Safeguarding Our Adolescents from Inappropriate Use of Smart Gadgets: Hacks and Heuristics

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ABSTRACT

Adolescents (children aged 11-19 years) are at the greatest peril when it comes to use of smart gadgets. These gadgets are essential for literacy and development, but also have the potential to cause addiction and other unwanted effects. Finding the right balance is the key. Thus, there is a considerable need to devise, enlist and convey to parents, various hacks and heuristics that can be used by them to optimize the use of smart gadgets by their teenager children. This communication should prove helpful for all health care professionals who are directly or indirectly involved in adolescent health care.

Keywords: Screen addiction, adolescent health, counseling, digital health, pediatric health, psychology, screen time, teenagers

Adolescent age is a very fragile phase in a human being's life span. At this age, one is neither mature enough to differentiate wrong from right nor is one so trusting as to unquestioningly abide with rules set by parents. Adolescence is a vital phase as the future personality of a person depends largely on the habits imbibed during this phase.[1] One such habit that affects the adolescents' future in the long run is inappropriate use of gadgets.[2] They are extremely vulnerable to be influenced by the content of the media shown and to be exploited by cyber-bullies. Nevertheless, it's very difficult in this current tech-based world to just seize their gadgets authoritatively and restrain them from e-communication. If we as adults can't imagine staying away from our phones for a day, how can we expect our younger generation to do so? Just think about it.

We are privileged to be living in an era where we can reach every corner of the world in just a blink of an eye! The younger generation has equal rights to experience this privilege. Denying them of this 'new normal' would only make things worse. Moreover, the compelling digitalization of education system during the COVID pandemic has strengthened this normalcy further.[3]

The need of the hour is not to devise ways to keep the teenagers away from screens but to concoct a systematic course of action to let these screens turn into a helping tool for their better personality development. The hacks and heuristics as enumerated in Table 1, can help to raise an adolescent into a real human reflecting a technology driven personality with a realistic human touch.

PARENTING MEANS COMMUNICATION

The responsibility to safeguard the adolescents from the dangers of screen addiction lies equally on the shoulders of parents as well as health care professionals. Parents must fetch time to *communicate* with their adolescent children to keep the parent-child relationship strong during this tricky age.[4]

Just half an hour of daily conversation by either of the parents is enough to let them realize the bond shared. That must include some general talks about life, knowing about their friends and teachers, their career choices, involving them in family decision making and simultaneously fetching information about their current social media ventures. Explain the dangers of too much of screen time and keep reinforcing the same. We can call it as *friendly parenting*. This is the only way to win the trust of an adolescent soul. At this age, they

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Table 1. Hacks and Heuristics to Safeguard Adolescents from Inappropriate Gadget Use

General rules of parenting
• Face-to-face communication
• Friendly parenting
• Planning an excursion
• Engaging in a sport of interest
• Extracurricular skill
• Competitiveness
• Protective strategies
• Pre-sleep ritual
• Actions right from the childhood
Rules related to e-communication
• Digital literacy
• Right time to own personal device
• Family social media group
• Vigilance for screen or game addiction
• Family screen rules
• Screen-free timings and zones

need an unconditional support from their parents to avert themselves from falling prey to the fallacies of virtual world. That is possible only if the level of trust between the parent and child is too strong to hide anything. The responsibility of a parent must never fall short even if the child is adamant or stiff-necked. Tackling such a stubborn child is although difficult, but not impossible. Consistent communication is the key to turn the tide. Never forget the following rules while talking to them: listen, show trust and understanding, validate their feelings, respect their ideas, avoid being a dictator, praise often, control your emotions and be observant.[5]

DIGITAL LITERACY

Digital literacy holds a crucial space in today's globalized scenario. Acquisition of digital skills is one of the basic aspects of education now-a-days. These skills are mandatory to live in a society where access of information is mainly through technology.[6] It also includes teaching them how to use technology effectively and safely. It can be provided both by schools as well as at home by joining professional digital education courses once a week. Getting indulged into an entirely different digital space makes them less vulnerable to be trapped in cyber-crimes. Moreover, their career opportunities would also increase astronomically.

SOCIAL LITERACY

Apart from the above indoor tasks, adolescents should also be encouraged to explore the outside real world. This can be achieved by planning a *family excursion* at the weekends to rejuvenate their mind and body. Leaving all the mobile phones and gadgets back home would definitely be an icing on the cake. The adolescent children are stocked with relentless energy. This fact can be utilized to divert their attention away from the screens by enrolling them into any *sport of their interest*. This would keep their physical fitness at par as well as would lead to a shift of focus from worthless online concoctions to a more valuable pursuit.[7]

Additionally, there are a vast variety of *extracurricular skills,* which are equally helpful in rerouting the nerves of young brains, like singing, dancing, playing a musical instrument, painting, photography, craft, pottery, martial arts, story writing, learning second language, etc. As soon as the child seems to develop even a slight interest in any of the skill or activity, he/she should be encouraged to pursue the same. The key is to provide the spark at the point of ignition itself and the aim is again to safeguard them from unnecessary use of internet.

Having them engaged into the above-mentioned activities; an effective hack is to inculcate *competitiveness* with their peer groups with respect to the concerned sport or activity as well as in the academic feats. The young ambitious minds won't mind trading their screen time for skill practice and studies to outperform their competitors.

E-CHAPERONING

There comes a time when an adolescent is ready to have a *personal smart device*, something which ought not to be denied.[8] The onus of choosing the right time is on the parents. Once they have developed a trustworthy friendly relationship with their child and are confident enough to implement proper *protective strategies*, the time has arrived. The strategies include keeping a watch on search history, scrutinizing the apps used, performing extensive research of the video games played, making them aware of cyber-crimes, teaching them the importance of password protection of social media accounts, making them wary of downloading unnecessary utilities or data, not allowing them any online mode of payment, etc.

Once they have mobiles of their own, they should be added into the *family social media group* to inculcate in

them a sense of being an important member of the family. Sharing important family discussions, forwarding meaningful quotes and inspirational videos, chatting about current affairs, are some of the activities which would increase his sense of responsibility towards the family and society.

Family screen rules still play an important role in curbing most of the habit-forming actions. The rules must be abided by all the members of the family invariably. Setting an example yourself will convince them more to follow the suit. Manage your own screen time first. Certain *screen-free zones* at home, like the dining area, the bed, the play area, allow the child to understand the family values. For that matter, displaying the *screen-free zone* stickers at these areas inculcates a sense of compulsive discipline.

Lastly, a *pre-sleep ritual* must be followed invariably every day, a time which must be reserved for the family fun together.[9]

SCREEN ADDICTION

With every beautiful phase of life, the likelihood of insecurity prevails. *Screen addiction* is one of the most atrocious byproducts of adolescents owning personal smartphones. One must be vigilant in recognizing early signs of the same. Finding the child often seeking for lonely space at home, avoiding family get-together moments, complaining about being bored often, being unhappy during screen-free times, showing agitated behavior when asked to stop mobile use, being absent-minded, declining academic performance, increasing oppositional behavior, dull looking face, dark under eye circles, are some of the symptoms, which when observed must be immediately attended to before it gets too late.[10] Similar are the signs of online game addiction or traps, which also include unusual aggressive behavior, constantly asking for activation of payment modes, giving up extracurricular activities, remains preoccupied with video games, becoming emotional when video game apps are removed and an inability to control the urge to play. This internet gaming disorder is the worst that can happen to a child. It becomes mandatory to consult a child psychologist to timely provide cognitive behavior therapy. Else, prevention is better than cure.

SUMMARY

The above-mentioned strategies would work best if the implementation starts *right from the childhood*. Growing into a competent human being, capable enough to lead a successful life at par with the existing technology, has remained a constant goal for children of all times. Today's technology driven world demands an additional constitutional reform in terms of right to use the gadgets by children in an age appropriate manner and in accordance with the required developmental stage of the child.

The hacks and heuristics that we share in this article will go a long way in ensuring that this right is met, in a responsible manner.

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