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Research Paper

Excessive Screen Time in Children: A Review of Causes, Effects and Preventive Strategies

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ABSTRACT

Screens have become a crucial part of children's life in this digital age, it is continuously changing the way of learning, socialization and connection to the world. This paper aims to identify the problem of increasing screen time and digital dependence in children, in which we have tried to identify its root causes, social and developmental effects and possible solutions. Initial unmonitored use of electronic gadgets, lack of outdoor sports, changing family structures and algorithm dependent digital platforms are responsible for the increasing screen time in children. Many researches shows that high screen time in children can cause many developmental problems like delayed language development, impaired cognitive and social skills, sleep disturbance and emotional instability. According to WHO (World health organization) and IAP (Indian Academy of Paediatrics), most of the children spends more than the recommended time on digital screen, and this problem has increased during and after the COVID-19. This study highlights mindful parenting, co-viewing and structured digital lifestyle as key strategies for a balanced use of technology. Additionally, it also points the importance of family bonding, outdoor play and digital literacy programs in schools. In the end this study emphasize that in this age of distraction, the cognitive and emotional development of children is only possible with the collective efforts of parents, teachers and society.

Keywords: *Screen time, Digital addiction, Child Psychology, Parenting, Psychosocial Well-being*

We are living in the age where we are surrounded by digital screens and information is continuously flowing through online platforms and children also have easy access of this. On one hand where it is a mode of entertainment, learning and communication on the other hand it poses some challenges which earlier generation never faced.[1]

Childhood is a vital age for cognitive, social and emotional development which is being highly impacted through the screens and streaming platforms. Change in daily routine and attention pattern is a growing concern in India and worldwide.

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Electronic devices have undoubtedly revolutionized the way of communication and learning but its overuse or misuse can have negative effects on the development and behaviour of children. Researches shows that excessive use of screens can cause disturbance in sleep, obesity, low academic performance and behavioural problems. [2,3,4]

A meta-analysis by Khobragade et al. showed that in India, children under 5 years of age spends an average of 2.22 hours per day on screen which is more than twice of the limit recommended by the Indian Academy of Paediatrics (IAP). This study also showed that children under 2 years of age spends on average of 1.23 hours per day on screen, however the IAP advices complete avoidance of screen for this age group.[5]

WHO recommends less than 1 hour of screen time for the children under 5 years of age and also highlights importance of physical activity and adequate sleep for the healthy development of children.[6]

Parents today are caught between the educational potential and the risks associated with the technology. According to a UNICEF report, 68% parents across 12 countries are worried about the screen habit of their children and over 40% admitted that they are struggling to effectively manage their children's screen time.[7]

These worries more intensified during the COVID-19 pandemic, because the screen time in children nearly doubled in that period, which caused increase in sleeping problems and anxiety level.[8]

The purpose of this paper is to present an evidence-based overview of causes, effects and strategies to limit the excessive screen time in children, so that to guide parents, teachers and policy makers for the healthy development of children in this age of distraction.

Objectives of the Study

The main objectives of this study are as follows:

1. To identify and analyze the main causes of excessive screen time and digital dependence.
2. To analyze the psychological, behavioural and developmental effects of prolonged screen exposure on children's well-being
3. To review the role of parenteral behaviour, family structure and socio-cultural factors on the digital habit of children.
4. To recommend the scientific and culturally suitable strategies to decrease the digital addiction in children.
5. To suggest practical solutions to parents, teachers and policy makers to promote balanced and mindful use of technology in this digital age.

METHODOLOGY

This study followed narrative review approach to gather and analyze the researches available on the excessive screen time in children, its causes, effects and management. A systemic search was done across the electronic databases including PubMed, Google Scholar, and ScienceDirect for articles published between 2014 and 2025. Keywords used in the search included *screen time, digital addiction, child development, parenting and emotional well-being.* Only peer reviewed, English language studies focusing on children and adolescent were included. Non-English, duplicate records and studies unrelated to psychological or developmental outcomes were excluded.

Other than this relevant reports and guidelines from recognized organizations such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the Indian Academy of Paediatrics (IAP) were also included to provide a policy-level perspective.

Thematic analysis of the selected literatures was done to identify the causes, patterns and factors associated with excessive digital exposure, its social and psychological effects and effective interventional strategies.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE: CAUSES OF EXCESSIVE SCREEN TIME IN CHILDREN

Rapid expansion of digital media has made screens an integral part of modern-day childhood. Several psychological, social and environmental factors combinedly contributes to the excessive screen time in children.

1. Easy Accessibility and Early Exposure:

Now a days digital devices like smartphones, tablets and television are available for children right from infancy. According to a study it is found that 90% children have used at least one digital device before 2 years of age. Many parents initially use this to calm or entertain their child while doing household or professional works, this unintentional exposure gradually becomes a habit which becomes difficult to manage in later years.

2. Parental Behaviour and Lack of Digital Literacy

Children often try to imitate parents media habits. In household where parents spend long hours on their phone or computer for work or entertainment, children tend to adopt the similar behaviour. Research indicates that parenteral stress and lack of digital literacy further increase this problem because they are unaware of how algorithm and parenteral control works. As a result, children are exposed to age-inappropriate and prolonged digital content. Researches shows that parents under stress or burnout are more likely to allow unmonitored device use. [7,9]

3. Changing Family Structures

Gradual shift of society from joint family to nuclear family has significant effect on daily routine and emotional environment of children. In earlier generation grandparents and other family members provided social interactions and playing opportunity which naturally reduced the screen exposure, however in nuclear family, especially in urban areas parents are often working and don't have enough time for their children, as a result children are attracted to digital devices for engagement and companionship.

4. Lack of Outdoor Play and Social Interaction

Urbanization, safety concerns and increasing academic pressure collectively are reducing the outdoor playtime of children. In absence of real-world social interactions, children turn to screens for connection and entertainment. Studies shows that children living in areas without accessible open play spaces, spends significantly more time on digital devices than those who have access to open play spaces.[10]

5. Algorithmic Design and Attention Engineering

Modern apps and games are developed to engage the user for longer duration. Feature like autoplay, reward loops and personalized recommendation encourage user for repeated and longer use. Children who are still developing in terms of self-regulation and impulse control,

are particularly more susceptible for these designs. Over time, this constant stimulation can create compulsive behaviours resembling that to addiction.[11]

6. Instant Gratification and the Dopamine Cycle

Digital platforms provide quick rewards like winning, opening new level or simple likes, which triggers dopamine release in the brain. This mechanism increases the urge of constant use and deceases the attention span. Children addicted to this, struggles with patience, sustained focus and slow and effortful learning activities.[12]

ILL EFFECTS OF EXCESSIVE SCREEN TIME ON CHILDREN

Excessive and uncontrolled exposure to screen affects children on multiple levels including cognitive, emotional, behavioural and physical. Although digital technology provides opportunity for learning and entertainment but long and unmonitored usage may hinder emotional maturity and developmental process.

1. Developmental Challenges

Brain develops rapidly in early childhood and this process depends heavily on real life interaction and experiences. When screen replaces this interpersonal communication, it can lead to delay in language acquisition and problem-solving skills. A meta-analysis reported a clear association between extended screen time and low language ability in children.[1]
Additionally, fast paced visual contents may weaken the working memory and attention regulation, which makes it difficulty in sustained focus in any work.

2. Cognitive and Academic Impairments

Children who spend more time on screen, often found having less attention span and they lag in executive and academic performance. Overexposure to rapid digital stimuli causes exhaustion of cognitive resources, which make classroom concentration more difficult. Recent studies have shown that excessive digital engagement in early childhood is linked with delay in cognitive development and reduced socio-emotional skills. [13,14]
This cognitive strain also affects creativity and problem solving skills, crucial for long term academic success.

3. Lack of Communication and Problem-Solving Skills

Children primarily develop language, empathy and social skills through real world interactions and by observing other's expressions, listening and responding to them. When this experience is replaced by screen-based media, children lose the opportunity of active communication and cooperative play. Prefrontal cortex, which governs the attention and emotional control, remains less active while passive screen viewing. Longitudinal studies show that the children who are exposed to screens as early as one year of age, show delay in communication and reduced problem-solving skills by the age of 4.[15] This reduced interaction also limits emotional intelligence, which makes it harder for children to express their feelings and understanding others.

4. Sleep Disturbances and Fatigue

Blue light emitted from digital screens suppresses the production of Melatonin which causes delay in onset of sleep. Studies shows that children using devices up to one hour before sleep are significantly more likely to experience poor sleep quality.[3]

This inadequate sleep has negative effects on concentration, emotional regulation and learning ability. Research also show that night time screen exposure is related to anxiety, irritability and overall emotional distress among adolescents.[16]

5. Emotional and Mental Health Problems

When children spend more time with screen, their emotional sensitivity and empathy reduce significantly. Excessive screen exposure has been strongly associated with symptoms of anxiety, depression, and mood instability. [17,18,19]

The constant comparison on social media, exposure to overstimulating content, and reduced face-to-face interaction contribute to emotional dysregulation and lower self-esteem in children.

6. Behavioral and Social Difficulties

Children who are more dependent on screen are found to have more impulsive behaviour, irritability and social withdrawal. Overstimulation of digital media reduces the tolerance of frustration and hinders in development of real-life social skills.

Longitudinal studies also showed relationship between excessive screen time and conduct issue, peer relationship problems and emotional symptoms in children and adolescent.[20]

7. Reduced Creativity and Imagination

Traditional games used to stimulate imagination whereas digital media provides readymade images and stories, which limits opportunities of independent creative thinking. Researches shows that the children who spends more time on screen has less ability of mental imagery and creative problem-solving skills whereas the children who are involved in imaginative play and social activities have more creative mindset. [21]

8. Vision Problems and Eye Strain

Excessive screen exposure is also associated with physical health issues like Digital eye strain (DES), Dry-eye Disease and myopia. Researches shows that children below age of 15 years who spends long sessions on digital devices are more likely to experience eye fatigue and dryness. Continuous close-range focus also increases the chances of myopia in early age. [22,23]

STRATEGIES TO REDUCE SCREEN ADDICTION AND PROMOTE BALANCED DIGITAL USE IN CHILDREN

To reduce excessive screen time in children requires a multi-dimensional approach which includes efforts from parents, teachers, healthcare professionals and policy-makers. Since the causes of digital dependence is both environmental and social, so it can't be corrected by only imposing restriction but it requires creation of scientific structures, awareness and emotional connection.

1. Parental Monitoring and Co-Viewing

Parenteral involvement plays the most crucial role in managing the screen behaviour of children. When parents watch digital content with their children and discuss about them and guide them towards the positive and educational contents, then, this not only promotes awareness but also reduces the exposure to inappropriate and addictive media. Research also showed that co-viewing increases meaningful dialogue between patents and children which strengthen their relation and makes appropriate digital boundaries. [24]

2. Reviving Family Bonds and Intergenerational Interaction
Modern day family often lacks face-to-face communication. Family activities like storytelling, eating together and joint hobbies provides emotional satisfaction to children outside the digital environment. Grandparents and other family members can play a valuable role in decreasing digital dependence in children by offering companionship and moral guidance.

3. Setting Time Limits and Structured Routines
Establishing consistent schedule for device use is essential. According to American Academy of Pediatrics children under 2 years of age should be avoided completely from the screen exposure and for children of age 2 to 5 years maximum screen time should not exceed from 1 hour per day. Subsequently, there should be a limit on screentime and content for the older children. [25]
Also, families who have screen free zones in their home (like no screen in bedroom or at meal time) reports improvement in quality of sleep and emotional regulation.

4. Encouraging Physical Activity and Outdoor Play
Outdoor play is one of the most effective ways to reduce excess screen time. It improves motor development and social skills. According to WHO guidelines, children should be engaged for at least 60 minutes per day in moderate to vigorous physical activity.[6] Activities like cycling, team sports and family walks, not only improves physical health but also emotional connection.

5. Educational and Institutional Policies
Schools can play a crucial role in promoting digital hygiene. If media literacy is added to the curriculum, it can reduce entertainment related screen time in children. Several school-based programs have shown success in decreasing screen time by emphasizing digital self-control, empathy and offline collaboration.

6. Promoting Offline Hobbies and Creativity
Creative activities like art, music, reading and sports provide natural alternatives to stay away from screen. These activities not only decrease passive screen time but also stimulate and strengthen imagination and self-expression. Research shows that children who participates in extracurricular activities tends to spend significantly less time on screen than those who don't. [26]

7. Professional Counselling and Early Intervention
When children start to develop the symptoms of digital addiction like restlessness, mood swings, irritability and loss of interest in offline activities then it becomes essential to get professional advice. WHO has recognized gaming disorder as a behavioral disorder in ICD-11.[27] A global meta-analysis reported that one in four adolescent is suffering from some degree of digital addiction.[28]

The American Psychiatric Association (APA) also lists Internet Gaming Disorder (IGD) as a behavioral addiction that shares neurobiological pathways with substance dependence.[29]
Cognitive Behavioral Therapy (CBT) and Family-Based Behavioral Training (FBBT) have proven effective in reducing screen overuse and improving emotional regulation.[30] If we combine early clinical intervention with parental counselling, teacher awareness, and school-based guidance programs, then we can create a supportive network to prevent digital addiction from becoming a chronic condition.

8. Technology-Assisted Control Tools

Parental control and some built-in apps both in android and apple devices like Google Family Link and Apple Screen Time might be helpful in reducing the screen usage. These apps allow patents to monitor and schedule the digital activities. However, these tools are efficient when these are combines with open communication and clear expectation rather than strict enforcement as punishment.

9. Community and Government Initiatives

Public health campaigns are necessary to aware people about the psychological risks of digital overuse. Government policies encouraging "digital detox" programs, family workshops, and screen-free community events can raise awareness on a larger scale. Successful examples from countries like South Korea and China demonstrate how collective responsibility can effectively decrease the screen addiction in youth.

DISCUSSION

Today children are growing in an environment where they are surrounded by technology which offers both learning opportunity and psychological risks. It is clear from literatures that long and unmonitored screen use causes several developmental problems like delay in speech, lack of concentration, emotional instability and social withdrawal. While technology is not harmful itself, but its unregulated use causes all the problems specially in early developmental years. Parental behaviour, family structure and lifestyle choices play critical roles in shaping children's digital habits. In many urban nuclear families due to lack of face to face communication, screen has become a virtual companion and the pandemic further normalized digital dependency by shifting education, recreation and socialization to online platforms. As a result, children have become increasingly dependent on instant gratification and passive entertainment, however, this adversely affects emotional resilience and creativity.

However, researches shows that mindful digital engagement is possible if structured co-viewing, digital literacy and family connections are built strongly. Schools and society also have shared responsibility to include creative learning, emotional education and outdoor play as daily routine of children.

The key is not to reject technology, but to humanize its role in family and developmental life. That means, digital devices should be helpful.

CONCLUSION

Digital revolution has completely changed the way of growing, learning and communication. Although digital media provides a number of opportunities for education and wisdom but its excessive and uncontrolled use hinders the emotional regulation, attention span, and healthy social development. The problem arises not from technology itself but from how, when, and why it is used. When it is used imbalanced, unmonitored and for emotional alternative, then it has negative psychosocial effects. Addressing this problem required a collective approach which include parents, teachers, health professionals and policy makers.

If children are taught structured digital habits and outdoor play, creative activities and family communication is given priority, then we can again establish an ideal digital balance.

In short, our aims are not to eliminate the screen completely but to ensure that technology remain a tool for growth, not a trap for dependence. If family and society remain vigilant and adopt balanced sense, then we can build a generation who will use technology using their wisdom, responsibility and empathy.

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