

Digital Exposure and Mental Health of Children

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Abstract

Use of digital medium for education especially during these Covid times has become a part of the 'new normal'. Schools have not opened post lockdown and the uncertainty persists in the future too. Other than that engagement with the media has increased manifold for formal communication and for social connectivity. However, as an enlightened population, we should be able to strike a balance between how much of digital exposure we can give to young to facilitate learning and at the same time not lose the opportunity to master social skills and interpersonal connections. This is the need of the hour looking into the studies which show a deleterious effect of media on mental health of young minds. Therefore parental supervision is crucial to facilitate learning and minimize the negative impact of media.

Key words: Mental Health, Media, Behaviour

Introduction:

Individuals who revolutionized the relationship between individual and the computer, Bill Gates and Steve Jobs raised their kids tech-free and seldom let their kids play with the very products like I-phone and I-pads, they helped create. In 2007, Gates, the former CEO of Microsoft limited their kids's tech exposure, banning them from owning a cell phone before they turned 14 years. Steve Jobs in 2010 releasing the iPad, described it as a wonderful device that brought you educational tools, however, never allowed the iPad in the home, citing that it was 'too dangerous and addictive, hard to resist'.

The census report (2011) of the Government of India states that India's child population is 164.5 million and children in the age group of 5 to 9 years are 128,316,790, 12.5 % and children in the age group of 10-14 years also are almost the same number 124,846,858. This age group is crucial because the education needs are of prime concern during this age. Investment in this population is most essential to transform the nation and bring out rich dividends. Thus, it calls for immediate and concerted action for providing them with the right educational tools and for maintaining physical and mental health of children. The advent of hyper learning technology has made a turbulent advent into the living and learning spaces more during the Covid times. The technological advancement has been into a spiraling speed and has invaded deep into the lives of

children. It would not be wrong to say that socialization of the children is more influenced by the media than by parents, teachers or even the peer group.

Child Mental health includes the complete well-being and optimal development of a child in the emotional, behavioral, social and cognitive domains. Mental health of children is different from adult mental health and is more multi-faced because of the unique developmental milestones that children experience.

There is little doubt that technological inputs introduced for education has a positive impact on teaching and learning. Studies show that in the regular course of time, children exposed to variety of media can improve children's learning. The electronic media in schools have capitalized on the motivation to learn and have a positive effect on children. The beneficial effects include early readiness for learning, educational enrichment opportunities, exposure to variety of areas like arts, music and entertainment.

The various media that children can be exposed are:-

Television

Television can take one into different realms of earth virtually which cannot be reached physically. Channels such as National Geography, Discovery facilitate learning. However, Research has found that television viewing at home is more for entertainment than at school for educational purposes which call for attention. The influence on children and adolescents depends on how much time children spend on watching it and the quality of programmes seen. As a result, with prolonged viewing, the world shown on television becomes the real world. It frequently limits children's time for vital activities such as playing, reading, learning to talk, spending time with family, storytelling, participating in regular exercise and developing other physical, mental and social skills. Current literature also suggests that there is a relationship between watching violent television programmes and increase in violent behavior. Children viewing televised violence contributed to acting violence in the home.

Excessive television watching contributes to increased incidence of childhood obesity. Children are vulnerable to the impact of advertising. A recent study of Stanford University found that one 30-second commercial can influence the brand choices of children as young as two years and repeated exposure to advertisements are even more effective. Excessive television viewing may also have a deleterious effect on learning and academic performance. Watching certain programmes may encourage irresponsible sexual behavior. Studies also show that Teenagers watching some programmes on MTV are more prone to develop favorable attitudes towards pre-marital sex. Television violence teaches aggressive attitudes and behavior, desensitization to violence and increased fear of becoming victimized by violence/overestimate the possibility of being a victim of violence.

Young children have a tendency to imitate, whoever they observe thus leading to a finding which is substantiated that when children are exposed to specific aggressive behavior which increases

the likelihood of behaving in exactly the same way. There are other factors that influence aggressive behavior such as neuro physiological abnormalities, poor child rearing, socioeconomic deprivation, poor peer relations, attitudes and beliefs supporting aggression, drug and alcohol abuse, frustration and provocation etc. One of these factors added with exposure to media violence becomes a predisposing factor for aggressive and violent behavior.

New, Views and Analysis

24X7 news channel updates on the happenings anywhere in the world. But it is also a fact that news principally reports on the most violent events from all over world, often in a sensationalized manner. Needless to say that competition amongst the news channel to keep viewers glued to the screen is the imperative. However, watching updates and news of not so positive news can increase anxiety and depression. Within this present level of heightened awareness about terrorism, many children are exposed to second hand terrorism in which media sometimes unconsciously focuses on the possibility of being a direct victim of future terrorism. This sets the stage for insecurity, false alarms and persistent anxiety. A news report published in Clinical Psychology reveals that the children exposed to terrorist attacks show elevated symptoms of mental health problems, including post-traumatic stress disorders, separation anxiety disorder and general anxiety disorder. An underlying message is, if instability and threat is repeated over and over again in many children's programs giving children the impression of a threatening and unsafe world where danger is never put to rest, it can be immensely harmful.

Internet

The internet uses multimedia and interactivity extensively. Using multimedia means that you can access not only written words, but also pictures, music and sound effects. However, the dangers in this medium are:

- Children access inappropriate information
- Inadvertently form friendships with strangers in the social media platforms
- Be subjected to advertising pressures, making purchases or gamble online
- Risk their personal health through excessive use
- Endanger their privacy by revealing personal details about themselves.
- Being victims of bullying and cyber abuse.

Computer/Video games:

Computer and video games have to be evaluated and analyzed on the basis of the contents and results/ outcome before children have access to it.

Games such a role playing, where the player goes on a quest of some sort overcoming obstacle on the way is Real Time Strategy, where player can strategically direct battles are usually violent causing harm to others, the harm rewarded, harm is depicted as humorous. Games such as first person shooter (#D action, shooter, FPS) where the characters compete physically often through

martial arts with other character are always violent. Prolonged exposure of children to violent video games increases the likelihood of aggression. The more often children practice (fantasy acts of violence), the more likely they are to carry out real-world violent acts. The risk associated with computer and video games includes-

- Becoming addicted/hooked more when there are rewards attached to the results.
- Being exposed to violence, particularly practicing violent act in the first person
- Developing/ reinforcing negative racial or sexual stereo types.

The harmful effects are sensationalization of violent behavior, exposure to subtle or explicit sexual content, promotion of unrealistic body images, presentation of poor health habits, exposure to persuasive advertising targeting children.

The crucial age

The developmental tasks during the childhood phase require vital activities such as playing, reading, learning to talk, spending time with family, storytelling, participation in regular exercise and developing other physical, mental and social skills. When media engages the child's time for more number of hours, it can take a toll on not only their learning abilities but also their overall development. Moreover, young children during their formative years have a tendency to imitate and they are not able to differentiate right behavior and wrong behavior which can also have detrimental consequences.

As an enlightened society, we need to check whether through our acts of omission or commission that we do not give away to those platforms that lead our children to be severely unhappy or maladjusted. Teachers and parents must become media literate and guide children in the use of media. It is necessary to keep up with rapidly changing knowledge level and thus use technology as a supplement to traditional methods of learning and not substitute it. Learning through media should always be under the supervision of parents and guardians. Children should be able to vent out what they feel and express their views after each session.

Age appropriate use of internet video games and television programmes should be advised. Placing the computer or mobile phone /tab in the common space of the house and not in the child's personal space negates the effects of viewing inappropriate material. The challenges we face as a globalised economy is to help the young realize the power of technology and at the same time use it with caution.

The technological revolution has overwhelmed us but it is time to exercise restraint and see that the informational revolution does not compromise the development needs of the next generation. The time to act is now as quoted by Gabriel Mistral, the Nobel laureate said on the need to focus on Children's issues should ring in our minds and called for urgent actions, ,” We are guilty of many errors and faults but our worst crime is abandoning the children, neglecting the foundation of life. Many of the things we need can wait. The children cannot- right now is the time his

bones are being formed, his blood is being made and his senses are being developed. To him, we cannot answer 'tomorrow' His name is today.

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