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SASOP position statement on the mental health impact of Excessive Screen Time on Children, Adolescents, and Adults

The pervasive use of digital devices has transformed daily life, offering numerous benefits while also presenting significant challenges to mental health. Excessive screen time —defined as prolonged engagement with digital devices such as smartphones, tablets, and computers —has been linked to various mental health issues across different age groups. This position statement aims to outline the risks associated with excessive screen time and provide guidelines for mitigating these effects, including recommendations for the educational use of cell phones and tablets in schools.

Risks associated with Excessive Screen Time

- 1. Mental Health Concerns:** Studies have shown that excessive screen time is associated with an increased risk of depression, anxiety, and other psychological issues. Other specific concerns are also cyberbullying, pornography, grooming, online addictions (e.g. gaming, social media use), and the promotion of certain harmful behaviours such as dysfunctional eating and suicidal behaviour. A systematic review found that children and adolescents who spent more time using screen media had lower psychological well-being compared to low users. A study indicated that adults who spent six or more hours on screens daily had a higher likelihood of moderate to severe depression.¹⁻⁴
- 2. Sleep disturbances:** Excessive screen time, especially before bedtime, can disrupt sleep patterns, leading to insufficient and poor-quality sleep, which in turn affects mood and cognitive function.⁵⁻⁷
- 3. Academic performance:** Although the consumption of high-quality content can improve academic performance, too much screen time hinders performance. High screen usage has been linked to lower grades and decreased engagement with schoolwork, potentially impacting educational outcomes. Furthermore, the consumption of violent media, leisurely video games, and online addictions such as gambling and pornography, have a negative impact on performance.⁸⁻¹¹
- 4. Physical health concerns:** Increased screen time is associated with sedentary behavior, contributing to obesity and related health problems. Prolonged screen time is linked to physical health issues such as eye strain, headaches, and musculoskeletal problems.^{12,13}

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Guidelines and recommendations

1. General recommendations

- **Screen time limits:** Implement age-appropriate screen time limits. Various international bodies recommend no screen time for those younger than two years, no more than one hour of recreational screen time for those 2-5 years of age, and no more than two hours of screen time for those five years and older, including adolescents and adults.^{14, 15} It is important to use discretion, as the term “recreational screen time” itself is quite broad, e.g. a carefully chosen family movie watched together, is qualitatively different from two hours of non-stop gaming or scrolling through “shorts.” Similarly, if children are obliged to use electronic devices for school (see below), it is unreasonable not to allow a certain amount of recreational screen time in addition to this. Again, parental discretion is required and the extant literature provides little evidence-based guidance for this scenario.
- **Encourage physical activity:** Promote regular physical activity to counteract the sedentary nature of screen time. Outdoor activities are especially beneficial.^{15,16}
- **Foster social interactions:** Encourage face-to-face interactions with peers to support social development and mental well-being. Device-free family time fostering communication and cohesion is crucial and must be encouraged.¹⁷
- **Parental monitoring and modelling:** Parents should monitor and guide their children's screen usage, ensuring age-appropriate content. Although there are various apps and tools to limit and monitor children's and adolescents' online activity, there is no substitute for parents having physical custody of devices, especially overnight. Parents should also model healthy online habits themselves.

2. Educational use of cell phones and tablets in school

The use of technology in education is part of the current landscape, though strongly debated. Age-related benefits and disadvantages should be considered. When technology is used in the educational context, the following should be taken into account:

- **Purposeful integration:** Use digital devices as educational tools to enhance learning, ensuring they serve a clear educational purpose.
- **Structured usage:** Establish clear guidelines for when and how devices can be used during school hours to minimize distractions. Some schools have implemented policies allowing cell phones only during non-instructional times, such as lunch breaks.
- **Digital literacy education:** Incorporate digital literacy programs to teach students about responsible and healthy use of technology.
- **Monitoring and evaluation:** Regularly assess the impact of device usage on students' academic performance and mental health, adjusting policies as needed.

Conclusion

While digital devices offer valuable resources, excessive screen time poses significant risks to mental health across all age groups. Implementing structured guidelines and promoting balanced screen usage are essential steps to mitigating these risks. Parents and educators play a crucial role in modelling and enforcing healthy technology habits, ensuring that digital tools enhance rather than hinder students' well-being and academic success.

ON BEHALF OF SASOP

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