

Is the pandemic causing our children to become digital addicts?

Welcome to SBH Bronx Health Talk produced by SBH Health System and broadcast from St Barnabas Hospital in the Bronx. I'm Steven Clark.

“Nearly a year into the coronavirus pandemic, parents across the country — and the world — are watching their children slide down an increasingly slippery path into an all-consuming digital life. When the outbreak hit, many parents relaxed restrictions on screens as a stopgap way to keep frustrated, restless children entertained and engaged. But, often, remaining limits have vaporized as computers, tablets and phones became the centerpiece of school and social life, and weeks of stay-at-home rules bled into nearly a year.”

This comes from a recent front page article in *The New York Times* about the challenges of separating children from video games and social media. What concerns researchers, the article goes on to say, is that these devices are a poor substitute for activities known to be central to health, social and physical development, like physical play and other interactions that help children learn how to confront challenging social situations in the real world.

With us today to discuss this timely topic is Kevin Green, a social worker at SBH who works with children and adolescents. Welcome, Kevin.

Thank you for having me today.

So let's start off. Are you concerned by this?

You know it's inevitable that with most of the schools going to remote learning and with schools handing out laptops and tablets it's inevitable that there is going to be additional screen time. That's a given. What I've noticed in the almost a year now into the pandemic and working with kids through the video sessions is they actually want to be in school. They actually want to connect with their peers in person. The normal play dates that kids would have are not happening so they're finding that they have no choice but to be on the screen time because and that's out of safety because kids aren't necessarily getting together in person at this point. But from what I've noticed is that kids actually do want to socialize and they do want to be a part of the school. Community and in the community themselves, yeah.

But again, you know this article mentioned that as much as 40 hours a week are spent on digital devices, which is like a full time job is that too much?

Well again, you know that it's inevitable for having the additional screen time with school and it's a person by person basis of how it's going to work outside of the school so parents should set some. And parameters of the online you know digital life, you know whether it's their social media apps or video game just to find the right balance and it's really about finding that right balance that would make it work and it's you know every person in every situation is different, but I notice that there are healthy alternatives besides just jumping on the video games in the afternoons after school so, but it does become an issue when kids are using the device. let's say in the middle of the night unbeknownst to their family right.

So right, I was going to mention that cause we've spoken about this earlier when you told me you had some kid who confessed that he was waking up or up in the middle of the night playing video games. I guess when it interrupts their sleep, when it affects their classroom performance, then it's an issue, right?

Absolutely and that's where the you know the dialogue happens to the video sessions is you know what makes it work and I'll give you another example of a recent teen here in the. Uh through the video sessions, he was failing all his classes in the first marking period. He really set realistic goals for himself, he said. Mister Green, I really wanted to get maybe 85 in the next marking period, so we worked on strategies in the video session to see you take a look at his room and seeing what would be conducive to the remote learning because he was very distracted in the first marking period and so he reconfigured his room so he would have less noise and he would be facing a wall, not necessarily other people around the house and it turns out that I just had a session with him the other night and he's getting 90s in all his classes, which is exceeding what his realistic goals and expectations were. So it can work. It's just what is going To be conducive to making the online experience conducive and appropriate for them, but it can work.

Yeah. I mean what concerned me is again this article talks about an actual addiction where they can see changes in the brain, not unlike people who are addicted to drugs and that's what they're finding where kids compulsively feel they need to play video games or go on social media. Are you seeing that? Are parents concerned about that?

Parents are concerned. It is a concern, especially if they're on for hours and hours on end and that's where you have to find a healthy balance. You know it's appropriate. As long as and again, it's the parents showing empathy and compassion around this area and really sitting down with the child or teen that you know, it's inevitable that they want to connect with their peers and because of the physical distancing measures that are in place for the most part, the only way they can connect is through perhaps an online game or through social media. However, you know and that's a dialogue that should happen and anyway, even with without a pandemic, it should always be a dialogue and there should be transparency of what they're playing, what apps they're using just to make sure it's appropriate and safe but again that's something that the parents and child should have that discussion of what the expectations are because if they're using the devices during the day and I've seen situations like that where they're on a YouTube video or on a video game and they have the camera off during school hours, of course, it becomes an issue. But if you set realistic goals and rewards and expectations, it can work because you're going have to have some digital life for them, but as long as it's within limitations, it does work.

I guess the reality is during these times, during the pandemic, you just can't say, a parent can't say to the kids go out and play or you know why don't you sign up for to play basketball this semester or take some extracurricular activities, cause they don't exist. So we're really limited. I mean it's not like you've got a you know a range of potential activities. I mean they can shut down.

Yes, but then that's where you have to work on the strategies of you know there are activities that you can take a walk. You can't take a nature walk. It's appropriate to go outside. Get some fresh air when the weather is great, but there's also things you can do indoors and as far as like keeping movement, exercise and also it's really up to the parents to model for their child routine. You know of the digital life because if a parent and you know a lot of parents are just overwhelmed at home with just the space limitations and working from home as well and navigating their kids to different curriculum on the laptops or Chromebooks. It becomes you know a situation where the parents just want to be on social media all the time as well. So it's really up to the parent to put down the device as well and model that you know this is a perfect time to connect as a family. Eat together, play together interact so there are ways to you know, go around the you know whether to basketball or and physical activities, but there are ways to move and exercise at home.

Kevin, do you think once the pandemic is in is ending and hopefully it'll end one of these days, will people go back to more normal existences? Will they realize they're spending too much time on social media and they'll get involved in other things like they did before?

You know again in what I've seen during the video sessions is they desperately want to get back to a basketball league or you know being able to be on a cheerleading team or interacting with their peers. So yes, I mean they do have social media even before the pandemic, there should be limitations and transparency even with the devices anyway, but from my experiences, kids actually do want to go back to a school building and socialize with peers and interact with peers and it won't be this withdrawal period that people perhaps are thinking about but from my experiences, kids really desperately want to go back. That some sense of normalcy but again, this is our new normal. so there will be additional screen time at this point.

Do you feel, I mean you're dealing with kids, you know, young kids and adolescents, are you finding that from an anxiety perspective or depression perspective, this has been especially rough for them?

Yes, and I think, especially it hits harder for the teens because when you're not interacting cause kids and the teens want to socialize, I want to get out there and it also creates a sense of identity so when they're not interacting with peers and having that face to face interaction, the kind of strays from uh from that identity as a teenager. So what I've noticed is, it's really hit the teens, especially hard.

Yeah. I mean, I read something. It's going a little astray from what our topic is today, but I read an article about in Las Vegas. They had something like 20 suicides of kids ranging from the age of nine to teenage and you know I guess kids are feeling very dark. It's like there's no way out of This It's been going on for almost a year now and they're really feeling the reality. What reality is today.

Exactly and it's really the fear of the unknown because you know you have a pandemic where you don't see the end in sight, perhaps but again through the sessions, it's really working on those coping skills to you know, try to help them through those anxieties through those depressive symptoms and more times they're not they're able to and that's another thing is sometimes the video games for them provides that kind of escapism and entertainment with their peers and they

really desperately. Have those social connections. Also Face time, Face timing family members you know during the pandemic. I mean we're not hanging out with people even with family members. We're not having those kind of family get togethers like we normally would so again with the additional screen time that we're seeing uh to use the Face time just to keep that connectedness and even for the sessions in the video sessions is keeping that connectedness to have some continuity so there is some sense of normalcy even though it's a new normal but or not, it makes them feel better to have that connectedness and you know working on other things besides our video game whether it's mindfulness activities, visualization, I work with the teenager who finds meditation helpful. So it's those kind of things that we work on in the sessions to help them through the depression or anxiety.

So I guess it's fair to say as a parent, you can set limits. You can create balance and you should be aware of what your kids are involved in as far as social media and digital devices, that fair to say?

Oh absolutely. I think any parent should sit down with their child or team and see what they're playing on. Kids, let's say young kids like to play uh let's say this roadblocks computer game where they're interacting with their peers. We want to make sure that they're interacting with peers their age. They're talking appropriately. They're acting you know appropriately on the game and just take an interest in what they're playing on and what they're talking on social media is so important and also gives the parent a chance to even play together as well. But, it's also finding those ways to interact outside of the digital life, whether it's playing with Legos, playing with Play Doh, playing with a family pet, picking up a book, picking up a hobby, arts and crafts. There's plenty of things, playing a board game together. I mean board games are so essential. Even in the video sessions we've worked on playing Connect Four together or Trouble or you know there's ways around it. You know where it's not just digital life even though we have our screen time, but because the video sessions are so great is uh we can see each other. Playing the board game together, we're drawing together so it does work.

That's one thing we talked about before I mean it really seems that of all the services that hospital like St. Barnabas Hospital is offering to patients the one that's really been the most effective has been the kind of services that you're offering.

Absolutely and again, it's keeping that connectedness and also modeling for them that you even though it's inevitable that we have the digital life and the you know the increase in screen time it's really about making it work, setting limits and expectations working with the parents of sending those limits and expectations and modeling for them and playing the board game or have my cat jump up on the table and they're showing me their pet and or their faith of what they use to comfort them during you know the pandemic of when they're feeling depressed or anxious. So it's really opened up an entirely different, you know situation you know when you're doing the video sessions more so than if I were just in my own office.

Yeah, I guess again you know you know years ago, it was the old public service announcement. "It's 10 o'clock. Do you know where your children are?" and I think I guess it's fair today to ask parents. Do you know what your children are doing on social media? What video games their playing.

That's right. That's right. It's changed to that absolutely and also sure, they're not using it uh I'm not doing it to their parents or guardian in the middle of the night, which has happened. That's why again with setting those expectations. If they have to limit the uh screen time, keeping the phone out of the room or the video game system shut down. It's just kind of tweaks that you need to make to make sure that they do have enough focus and you know during the school hours and also there's expectations so from what I noticed once you have that conversation and have that conversation and they're open and uh to keep it transparent, it does work but again, it's really important to have that dialogue and seeing what they're actually doing and who they're interacting with. Yeah, it takes some work. It's not going to happen automatically.

Well, Kevin, thank you very much for being with us today. This is very good information and to our listeners thank you for joining SBH Bronx Health Talk. For more information on services available at SBH Health System visit www.sbhny.org. Until next time.