



# PROTECT YOUR CHILDREN

ON SOCIAL MEDIA

## DIGITAL GUIDE



Seventh-day Adventist Church  
FLORIDA CONFERENCE

CHILDREN'S, FAMILY AND  
SINGLES' MINISTRIES

*Dr. Duany*



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# INTRODUCTION

In my clinical practice, problems from social networking, texting, gaming, and excessive screen time are common among children, teenagers, and the families with whom I work.

Technology has indeed changed the way we communicate and relate to others. Even so, since we are dealing with the youngest members of the family, there is still much to discuss.

On the one hand, children and teenagers who have fun on the internet may feel that it is an escape from reality and problems. On the other hand, social networks give them the feeling that communicating is much easier. Even those yearnings to explore the world are satisfied through them.

However, not all that glitters is gold, which can be proven by knowing the hundreds of dangers children are subjected to online. Anonymity and a lack of truly efficient regulations are serious security flaws that put this vulnerable group at risk.

One only needs to think of cyber addiction or cyberbullying to get a clearer idea of how serious these threats are. We can agree that isolating a child or teenager from the internet is impractical in today's world, so, as parents, we must set limits and schedules.

There is no easy answer to the question of how much time we can allow our children to spend in front of a cell phone screen. And that is why we will try to further explore a satisfactory solution in this guide.

**DR. EFRAÍN DUANY, DMIN, LMFT**

# How do our children spend their time in front of screens?

I have always considered raising children to be the most complicated job God will ever give us in life. Being a parent represents a great blessing, but at the same time, a great challenge that is only getting more complicated as digital media takes over the world.

In the last decade, the rate of childhood mental disorders has doubled, something that is related to the use of the internet and how its power has increased in society. Being so easily influenced, children and teenagers need proper guidance on its use.

But this is also where we enter a new debate that is causing parents consternation, and that is, how much time is appropriate to allow them to use the various screens they have access to? That includes their cell phones, computers, tablets, and video game equipment.

Extremes are counterproductive for parents, so, if your answer is that they cannot have access to anything, you are not being realistic. Just as if you feel there is no need to supervise their use, you are also part of the problem.

Parents need to educate themselves about the consequences of screen time and how it affects the development of children and teenagers because you cannot fight something you do not know or fully understand.

One of the first steps is to be honest with ourselves and admit how much time they spend browsing the internet. If the sum of the hours





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is alarming, you're not alone—the statistics from the Centers for Disease Control<sup>1</sup> speak for themselves. For example, more and more children ages three to fifteen have their own tablet, while the use of smartphones is notorious from ages eight to seventeen. Statistics show that:

- 16% of children aged 3 to 4 years have their own tablet.
- 44% of children aged 5 to 15 years have their own tablet.
- 32% of children aged 8 to 11 years have their own smartphone.
- 78% of children aged 12 to 17 years have their own smartphone.

In terms of hours per day spent in front of screens, the numbers are also very revealing:

- 4.5 hours a day spent by children aged 5 to 7 years.
- 4.5 hours a day spent by children aged 8 to 12 years.
- 9 hours a day spent by teenagers between 13 and 19 years.

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<sup>1</sup>Centers for Disease Control



# How do social networks and smartphones affect our children's mental health?

**M**ental health in young people has been deteriorating over the years, especially in the last decade. And a relationship between this situation and the rise of social networks and smartphones exists.

More than 50 percent of children aged four to seventeen have a diagnosable mental health disorder before the age of 18. At the same time, within this group, 21 percent, or 1 in 5, have a serious mental disorder. Once again, the Centers for Disease Control offer us revealing figures that should not be underestimated:

## Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD)

- 11% of young people between 4 and 17 years of age have it.
- 6.2% of young people take medication.



## Depression and anxiety

- 30% of 13–18-year-olds have an anxiety disorder.
- 15% of 13- to 18-year-olds have a mood disorder.

## Youth suicide

- Rates of consummated youth suicide increased by 25% over the last 15 years.
- Hospitalization of young people with suicidal thoughts has doubled in the last decade.
- This is the second most common cause of death among 15- to 24-year-olds.
- It is the third most common cause of death for young people aged 10 to 14.

These are numbers that can terrify any minor's parent or legal guardian. Even more so when you consider that adults have a huge influence on the time young people spend in front of screens.

Surprisingly, the risks to which children and teenagers are subjected do not end here. The excessive use of smartphones and social networks leads to more radical changes, which can be observed from afar if appropriate action is not taken.





# Main risks of social networks

**S**ocial networks have changed the world in which we live. People no longer communicate the same way they did a few years ago. And where many can see advantages and new opportunities for entrepreneurship, business and more fluid communication, the negative effects they have had on children and adolescents are notorious.

Here are the main problems caused by excessive screen time, and some practical tips on how to counteract them.

## Sleep disturbance

Sleep disturbance is one of the most important effects of excessive screen use, since





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the more time a child or teenager spends in front of a computer or smartphone, the lower their sleep quality.

I am sure you already know this, but I will repeat it so as not to subtract an ounce of the importance: sleep is essential for brain growth. In case you did not know, this situation continues until the age of 25 in women and 30 in men.

Sleep is so important in the consolidation of memories that a good sleep routine has a direct link to academic success. Memories are strengthened during sleep. Not letting our brains rest is a serious mistake that will show its effects in a short time.

But how specifically do screens disturb our sleep? Basically, in two ways:

- **Blue spectrum light:** When exposed to blue light, especially blue spectrum light, melatonin production is inhibited. Melatonin is a hormone that is produced naturally as the day gets darker. But when being exposed to this light after sunset, this hormone is not produced and we interrupt our waking and dream



cycle. Also, since our body does not receive the signal that it is time to go to bed, our heart rate will be affected. The best thing to do is to turn off the screens before going to bed so that we can fall asleep in a better way.

- **Stress response:** All digital media are designed to cause us stress in one way or another. How can that be? Cortisol, the stress hormone, is produced in low doses from watching videos on the computer or playing video games. It even drives us to buy things. Those low doses of stress are what we call “excitement,” and the more time we spend in front of a screen, the more stress hormones we produce.

## How to improve our sleep habits

The basic solution is to not spend so much time in front of a screen, especially during the hours before bedtime. This is a rule that all family members should follow



regardless of their age, whether the person is the father, the mother, or one of the children.

When you as a parent work late, you are not setting a good example for your children. You should be a role model. This kind of behavior makes children obey much more easily because they will not feel they are being treated “unfairly.”

Another recommendation is that there should be no screens in the children’s rooms at night. By that I mean television, tablets, and phones. In the case of teenagers especially, it is very important that parents keep their tablets and phones in their own room.

If they have computers in their rooms, you must resort to parental controls to limit the hours of use.

## Weight control and obesity

Excessive screen time inevitably leads to a weight disorder. It is a consequence that seems logical, considering that children and teenagers sit in front of their computers for long hours without any physical activity, something that leads to obesity.

Having a screen fixation and being overweight has been linked for decades in numerous studies. A child may be addicted to video games today, but years ago, watching a lot of TV while snacking was also a sure path to unhealthy extra pounds. The same story repeats itself with cell phones and social networks.





In the last 30 years, childhood obesity rates have doubled<sup>2</sup>, along with diseases such as diabetes. The constant advertising for fast food has also had a considerable influence. It is even more and more common to snack while playing with a plan to postpone meals to have more time to browse a social network.

## How to improve weight control

The basic recommendation I give regarding your child's weight dilemma is for you to ensure and encourage them to get an hour of daily exercise. This exercise is moderate, as suggested by the American Academy of Pediatrics, but the important thing is that it must be consistent, day after day. For example, you can play in a park, walk your dog, or play soccer or basketball.

In the same way, you should consider and monitor what kind of advertisements your child consumes through his/her social networks. Unhealthy foods abound here and there. In fact, millions of apps survive because of the ads they display when you use them. Perhaps paying for a subscription plan so that you do not have to receive these ads could be a solution.



Watching what your children eat is obviously another recommendation. If they want to snack while on the phone, offer them healthy snacks made with fruits and vegetables only. Their overall diet should be discussed with their pediatrician to ensure a balanced diet according to their age and lifestyle.

<sup>2</sup> Boone, Gordon-Larsen, Adair, & Popkin, 2007



## Aggression and desensitization to the suffering of others



Anya Kamenetz, author of *The Art of Screen Time*, states in her work that violence in the media provokes aggression. Since the 1960s, there has been research into whether children who were exposed to violent films were more aggressive.

Although it should be noted that this level of aggressiveness would not explain serious acts of violence, such as, for example, school shootings. These types of acts are more related to mental illnesses, dysfunctional family dynamics, and economic insecurity.

What is certain is that watching violence in images or videos is correlated with desensitization to real-life violence and the suffering of others<sup>3</sup>. It is also correlated with fear of violence happening to them, which triggers nightmares and an increase in violent thoughts.

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<sup>3</sup> Anderson et al., 2008; Harrington & O'Connell, 2016; Hull, Brunelle, Prescott, & Sargent, 2014; Hummer, Kronenberger, Wang, & Mathews, 2019; Kamenetz, 2018; Kirsch & Mounts, 2007

In short, playing violent video games predisposes the brain to anger and aggressive behaviors. All these types of materials are available on social networks in the form of previews, reviews, and the other players' comments.

## **How to reduce violent tendencies**

Currently, it seems impossible to isolate teenagers from video games or game-related content. But, as parents, we must choose our battles wisely and therefore, you must research the rating of such games. It is not always an easy topic to handle. Rather, it is one that requires doing some research.

In the same way, you will need to keep an eye on your child's stress and irritability levels during playtime. If you notice that he or she is showing a more defiant and violent nature, game time needs to be reduced. Chances are, he/she is not yet ready for these kinds of violent games.



You must teach him/her how to handle his/her frustration when losing in video games, how it can become an opportunity to learn to level up faster, or any consolation you would tell yourself. And you must not forget to sensitize your child and develop his/her empathy for others every day of his/her life. We live in a selfish world where there is often no sympathy for other people's pain. It is your responsibility to teach your child these lessons.

## Attention problems



Screen time and excessive use of social media can affect children and adults' attention span. Parents should ask themselves two very basic questions regarding their use:

- **How much time do they invest in this?** Have you ever wondered how much time your child spends in front of a screen every day? If you do not know, you are in big trouble. If it is a lot of time, you are in big trouble too. More time in front of screens means more concentration problems.
- **How fast?** Do you know how quickly the images on the screen they watch change? Faster images are related to more attention problems. Stress is triggered at higher levels by the fast pace of the cameras or video games. Once stress is triggered, it is more difficult for the brain to find the calm it needs to learn and interact in a healthy way. If the child is diagnosed with ADD or ADHD, they are more likely to be affected by the speed of the images<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Kamenetz, 2018; Swing, Gentile, Anderson and Walsh, 2010

## How to solve attention problems



First of all, you need to monitor and control the time your child spends in front of screens. Parental control apps help with this task, but you need to learn how to use them wisely. Also, you need to observe how your children respond during fast-paced media exposure. This is very important if the child is having trouble adjusting socially or in school.

In addition, you need to make sure your child engages in age-appropriate activities that help him/her be part of the real world in a healthy way. For example, in his/her school, sports, or social interaction.

## Depression, anxiety, and narcissism

Now it is time to talk about one of the most common problems related to social networks use, the high rates of depression, anxiety, and narcissism in adolescents who use them excessively.

The excessive attention they pay to their self-image and the lack of empathy towards others is not a pretty picture, but it is a direct product of what these networks show. They also lead to higher levels of anxiety and depres-





sion, since social networks create false expectations to fulfill and put powerful pressures on their young minds.

Ideally, parents should closely monitor the use of social networks in adolescents and guide them on how to safely manage their online social life. That said, it happens that most parents do not really know how social networks affect their children's emotional well-being. The excess must be stopped in time.

## How to prevent depression, anxiety, and narcissism



Monitoring, that is the word I want to emphasize for this section. Parents need to keep a close eye on how their children use social networks. They need to closely monitor how they interact with their contacts and how they can close the account if necessary.



Parents also need to have the authority to set limits on the social network use. Let teenagers know that how much time they spend on their cell phones is up to you, as parents. This can depend on good grades or good behavior.

Also, never forget that regardless of how smart a teenager is, he/she is still someone who is highly impressionable, so you need to instruct him/her on the dangers of interacting with others on the internet. They need to know better than anyone that predators and bullies abound online, that those predators and bullies can manipulate the truth.

One of the worst things about social networks is that they give a false sense of intimacy and familiarity, which is just that, false. Parents have to get involved here once again. It is interesting to dig deeper into bullying and how although a large majority of adolescents have experienced cyberbullying, only a small portion of them decide to tell their parents about it<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>5</sup> Kamenetz, 2018; Gámez-Guadix, Orue, Smith y Calvete, 2013; Gunnell et al., 2016; Merikangas et al., 2010

This is also something parents should work on, making their children feel confident talking to them regardless of the situation. Even if your child is not a victim of cyberbullying, constantly dealing with others' drama will lead him/her to mental health problems. So, access to online communities needs to be monitored. They need to be connected to the real world.

If social networks already have very powerful on your children, you have to act immediately and make the necessary adjustments. If it becomes necessary to delete an account, it is more than justified for their emotional well-being.

## Long-term brain changes and academic performance



A *National Institute of Health* study<sup>6</sup> has shown alarming results. It studied the long-term effects of screen time, showing that children who reported spending more than two hours a day in front of a screen scored lower on language and reasoning tests. In the study based on 11,000 children in 21 schools in the United States studied, it

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<sup>6</sup> <https://abcdstudy.org/>



was shown that children aged five to seven spend an average of 4.5 hours a day in front of screens, while children from eight to twelve years old spend six hours a day in front of screens.

How much time should they spend in front of the screen so that it does not harm their brain development? Less than two hours a day is recommended until the age of 10.

## **Social effects**



Social life and social networks depend on each other in the lives of teenagers today. Even young people who do not have access to them will find themselves isolated from their groups of friends and social dynamics to the point having trouble with academic assignments, since classmates now interact with each other via social networks to stay up to date on the latest news.



Therefore, the answer is not to take their phones away, it is more complicated than that. You must keep an eye on them and supervise them, but in a measured way. For example, parents who are “friends” on Facebook with their children see positive results here.

It is fundamental to see if social networking relationships are replacing real life ones<sup>7</sup>. It is your duty to keep educating them about the dangers of social networking, such as providing personal information online.

## Gaming disorder



It is not an exaggeration, gaming disorder was added as a health disorder by the World Health Organization (WHO) in 2018. Most teenagers who spend many hours gaming meet the requirements to suffer from this disorder.

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<sup>7</sup> Abar, Farnett, Mendola, Koban and Sarra, 2018; Richards, R., McGee, Williams, Welch and Hancox, 2010.

For example, intense preoccupation with gaming, experiencing withdrawal symptoms, such as sadness, irritability, or anxiety, from not being able to access video games, not being able to reduce gaming time, or losing interest in previously enjoyable activities are warning signs.

If you suspect that your child suffers from video game addiction, the best thing to do is to contact a professional.



# GENERAL PRINCIPLES FOR ANY AGE

**M**anaging the time our children spend in front of their cell phone, computer, or tablet is possible. We must act effectively and intelligently, so here are some tips that I consider useful for this purpose. They are called the 4 M's.

## 1st Principle: **MANAGE**



Parents must manage and supervise the time children and teenagers spend in front of the screen. They are responsible for shaping their children's character and habits and are responsible for everything they say and do. So, you are responsible for the time they spend online and for the quality of the content they consume, that is, the content they have direct access to.



This influence reaches its maximum power at preschool, elementary and high school ages, and by the time they reach late adolescence, that power decreases. By that time, the teenager is guided by the habits they have established previously. If there were no previous boundaries, do not expect them to be restrained as they grow up.

## 2nd Principle: **MAXIMIZE**



You must ensure your children prioritize their relationships with the real world. Relationships that depend on social networks, the internet, or video games are not part of the real world. Parents must be clear about this matter so that they can teach it to their children.

Respectful communication in the family is an indispensable tool to ensure the teachings are learned the way they are intended. Once again, parents need to set the example, the example of how the most important things are off-screen, like family.

Children and teenagers need to have more and more activities that take their attention away from screens, that encourage them to have fun outside of them, for exam-



ple, spending more time playing sports or learning about music. Physical exercise is very important for better health.

Do not forget that each child's temperament is different, and this means that the path to emotional well-being will not be the same for every child. You must know your children's personality and tastes in order to give them certainty and love.

### 3rd Principle: **MONITOR**



We have talked about this before, and I will emphasize it again: apps, videos, and games are designed to trigger your child's stress response. Low levels of stress are associated with "excitement" and keep their attention. In small doses, they do not present a big problem, but in high amounts they do.

If your child is irritable, aggressive, and is having difficulty controlling his/her impulses, you will need to reduce his/her screen time. Less screen time will improve their coping skills.

## 4th Principle: MENTOR



You are your children's mentor on how to use digital resources in a healthy way. You are their main role model<sup>8</sup>, therefore you need to set the example by not spending too much time using your smartphone and showing that real relationships are based on empathy.

You need to help them create healthy habits when it comes to screens, not lock them away altogether because that is counterproductive considering the way they live in the present.

According to the guidelines from the *American Academy of Pediatrics*, it is recommended for children under 18 months to avoid using screens unless the use involves

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<sup>8</sup> Gentile, Reimer, Nathanson, Walsh, & Eisenmann, 2014; Gingold, Simon, & Schoendorf, 2014; Lauricella, Wartella, & Rideout, 2015; Lee, 2013; Sanders, Parent, Forehand, & Breslend, 2016

video calls with loved ones. From 18 to 24 months, you need to select high-quality programs and watch them with your children. And from two to five years old, screen use should be one hour a day, but parents should help them understand what they are watching.

When they are over six years old, the limits will be more flexible. The goal is to ensure screen time does not interfere with their sleep or physical activity.



# Monitoring resources you should know about



Practically all smart devices have parental controls that make monitoring much simpler. They give a safe browsing space for children and teenagers, and some peace of mind for parents. For example:

- Apple/Mac/iOS devices: <https://support.apple.com/en-us/HT201304> (integrated in the configuration).
- Android/Google devices: Download the Google Family app for this: <https://play.google.com/store/apps/details?id=com.google.android.apps.kids.familylink>



- Windows/Xbox One: You can create a family account at <https://account.microsoft.com/family>.
- Amazon Prime and Fire tablets: Parental Controls can be used with all Amazon devices: <https://www.amazon.com/gp/help/customer/display.html?no-deld=201423060>

But you can also access third-party parental control apps, like a remote control of the content your child accesses from his/her devices. Some of them for elementary-school-age children are:

- Our Pact: [www.ourpact.com](http://www.ourpact.com)
- Screen Time: [www.screentimelabs.com](http://www.screentimelabs.com)
- Circle: [www.meetcircle.com](http://www.meetcircle.com)

For teenagers, the control needs to be more flexible, but requires being there with them. Some apps for this task are:

- Qustodio: [www.qustodio.com](http://www.qustodio.com)
- Norton Family: [family.norton.com](http://family.norton.com)
- Net Nanny: [www.netnanny.com](http://www.netnanny.com)

And if you are looking for reading related to this subject, here are some recommended books:

- The Art of Screen Time by Anya Kamenetz
- Reset Your Child's Brain by Victoria L. Dunckley
- Raising Humans in a Digital World by Diana Graber

# CONCLUSIONS



Parenting has been a challenge since the beginning of history, it is just that, with so many latent dangers on the internet nowadays, this role can be even scarier. Still, let me assure you that there is nothing you cannot do as a parent.

Children and teenagers require vigilance and boundaries, but above all, what they need is your attention and affection. Isolating them from smart devices or preventing them from having access to social networks according to their age is not protecting them. Protecting them is giving them the necessary tools to know what is right and what is wrong.

By giving them your example, love, and understanding, you will get to know a new side of your children, one in which communication will improve as time goes by. You should not make the mistake of believing that you know everything because a parent's education should grow along with their children's.

The next time your child does not want to detach from their Instagram account, instead of snatching the device away, offer to take them out for a walk, have fun, or do something exciting outdoors. The next time you notice your child is being distant and afraid of you looking at their Facebook account, sit down with them and remind them that there is nothing you will not help them with.

As you understand them, educate yourself and become more empathetic with them. You will see how they understand your role and how they are willing to trust your decisions more and more.

**Dr. Efraín Duany**



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