Screen Overuse

The compulsive and problematic use of digital devices for social media, streaming platforms (like YouTube), texting, gaming, pornography, online shopping, and seeking info/entertainment.

Screen overuse is linked with loneliness, decreased motivation, anxiety, obesity, sleep problems, reduced play time, poor attention, decreased learning, and poor physical and mental health.

This can look like:

- Losing interest in hobbies, sports, etc.
- Relationship problems.
- Emotional outbursts when screen time is reduced.
- Problems at school or work.
- Increased anxiety, fear, sadness, and hopelessness.

46% of teens say they are online "almost constantly."

— *Pew Research Center, 2023*

Design Features that Manipulate Children into Overusing Screens

Screen overuse is not an accident. In the past 25+ years, tech companies have employed armies of scientists and PhDs to use psychology and gambling science to develop addictive technologies to keep us on our devices. Young people are particularly vulnerable. Tech companies manipulate users with:

- **Hard-to-ignore notifications**
  Alerts that pull users back into apps.

- **Interaction streaks**
  Display how many days in a row a user has interacted with another user or used the app. Example: Snapstreaks.

- **Variable rewards**
  Trigger extra dopamine in users. Ex: refreshing a newsfeed, slot machines.

- **Ephemeral content** Content displayed for only a limited time to create "fear of missing out," which pressures users into frequent use.

- **Parasocial relationships**
  When trusted characters/influencers pressure children to take an action. For example, a character might cry if a child does not buy a product.

- **Quantified and named popularity**
  Showing the number of likes/reactions and who liked/reacted to a post, which Meta's own research, "Project Daisy," suggests has harmful mental health effects.

- **Gamification**
  Use of points, loot boxes, trophies, and other rewards to increase use.

- **Dark patterns**
  User interface designs that coerce, steer, or deceive users into making harmful decisions including giving away personal information, spending money, and more.

Scan to get more resources on dark patterns.

Online Harms Prevention Action Kit
fairplayforkids.org

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Protect Your Child

Use caution with devices, social media, and communication apps
Delay their use when possible, especially by young children. To start, consider a Light Phone or flip phone.

Think early about what age you will give your child a smartphone/video games and what limits you'll put in place. We recommend:

- No screen-based devices in the bedroom.
- Create a screen-time curfew.
- No phones at dinner.
- Use parental controls.
- Create a screen-time contract. See "Resources" below.
- Unless they're necessary, put screens in another room while your child is doing homework.

Look for like-minded parents among your child's friends and classmates. Assure your child they are not the only one with tech rules.

**Model good behavior with your screens:**

- Be present with your child—put your phone down, look at them, and give them your full attention.
- Do phone-free activities in front of and with your children.
- Turn off notifications and alerts.
- Do not text and drive.

Encourage outdoor time, exercise, in-person social interaction, sleep, and healthy eating.

Ask for homework on paper (not on screens).

Teens spend 9 hours/day on screens.

— American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry, 2020)
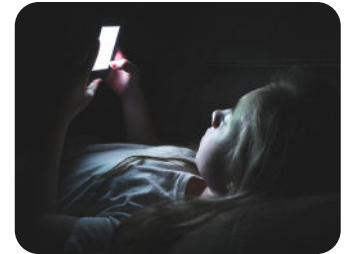
Start a Conversation

What are ways you've seen tech companies manipulate users?

Why do you think they do that?

How does that make you feel?

How do you feel about your relationship with technology?

Do you feel dependent on it?

Are you controlling it or is it controlling you?

How often are you receiving notifications from social media apps? Which app sends the most notifications?

Have you noticed how notifications affect your emotions, concentration, and habits of checking your device?

Take Action *if your child is overusing technology*

- **Reach out to a healthcare or mental healthcare provider** for suggestions on how to help them learn healthy coping strategies. Individual therapy can help teens recognize and work through feelings and experiences that contribute to problematic use.

- **Download apps** designed to help curb use (e.g., BreakFree and Menthal).

- **Practice mindfulness and adaptive coping strategies** like exercise, deep breathing, and progressive muscle relaxation.

- **Encourage creative outlets**, exercise, in-person socializing, and hands-on activities.

Scan to access more resources on screen overuse.

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