

We need regulation to save kids from mobile device addiction



From online games to social media, we're exposing our children to a world of addiction at early stages of their lives.

Teo Yik Ying

It is ironic that in a grade-obsessed country like Singapore, we have parents who are relentless in sending their children for extra tuition in order to boost academic results, and yet we also have parents who will give their kids unfettered access to mobile devices, often as a way to keep them occupied. Just go to any public eating spot during meal times, and you will certainly find kids on phones, iPads or tablets, either texting, scrolling or watching shorts. On public transport, we have seen young kids with mobile devices scrolling through social media and watching videos unsupervised.

Many parents are indulging or even engendering their children's online habits without realising they are actually providing children the tools to be exposed to undesirable content from a young age. It was reported that there was a 30 per cent increase in the number of youths arrested for sexual crimes in 2023 compared with the previous year. It's telling that the two reasons cited were early exposure to sexually explicit materials and access to inappropriate or inaccurate information about sexual behaviours and relationships.

The growing-up years are formative for children, crucial for establishing the right habits, shaping their thought processes and teaching them to read subtle cues when interacting with people.

Unsupervised access to online content through mobile devices can be detrimental to that important phase of a child's development.

LATER IS BETTER?

It may not be practical for parents to completely bar their kids from using these devices. Students are using personal learning devices or PLDs such as iPads or laptops at school, with many allowed to take

the devices home. Educators in Singapore take the stance that PLDs can affect learning both positively and negatively, depending on their use, and a better approach is to educate students to use them responsibly.

In fact, these devices are seen as effective tools for engaging students by gamifying learning and providing online assignments through apps. Teachers these days are also relying on messaging apps to communicate with older students through group chats.

In these contexts, it is true that PLDs have become essential to the learning process, without which students may miss out and fall behind.

The question here is what is a better age to incorporate the use of these technologies as part of learning, when we know they can also have a deep negative impact on young kids with the possibility of addiction setting in.

There is irrefutable evidence both locally and internationally that internet addiction among adolescents and young children is a growing problem, affecting both physical and mental well-being. Even a country like Bhutan which has always strived for a happy balance between digital inclusion and cultural preservation reported that nearly 35 per cent of its secondary school students suffer from internet addiction.

Children are spending so much time scrolling through social media feeds and playing online games that they experience withdrawal symptoms akin to those of substance dependency when disconnected from their devices. Parents have also expressed frustration at their children's addiction to the devices and how distracted they have become as a result.

A study led by Dr Chia Aiiru from my School of Public Health highlighted the health impact of children's lifestyles that include excessive screen time: raising of pre-hypertension risk, as well as levels of blood pressure and lipids – even at the age of eight.

THE SAD TRUTH

We need to then ask ourselves if introducing these devices at such an early stage of our children's lives is necessary or if it can be better managed – especially since they have become important in facilitating learning in schools.

Another critical question here is

whether we can trust students to always do what is right, especially when ownership of mobile devices among young children is at an all-time high.

It is easy to say that parents have important roles to play in shaping children's digital habits. There have been ample calls for parents to set limits and monitor usage, designate device-free zones or timeslots, and promote alternatives to screen time to encourage children to engage in offline pursuits and strengthen interpersonal connections.

The sad truth is that many adults in Singapore are themselves unable to control their own behaviours when it comes to mobile phone use. My own observations of friends and strangers suggest that parents are more likely to rely on smartphones and digital devices as a parenting aid to occupy their children – and not just at eating establishments – in order to give themselves some downtime.

Many parents also struggle to monitor their kids' online habits due to their own busy schedules.

Perhaps it is time for us to consider laws and regulations to govern children's access to mobile devices and social media. The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) even issued a call last year to ban smartphones in schools in the light of clear evidence that it was affecting academic performance and increasing the risk of anxiety, depression, cyberbullying and social isolation in children.

Recent studies and surveys on the impact of these devices on kids certainly suggest that the negatives outweigh the positives. In fact, Unesco even warned that any positive impact on learning outcomes and efficiency may, in fact, be offset by the harm from excessive smartphone use.

We need to seriously study the value of Unesco's call. While there are schools that prohibit phone

use during lesson time, there is currently no blanket ban by the Ministry of Education (MOE).

BANS, LIMITS AND RESTRICTIONS

Countries such as France, Australia and Ireland have implemented laws prohibiting the use of smartphones in school, with France leading the way in 2018. Lawmakers in these countries have emphasised that such bans serve to minimise distractions, improve learning outcomes and reduce cyberbullying.

The American state of Florida went a step further in February by enacting a ban on social media for children under 14 years old, citing the increase in cyberbullying, suicides among kids and predatory activities targeting children on social media. Notably, the legislation garnered bipartisan support from both Democrat and Republican representatives, in a country renowned for safeguarding constitutional rights.

Where PLDs are being used in primary schools, we need to consider if we can limit their use to school so pupils will not have access to the devices at home. While it could pose an administrative or logistical challenge for schools, it would be a welcome move for many parents who are struggling to monitor their kids' usage.

Second, phones used by children below the age of 16 should be required to come with parental controls that either block or regulate the duration of access to social media platforms. The hope here is for parents to consciously set limits to what the child can access and to help them do so. This also provides them with the opportunity to learn about the digital habits of the child.

China has passed laws that limit the amount of screen time for kids, and restrict their access to

There have been ample calls for parents to set limits and monitor usage, designate device-free zones or timeslots, and promote alternatives to screen time to encourage children to engage in offline pursuits and strengthen interpersonal connections. The sad truth is that many adults in Singapore are themselves unable to control their own behaviours when it comes to mobile phone use.

online gaming and social media.

Children under eight are allowed to use digital devices only for a maximum of 40 minutes a day, and, even then, the use is restricted to approved content deemed beneficial to the development of a child. Youth under 18 are not permitted to use their smartphones for social media or online gaming between 10pm and 6am each day.

The Chinese official policy document refers to the potential of harm from online content as a result of "minors' physiological and psychological immaturity".

Third, it is time we implement age restrictions on social media platforms to prohibit children below a certain age from creating and accessing social media accounts known to pose risks to their well-being.

The Infocomm Media Development Authority (IMDA) maintains the Online Safety Code that regulates harmful content on social media services, with additional protection for children with specific age-appropriate requirements.

We can strengthen this further by explicitly banning young children from any access to social media, especially since social media is largely unchecked in what it dishes up.

These recommendations will, however, require careful thinking on effective ways to implement and enforce. What is clear is that the problem of children's addiction to this harmful "electronic drug" requires urgent attention and solutions.

Adults had several decades to experience the world before the arrival of smartphones and social media, but our children no longer have that luxury if they are chained to their devices.

It is time to recognise children's addiction to mobile devices and social media as an urgent problem that requires stronger actions to be taken.

It is time we find ways to make our children put down their mobile devices, to experience the world themselves, rather than through someone else on social media. More importantly, it is about protecting their physical and mental health.

Teo Yik Ying is vice-president for global health and dean of the Saw Swee Heck School of Public Health at the National University of Singapore.

Children in Singapore engrossed in their mobile phones. It is time we find ways to make our children put down their mobile devices, to experience the world themselves, rather than through someone else on social media, says the writer. More importantly, it is about protecting their physical and mental health, he adds.

ST FILE PHOTO