

Plugged-in kids lose social skills

By Jill Stark

Children who are constantly plugged into smartphones, computers and televisions are losing vital social skills, according to a new study. Researchers found 11 and 12-year-olds who were denied access to digital technology for five days were significantly better at reading human emotions than those who spent hours looking at electronic gadgets and watching TV.

Psychologists behind the study, conducted by the University of California Los Angeles, say it highlights the dangers of excessive screen time. They stress that face-to-face interaction is crucial in helping children learn to read non-verbal cues. However, local experts say the research has limitations and have urged parents not to panic about young people's use of technology.

In the study, 105 pupils from the same school were divided into two groups. Half were sent to a science and nature camp for five days while the others stayed in the classroom. Students at the camp were denied access to electronic devices, with both groups tested at the end for their ability to recognise emotions in photos and videos. The children were shown images of people with differing facial expressions and asked to identify which emotion they were displaying. Pupils who had been at the camp were much better at reading the non-verbal emotional cues than those who had unrestricted access to digital media.

The authors said they hoped the results would start a conversation about the costs and benefits of the "enormous amount of time children spend with screens, both inside and outside the classroom".

"Our study suggests that skills in reading human emotion may be diminished when children's face-to-face interaction is displaced by technologically mediated communication. Today, even children under two years of age use mobile devices," the authors wrote in the study, to be published in the next edition of the journal *Computers in Human Behavior*.

"Moreover, computers and mobile tablets are rapidly entering classrooms and being put in the hands of every child beginning as early as kindergarten without sufficient attention to the potential costs. Our hope is that this study will be a call to action for research that thoroughly and systematically examines the effects of digital media on children's social development."

However, Jane Burns chief executive of the Young and Well Cooperative Research Centre - a Melbourne-based mental health organisation exploring the role of technology in young people's lives - said the findings should be viewed with caution.

"These kids were on a nature camp and they were doing team-building exercises without phones and computers so they were highly stimulated and engaged but to compare them to kids doing the same old thing at school every day doesn't really make it a fair comparison," she said.

"Too much screen time is not a good thing for anyone but it's not as simple as technology being good or bad, it's about making sure you get the balance right and having enough other activity that is stimulating, which includes outdoor activities, communicating face-to-face and team-building exercises.

"The message to parents is don't let your kids stay on their phones and computers 24-7. The other thing is don't allow young people to take phones into their bedrooms at night because sleep is so critical to development."

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