Shock horror: screens may not be ruining your children after all

If your children aren't sleeping, or doing their homework, or getting enough exercise, the stories that dominate the media would have you believe it is because they are glued to a screen.

In the last month alone we've had a Finnish academic suggest smartphones are to blame for Australia's drop in education rankings, a former teacher argue that screen use might be responsible for an increase in myopia and a journalist claim the latest electronic game, Fortnite, has driven boys to steal their parents' credit cards.

Parents are told to be worried about their children's attraction to screens and to do something about it - set time limits, ban the "wrong" shows and, if all else fails, take away the screens altogether. Any parent who doesn't have the fortitude, let alone the time, to do all of this – beware. Guilt is the lot of today's parents, who feel driven to hover above their children's over-regulated lives.

Yet evidence suggests that only in a very small percentage of cases can excessively long hours in front of a screen exacerbate underlying problems, or possibly create such problems in the first place. Other research shows that most children effectively regulate their own screen time and enjoy their engagement with the entertainment, music and social connections they offer.

We all use screens for pleasure: to watch TV, to keep in touch with friends and family, to listen to music, or to goof off and scroll through whatever captures our fancy while at the bus stop.

Yet this easy access to pleasure appears to unnerve us – particularly when we see its attraction to our children. Nothing seems to inspire more anxiety or opprobrium in parents than the sight of a child hypnotised by a screen.

But the pleasure we find in entertainment is as essential to our happiness and wellbeing as outdoor exercise. Children sit glued to the screen because they are enjoying it. When I spoke to children for my book, I found that television is for many of them "the funnest thing in the world".

Favourite programs provide a rich and special place to explore relationships, to dream, to laugh at crass and revolting slapstick or to sit quietly and fill in idle moments. As one eight-year-old girl told me, television "cheers you up when you are sad". Another 10-year-old described with delight how her own mother had introduced her to the edgy comedies of Chris Lilley. She loved their outrageous humour but she also liked the fact they were about "some of the stuff that happens in real life".

We have always been worried about the influence of popular culture and entertainment on our youngest and most vulnerable. Plato believed the craze of poetry would corrupt his students. In Victorian England the advent of cheap novels was seen as a threat to young women and girls. In the late 20th century, *Teletubbies* was a danger to our toddlers. Today, *Fortnite* and smartphones are the villains.

So why do we feel compelled to regulate our children's lives against their own pleasures? Professor James Kincaid has argued we are at risk of an "outrageous withholding" of happiness from our own children because we have become threatened by the fear that our children are at risk. The screen appears to have become a scapegoat for our anxieties and for the social evils we see around us.

Perhaps it is time to change the focus of the conversation and to consider what it is about screens that brings our children pleasure. In the over-regulated era of modern childhood, parents may find that just sitting back with their children and indulging is a pleasure for them as well - and it could put to rest their anxieties over the demon screen.

Challenges of the smartphone generation

''Something is happening, but you don't know what it is, do you, Mr Jones?'' Those famous lines of Bob Dylan seem relevant whenever there is rapid social change and well-meaning elders struggle to understand the behaviour of young folk. Now, they surely apply to the enthusiasm, verging on addiction, with which kids and teenagers embrace their digital devices and consume social media.

Should we be worried? Something, certainly, is happening. Young people are spending more and more time hooked up to their Androids and iPhones, including at school. Research by the Commonwealth eSafety Commissioner has revealed more than a third of children aged between eight and 13 are on social media. Once they reach their teens, it grows to more than 80 per cent. A recent US study found young adults use their smartphones more than 80 times each day.

The warnings from the experts are proliferating. Finnish educator Pasi Sahlberg, who is due to join the University of NSW later this year, told the Herald last week that smartphones are distracting students from reading, school-related work and exercise, as well as messing up their sleep.

In France, the government has banned smartphones in primary, junior and middle schools and plans to require children under 16 to have parental approval before they can join Facebook. Dr Sahlberg says we should think about a ban on smartphones in primary schools here.

And it's not just the education experts who are worried. Earlier this year, two of the largest institutional investors in Apple wrote an open letter to the company, calling on it to do more to combat the addictive properties of its own product. They cited research on social-media addiction among young people that shows a connection with anxiety, depression and even suicide.

Meanwhile, psychologists argue smartphones are making it harder for us to relate to each other, as well as to be truly alone. These effects will be greater for a generation that has never known life without these devices.

Sensing the growing concern, and worried at the prospect of more regulation, the tech giants are reacting. Apple's new operating system will allow parents to monitor their children's use of their phones more effectively and to set daily time limits on some apps. Google has made similar changes. And Microsoft has launched an initiative to improve the use of digital technology in schools, so that it becomes less of a distraction for students and more a tool for learning.

Every technological revolution has triggered a moral panic. We should avoid this extreme, lest we turn into a chorus of clueless Mr Joneses ourselves.

After all, the potential benefits of the digital world for young people are virtually limitless. At the cutting edge, the use of ''edtech'' in schools can empower children to learn at their own speed and undermine the ''factory model'' of education, where children of the same age all learn in the same way.

And for a creative-minded teenager, the resources made available by digital technology – for example, the entire musical tradition of the West – will be transformative in ways we could not have imagined, even 15 years ago.

So it is about managing risks. While teachers, experts and legislators all have a role to play in that, the role of parents is paramount. For a start, if we really want kids and teens to develop the discipline to decouple from their phones, we should lead by example.

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