

“Addicted to Digital Devices”: Practice Safe Social Media

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by Dr. Devra Davis

There's a physiological side to the effects of social media on the developing or developed brain that needs to be considered. Young children are at special risk.

A baby's brain more than doubles during the first year of life. The faster cells are growing, the greater the possibility that they can take up mistakes.

Also, there is growing evidence of addiction to the devices that are physiological and not merely social. Just try taking one away from a cranky toddler who is glued to a screen.

Myelin is a fatty protective sheath that surrounds brain cells called neurons. Myelination is the process of acquiring this protection that takes place throughout childhood and adolescence and is not actually complete until the mid-20s and a little bit later in young males than females.

Low-powered but erratic pulses of microwave radiation from cell phones and other digital devices have been shown to interfere with myelin formation. This could increase the lifetime risk of developing neurodegenerative diseases such as Parkinson's and other problems such as hearing deficits and tinnitus – chronic ringing in the ears.

In fact iPhones today, and all smart phones, come with warnings that are buried deep within the phone to tell you not to keep the phone directly on the body. Advice about this can be found at local clinics including Dr. Mark Menolascino out in Wilson, Teton Orthopedics, Teton Dermatology and Jackson pediatrics, as well as downloads on HealthTrust.org.

Recently, the government of South Korea concluded that one in five of its young people is addicted to digital devices.

Neuropsychiatrists in that nation have diagnosed a new category of brain damage called digital dementia. This results when the left and right hemispheres of the brain become stunted and do not develop adequately. Growing numbers of young people have been diagnosed with this problem and have the inability to remember numbers, difficulties in establishing eye contact and with empathy, and problems in impulse control and concentration.

While it may be cute to watch a toddler with sweet stubby fingers enchanted by the digital screen, we have no idea what this electronic stimulation is doing to rapidly developing brain cells or that child's ability to become a socially responsible and engaged adult. That's why the American Academy of Pediatrics has consistently warned that children need more lap time than app time.

There's no doubt that these new devices have opened up new frontiers in art and science. But we have to ask how we can use them in safer ways that protect the growing brain and also promote a real sense of social engagement and belonging.

Your cover story [July 23] highlighted the creative art produced by talented young people today using digital media and did acknowledge that "it will take your life over if you let it, but it's not real ..."

If you must give the device to a cranky toddler, please disconnect from the Internet and put it on airplane mode so that it will not be sending and receiving microwave radiation more than once every second.

While these devices are referred to as social media, ironically they often lead to people being alienated from one another.

As I dictate this note to you from Café Bohème, using a speakerphone with the device not on my body, I sit across the room from a small table where a young boy has been glued to his electronic game for more than one hour while his father is working on his own device. Neither has said a word to the other one or looked the other in the eye. The room contains five people all intensely connected electronically to their own devices, but none connecting socially to anyone or anything around them.

During yesterday's Jenny Lake boat ride, a group of tourists was holding their iPads and other devices up to film the ride rather than directly experiencing it with one another. We now live in a world where many people find it more important to video or snap the world in which they exist to share with the anonymous throngs online rather than talk to the person standing next to them.

Indeed as your article notes, #Connectedbutalone.

"We have the ability to connect with people all over the world, yet people are more separate than ever before."

I hope that your paper will continue to promote a balanced discussion of how we can use this technology so that it doesn't erode the social fabric of our lives or result in population-wide brain damage from which we can never recover.

ehtrust.org, FB campaign for safer phones, @DevraLeeDavis

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