



Parenting in the Digital Era: A Harm Reduction Approach

International Telecommunications Union Secretary-General Houlin Zhao says: “Digital connectivity plays a critical role in bettering lives, as it opens the door to unprecedented knowledge, employment and financial opportunities for billions of people worldwide.”

Although merely 30 years old, the internet has revolutionized every aspect of our public and private lives. More than two-thirds of the world’s population is digitally connected, with this number growing exponentially. Not surprisingly, 80 percent of 15 to 24 year olds are online. Improved telecommunications infrastructure, with parallel advances in digital technology, has made the virtual world more affordable and accessible. And Web 2.0’s interactive capacity, together with the development of social media networks, mobile devices, and smartphones, has transformed the ways in which we interface and interact with each other.

New problems and challenges have also arisen; there is increasing concern about the direct, indirect, and acquired effects of cyber technology upon human development, right across the age spectrum.

How do we integrate digital technology in a healthy, balanced, and responsible way while minimizing its harmful effects?

Humans are primarily relational beings: relationally motivated and relationally organized.

British pediatrician, child psychiatrist, and psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott famously said, “there is no such thing as an infant,” meaning that a baby only exists as part of a unit that includes parental care. Parent-child co-constructed interactions, moments of attunement, and repair of the inevitable disruptions that occur,¹ are vital for the development of a healthy sense of self, emotion regulation, and the capacity to tolerate the anxieties and tensions that accompany normal interpersonal relationships. These primary interactions form the individual’s attachment style, which becomes wired in the brain.² The relational dynamics arising out of the attachment style can persist across relationships and throughout life, although they are potentially malleable because of the plasticity of the brain.³

Neuroplasticity is why repeated behaviours set up pathways in the brain that are responsible for both healthy and unhealthy habitual behaviours. Hebb’s rule: “Neurons that fire together, wire together.”

Jim Balsillie, former co-CEO of Research in Motion (BlackBerry), and psychiatrist and psychoanalyst Norman Doidge, recently discussed how neuroplasticity is being exploited to facilitate smartphone “addiction” and how it changes our brains without us being aware of it.⁴

Balsillie points out that tech companies hire neuroscientists to help design apps that draw us back again and again, deliberately re-shaping our brains. Although there is no formally recognized “smartphone use disorder,” Doidge lists the marks of an addiction: “compulsivity, loss of control of the activity, craving, psychological dependence, using even when harmful.”

Psychologists, neuroscientists, behavioural scientists, and social commentators are studying the multi-faceted adverse effects of digital technology upon humans, with calls to policy makers for stricter regulations, to tech giants for more ethically-informed applications, and to parents for greater vigilance in monitoring, not just their children's screen time, but their own as well. The "parent-child" unit is now a "parent-child-digital" matrix, and all of us, particularly parents, must be cognizant of the harmful effects of digital technology on our lives — and that of future generations.⁵

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⁴Doidge N. and Balsillie J. *Can we ever kick our smartphone addiction? Jim Balsillie and Norman Doidge discuss*. *Globe & Mail*, 17 Feb 2018.

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⁶Brent J. *Your Kids May Actually Think You Love Your Phone More Than Them*. 12 Jan 2018
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Some ideas and tips, adapted from *Right Click*:

- Do you use digital media as a substitute for face-to-face experiences?
- Use digital and non-digital means to meet needs, turn interests into real-life experiences, and converse.
- Have the whole family adopt healthy digital habits. Specify no-tech, low-tech, and high-tech times, giving rationales and clear expectations, (when, where, how, with whom, and why).
- Model a self-controlled, healthy, balanced use of tech. Children need their parents' attention.
- Safety: Supervise rather than surveil; teach discernment and self-control. Foster trust and honesty; encourage kids to come to you first for guidance. Have a protocol to deal with issues; network with other parents for ideas and strategies. Keep current so as to help your kids think through the issues as they arise.



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