew these filters periodically; these filters can offer a sense of comfort and security but parents should combine these with discussions about digital safety;
- Use location services (with Family Link, Find My on iPhone, Microsoft Family Safety etc.) which can be used not only to know where your child is but also to locate a stolen device or know where your friends are;
- Make children aware of their Digital Footprint (every interaction that we make



online leaves a trail that others, such as future employers, may find on searching for the child's name. According to a 2018 CareerBuilder survey, 70% of employers check out applicants' profiles as part of their screening process, and 54% have rejected applicants because of what they found (Harvard Business Review, 2021)

- As for screen-time addiction remember:
 - o Any addiction is better to prevent than to treat;
 - o Moderate the use of technology and set bottom-line behaviours like "We never use the computer after 20.00";
 - o Ask for the help of a therapist if you think you lost control.

- Offer other family fun time: outdoor play, game board games, Lego-time etc.

Here are WHO's (World Health Organization) screen time recommendations by age:

- Infant (less than 1 year of age): Screen time is not recommended.
- 1-2 years of age: No screen time for a 1-year-old. No more than an hour for 2-year-olds, with less time preferred.
- 3 to 4 years old: No more than one hour.

OSF Healthcare recommends:

- No more than one hour per day co-viewing with a parent or sibling for children aged 2-5;
- Generally, no more than two hours per day, except for homework for children 5-17 years old.



CHAPTER 3: PARENTS' TOOLKIT

This chapter will show you how to use software tools that allow you to monitor and limit what your child sees and does online. They can be set up to do things like:

- Block your child from accessing specific websites, apps or functions;
- Filter different kinds of content;
- Allow you to monitor your child's use of connected devices;
- Set time limits, blocking access after a set time.



Note that no parental control tool is 100% effective. Helping your child build good online safety habits through conversation is just as important.

Next, explore how to use parental controls:

- On the wi-fi network;
- Built into devices, including on computers, mobile devices, gaming consoles and smart TVs;
- Through commercial software;
- In apps and programs, including streaming services, web browsers and search engines.

1. On the wi-fi network;

Wi-fi routers can help by managing who has access to what online content, and when. You can limit internet time (even scheduling for specific devices), restrict specific websites (you can choose which URLs to block on different devices in your home) or pause the wi-fi connection. If you like the router you already own but want to add parental controls, there are add-on devices out there to help. Plug-in modules like the Circle Home Plus co-act to your router and manage

internet access for multiple connected devices. Some devices and apps can even budget a certain number of minutes to each device, then allow children to earn more internet time by doing chores around the house. That's a great way to teach children to responsibly manage and balance their screen time without a parent wrenching the device out of their hands.

**2. Built into devices, including on mobile devices, computers,
gaming consoles and smart TVs**

a. Apple and Android devices



Children can be kept safe with text monitoring, web filtering, family locator, time limit setting and blackout periods with Qustodio and Google Family Link. This way, healthy routines can be created at an early age. You need to have Google accounts for Family Link. A Google Account also gives you Google-wide access to most Google products, such as Google Play Store, Gmail, Google Drive and YouTube.

b. Built into desktops and computers

For PC/Windows use Microsoft Family. It provides the ability to manage your children's online activity on Windows devices through website blocking, checking in online at any time, and viewing activity reports on sites, apps and games visited; needs Microsoft accounts. Mac OS X Parental Controls - this software limits access to websites or apps, restricts functions like Siri or the iTunes store, sets time limits for days of the week and for bedtime, and hides profanity in the dictionary and other sources. Note that some brands like Lenovo and Samsung offer in built parental controls.

c. Built into gaming consoles and smart TVs

Every major gaming console provides parental control measures.

Most Smart TVs offer internet browsers and, while connected to your home broadband, will apply any parental control filters you have set to prevent your children from seeing anything inappropriate.

3. Through commercial software;

Commercial software can provide additional control and convenience, generally for a price. Some products are designed to be installed on each device while others use special hardware in conjunction with your wi-fi router. Some are accredited under the Family Friendly Filters scheme. They tend to operate as a



subscription service. Some of the best commercial software for parental control in 2022 were: Qustodio, Bark, Net Nanny, mSPy, Norton Family or Mobicip.

4. In apps and programs, including streaming services, web browsers and search engines.

- Special apps for kids include educational apps or YouTube Kids which is a kid-targeted version of YouTube for children up to 12. It features curated, ad-supported TV shows, music educational videos and user-created content suitable for this age. According to educational appstore.com, there were 520,000 apps listed as educational in 2022.

This site compiled a list of the best apps for schools, as well as the best iPad apps and best apps for kids for parents and teachers to enjoy. Check it out!

- Streaming services: Subscription services such as Netflix, HBO Max, Stan, Foxtel Now and Amazon Prime all provide parental controls for families. In addition, you can subscribe to apps specially designed for families with children like Disney+.

- Web Browsers and search engines. Web browsers provide the door to the online world, and search engines are the way we explore that world. Some safe browsing tips are:

- ❖ encourage younger children to always ask an adult before clicking on an 'Accept' or 'OK' button and set up bookmarks in their browser for sites you would like them to use.
- ❖ In most search engines, you can activate 'Safe Search' to filter the search results so they don't include inappropriate or explicit content like sexual content.



CHAPTER 4: EXAMPLES OF GOOD PRACTICES DEVELOPED BY THE PARTNER SCHOOLS