

## Middle School Guidance Officer

### How much digital time is too much during COVID-19?



Since COVID-19 restrictions came into force across Australia, many families have been adapting to a whole new way of life.

Even now, several months in with some restrictions easing, most of us are spending unprecedented amounts of time in our homes. Our social lives have contracted, and our ability to enjoy time with extended family and friends outside has been curtailed.

As our real-world horizons have contracted, our digital ones have

expanded. Our access to news, work, schools and social interaction has all come through our digital devices. But have we been forming unhealthy habits? And could our new dependence on everything digital be having a damaging effect on family life? Dr Wonsun Shin is a Senior Lecturer in Media and Communications and her research focuses on how families can effectively navigate and balance the digital media landscape. With COVID-19 forcing so many activities to be carried out on digital devices, Dr Shin says there is a risk that children are more vulnerable to some of the negative effects of using digital media.

#### THE NEW CHALLENGES

"The more time children spend on digital media, the greater chances that children expose themselves to risks associated with digital media use, including excessive media use, exposure to negative media content, cyberbullying, privacy invasion and scams," Dr Shin says. If children are spending more time on digital media, how can we ensure that they are not being negatively impacted? Parents and caregivers naturally want to protect their children from online danger, but they too have been facing unprecedented new challenges as the pandemic shut down our real-world interactions.

Parents and caregivers have had to prevent children from seeing friends or playing sport, and many have had to work hard to juggle remote working with helping kids to school at home.

With all of these added pressures on family life, Dr Shin believes that, for the time being, restricting access to digital media may not be the most effective approach for caregivers to take. "For example, limiting teenagers' time spent on social media at home may work in non-pandemic situations. But it may not work now as it will substantially limit their opportunities to catch up with friends and to compensate for time they have lost for relationship building. In fact, too much restriction may not be the best approach to take in this stressful time," Dr Shin says.

#### GETTING THE BALANCE RIGHT

So, if children are spending more time on digital media, how can we ensure that they are not being negatively impacted? Sleep deprivation, anxiety and even depression have been [linked to unhealthy media habits](#), but Dr Shin says there are warning signs that parents can look out for. "Any sudden changes in behaviours like sudden withdrawal from normal



face-to-face interactions, frequent mood swings, feeling uneasy and avoiding parental oversight of their media use could be a sign of problematic media use, including addiction to digital media, content risks, privacy risks and contact risks," says Dr Shin.

But while the risks are very real, we should not forget the ways in which digital media enhances our lives. It provides us with instant access to global news, it educates and entertains us, and it allows us to keep in regular contact with friends and family. Dr Shin says sharing some of the joys of digital media together can help many families to bond. "Shared media experience, also known as co-use, can enhance family bonding, especially in these unprecedented times when family members are forced to stay together," Dr Shin says.

"For example, parents and children can play electronic or mobile games together, select Netflix shows to watch, or have family chats with relatives or friends using WhatsApp or Zoom." This can help families interact with each other and offer opportunities for parents and caregivers to discuss issues of online safety. Supervising adults can learn more about the content that children are consuming and open up conversations about different types of content.

Dr Shin believes that talking to children about digital media use is one of the most effective ways of promoting healthy media habits. "Throughout my ten years of research, I have been an advocate of communication-based parental media intervention, also known as 'active mediation'. Active mediation is defined as parents explaining to, and discussing with, children about media," she says.

Active mediation is considered an effective strategy to manage children's media use for several reasons. Firstly, active mediation allows parents and caregivers to explain the reasoning behind media supervision. Secondly, it allows children to cultivate critical thinking skills that empower them to make sound decisions when a responsible adult isn't around. Finally, children, especially teenagers, are more likely to adhere to digital media rules if they think that their decision to conform is self-determined rather than forced upon them.

### **BEING A GOOD ROLE MODEL**

There is, however, one more important factor that significantly impacts on children's media use – our own media behaviour. "As parents and children spend more time at home now, parents' own media behaviour can have a significant impact on children's media use," says Dr Shin. "Parental phubbing (this is snubbing someone in the real world by concentrating on your phone or computer instead of talking to that person directly) and excessive use of media will reduce the effectiveness of parental mediation. It's important for parents and caregivers to be good role models."

COVID-19 has forced many of us to become more reliant on our digital devices. But perhaps now, more than ever, it's important that we remember to put down our devices and make time to talk to each other – even if it is about what you want to watch next on Netflix.

Dr Wonsun Shin