

Computers and Electronic Devices—Problems and Concerns: Helping Handout for School and Home

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INTRODUCTION

The use of smartphones and similar computer devices has become an integral part of growing up. Many students, especially adolescents, use these devices from the moment they get up until the moment they go to bed. Some continue to use them well into the night. Roughly a quarter of adolescents go online almost constantly, mostly through their smartphones (Lenhart, 2015). The average time spent using computer devices to consume entertainment media in a day is 9 hours for adolescents and 6 hours for preadolescents (Lauricella et al., 2016).

The frequent use of computer devices, and the content viewed, has led to numerous concerns among both parents and teachers. Common concerns are that students spend too much time using them, which takes time away from other worthwhile endeavors; they share too many personal details; they are exposed to violent or sexual images; and they run the risk of receiving (and sending) hurtful comments and images (Lauricella et al., 2016). Teachers have additional concerns about students' use of computer devices in the classroom and how it affects teaching and classroom management. They feel these devices have an adverse impact on the ability of students to focus on learning and interfere with students' writing and face-to-face communication. These issues have led many teachers, and parents, to conclude that activities such as playing video games, texting, being on social media, and listening to music are damaging students' ability to learn (Rideout, 2012).

WHAT TO CONSIDER WHEN SELECTING INTERVENTIONS AND SUPPORTS

It is a challenge for parents and teachers to judge when a student's use of a smartphone and computer device is problematic enough to warrant intervention. As with nearly all other behaviors of concern, multiple factors should be considered when selecting interventions and supports. Two major factors are discussed in this section: (a) the age of the student and (b) the nature and severity of the problem.

Age

Consideration of a student's age will help determine appropriate use of computer devices. In general, younger students should spend less time using computer devices than older students. Most students between the ages of 10 to 12 are mature enough to have a smartphone. However, students differ greatly in maturity and their ability to make responsible decisions. Therefore, parents need to consider their child's individual characteristics, such as impulse control and conscientiousness, when deciding when a smartphone is appropriate and how frequently their child should be permitted to use it. Parents' decision also should consider *how* computer devices will be used. For example, there is a difference between allowing a young child to communicate with family members on a computer device and allowing the child to communicate unsupervised with a stranger, or between allowing a child to interact with high-quality

educational programs or to surf websites, play violent videogames, or watch videos obsessively.

Nature and Severity of the Problem

Parents and teachers frequently voice concerns regarding the amount of time that students spend using various devices for gaming, social networking, or watching or listening to media. Many devices and Internet services are designed to increase habitual use, and students are quite vulnerable to becoming hooked. There is no hard and fast rule regarding how much usage is too much. Every time an organization has come out with specific time guidelines, they are criticized for being unrealistic. Rather than focus on absolute time limits, parents and teachers need to ask themselves guiding questions such as the following:

- Does use substantially restrict the time the student spends communicating face-to-face with peers, parents, or teachers?
- Are there signs of decline in the student's academic performance?
- Does use of computer devices negatively affect the student's relationships with others?
- Is the student using devices as a way to deal with difficult emotions or situations?
- Does the student become upset, angry, or anxious when not online?
- Is the student sacrificing sleep to be online?
- Does the student often think that he or she will miss out on something if not online?
- Is there an increase in moodiness, depression, or irritability after being online?
- Has the student become secretive about his or her time online?

Students who are experiencing significant problems related to their use of smartphones and computer devices are going to prompt more affirmative responses to the questions above. The behaviors highlighted in these questions can reflect specific problems such as Internet addiction, sexting, exposure to pornography, lack of sleep, and cyberbullying.

RECOMMENDATIONS

When a student's smartphone and computer device usage is problematic enough to warrant intervention, parents and teachers should consider the following recommendations. The recommendations are specific

to common issues that occur at home and at school; strategies include decreasing a student's use of devices, protecting a student from harmful content, dealing with pornography, safeguarding privacy, and addressing cheating and plagiarism. Most of these recommendations are ones that are commonly cited in respected publications on students' use of computer devices. However, few have been empirically validated because of the lack of such research. Recommendations are presented separately for home and school, although most can be used for both places.

Recommendations for Home

1. ***Create a family media plan by designating specific times for media use within the home.*** Limiting media use allows children to experience more face-to-face communication. This is likely to enhance social skills development and encourage more outdoor physical activity, thus promoting a healthier lifestyle. The use of apps or programs on your child's devices can help enforce these limits. See healthychildren.org for ways to personalize a family media plan.
2. ***Use apps or programs to help monitor and filter the student's use of computer devices.*** Multiple apps and computer software programs are available for these purposes, either free or for purchase. They include helpful parental functions such as tracking and controlling online activity; filtering out unwanted comments, websites, and spam; and ending an online session or turning the device off altogether. Parental control options frequently are available as part of computer operating systems, Web browsers, and smartphones. NetNanny, Qustodio, and Securly, which must be purchased, include monitoring functions that help prevent a range of online dangers. For example, they allow parents to check to see what apps their children are using (e.g., dating and gambling apps), what websites are being viewed or attempted to be viewed (e.g., pornography, gambling sites, dating sites), and what videos are posted or watched (e.g. videos that encourage dangerous behaviors). If you decide to use these types of programs, make sure your child knows about it and also knows how they are used and why.
3. ***Model appropriate use.*** For example, you should stop using computer devices when listening to someone. You also should consider removing

computer devices from family time activities, specifically dinnertime. Having dinner together is an opportune time to have meaningful conversations and strengthen family connections.

4. **At night, remove or shut down your child's smartphone, laptop, or other computer device.** There are apps that allow you to shut down and turn on devices at set times. Shutting devices down at night and keeping them out of your child's bedroom is important for promoting a healthy sleep environment. Also at night, use apps that block the blue light emitted from these devices (e.g., f.lux). This is particularly useful for children who need to do homework late at night, as blue light interferes with their sleep cycles, which makes them stay up longer. If your child argues that the smartphone is needed as an alarm clock, buy a separate alarm clock to use.
5. **Protect privacy when going online.** While children may have fun sharing information with friends, they need to be aware of how the information can quickly become public and widespread. To help stop inappropriate sharing of information, photos, videos, and so forth, the following recommendations are suggested:
 - Review and explain privacy settings for all computer devices, apps, and especially social media websites that your child uses. Each website, app, and device has privacy settings. Be sure to activate them. You will need to go to these sites to obtain more information on how to access those controls. A good overview for student privacy issues is on the Common Sense Media website (see Recommended Resources).
 - Follow social media guidelines that restrict account access to children who are under 13 years of age on sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Snapchat. This restriction complies with the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act of 1998 (COPPA) and reflects concerns that younger children are unable to effectively restrict their personal information.
 - Turn off geolocation services. Geolocation allows certain smartphone apps and social networking sites to highlight your child's physical location to other users. One example is Snapchat, which has the option of using Snap Map, showing where a user is while using the app. Your child should be told about the dangers of making their physical location

known and why it is important to turn off that function.

6. **Explain that some content can be harmful to view.** A variety of videos highlight many dangerous or inappropriate behaviors that students should not copy or mimic. Examples include students completing challenges, such as the Tide Pod challenge (biting into a Tide laundry detergent pod) or consuming large amounts of cinnamon. Discuss the impact of such behaviors on the child and others, and make clear the consequences when inappropriate usage is discovered (e.g., loss of smartphone use for a period time). As age appropriate, be sure that your child is especially aware of possible harm in viewing pornography. Adolescents, particularly males, frequently seek out pornography online, which can lead to permissive sexual attitudes, more sexual aggression, and increased casual sex (Peter & Valkenburg, 2016). The more viewing that occurs, the greater the changes in attitudes and behaviors. Making sure your child is aware of the legal and ethical consequences of viewing child pornography is especially important. Make it clear that you do not approve of the viewing of pornography, as this disapproval has been shown to curtail usage (Rasmussen, Rhodes, Ortiz, & White, 2016).
7. **Provide support if your child is the target of cyberbullying.** You should let your child know that you are there to provide support and help. The primary focus should be on stopping the cyberbullying and providing support and guidance that will help your child cope with the cyberbullying. Various social media sites and filtering programs have active blocking services where individuals or specific content can be blocked from your child's account. In addition, you should contact the school when you become aware that your child is a target of online aggression. Depending on the severity, law enforcement can also be contacted.

Recommendations for School

Many of the recommendations above can be applied to the school as well as home, especially when your child's computer device is owned by the school. For example, it is important to monitor computer use closely, install filters, and alert teachers to any changes in behavior that might be related to the use of computer devices by the student or peers. Additional recommendations for preventing common problems

related to the use of computer devices in schools follow.

8. **Review school policies and classroom rules that cover the use of computer devices.** Although often guided by state laws, school policies vary widely from district to district, as well as from school to school. For example, many schools provide students with laptops or tablets and have strict policies governing their use. Some schools allow the use of smartphones, whereas others restrict where and when they can be used, and still others do not allow their use at all. School policies, including what happens when they are violated, should be clear to students and their parents. If a student violates a policy, be sure to highlight that policy and rules that pertain to the particular incident the student was involved in. Common issues where school policy is pertinent is in regard to cyberbullying, cheating, and plagiarism.
9. **Use other programs that help prevent problems more specific to the school, such as plagiarism and cheating.** In addition to monitoring and filtering programs, there are a variety of programs available that scan students' work for plagiarism or copied Internet sources. Teachers should give clear examples of different ways that plagiarism can occur when using Internet sources for assignments and let students know that plagiarism will not be tolerated. This lesson should ensure that students will not inadvertently plagiarize. Even with these reminders, some students will decide to risk it and plagiarize anyway. If a student knows about plagiarism and was unwilling to do the work, teachers should rely on school policy regarding consequences. For issues of cheating, see *Lying, Stealing, and Cheating: Helping Handout for School*, which includes recommendations on how to respond.
10. **If use of smartphones in class is a concern, impose limitations on their use.** Some schools allow smartphones in class; others don't. If students are using them when not allowed, teachers can consider implementing the Good Behavior Game, which has been found to be effective in reducing inappropriate use of computer devices (Hernan, Collins, Morrison, & Kroeger, 2018). See *Implementing the Good Behavior Game: Helping Handout for School* for specific steps on implementing this interdependent group contingency system.

11. **Tackling cyberbullying in school.** In addition to having fully developed policies on cyberbullying, schools should implement school-wide bullying programs. Many bullying programs have also led to decreased levels of cyberbullying. Some specific cyberbullying programs tend to focus on involving student bystanders in intervention efforts. For individuals who are being targeted, teachers and staff need to provide support, beginning with getting the school counselor involved. Support might include a focus on increasing a student's coping skills and identifying naturally occurring social supports. For recommendations on how to respond to cyberbullying, see *Bullying: Helping Handout for Home* and *Bullying: Helping Handout for School*.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

Websites

<https://www.common Sense Media.org/parent-concerns>

The website for Common Sense Media provides parents with the latest information on various media, including a strong focus on technology. Under the Parents Concerns tab, the site covers privacy, Internet safety, technology addiction, and cyberbullying, among other topics.

<https://www.healthychildren.org/English/media>

The website for the American Academy of Pediatrics provides step-by-step guidance for parents to create their own personalized family media plan.

<http://www.pewinternet.org/>

The website of the Pew Research Center provides a wide range of reports regarding the use of the Internet and technology across the lifespan. Various insights into social media preferences and use of computer devices is available.

Books and Articles

Brooks, M., & Lasser, J. (2018). *Tech generation: Raising balanced kids in a hyper-connected world*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Written for parents and teachers, the authors go into depth discussing a variety of problems encountered online. Several chapters discuss approaches to prevention and intervention for various technology issues.

Van Ouytsel, J., Walrave, M., & Van Gool, E. (2014). Sexting: Between thrill and fear—How schools can respond. *The Clearing House: A Journal of Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas*, 87, 204–212. doi:10.1080/00098655.2014.918532

Given the far-reaching consequences of sexting, schools will benefit from this guidance on responding to and preventing its occurrence.

Related Helping Handouts

Bullying: Helping Handout for Home

Bullying: Helping Handout for School

Implementing the Good Behavior Game: Helping Handout for School

Lying, Stealing, and Cheating: Helping Handout for School

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