



For illustration purposes: posed by model

DIGITAL FUTURES

*Longitudinal research papers on the effects of digital device usage on the young brain are in short supply. **Louis Weinstock** suggests that we encourage children to consult their own experiential evidence concerning the time they spend using digital devices, and that we harness the power of digital technology to enhance children's internal capacity for wellbeing*

Whenever I am wanting solid evidence to highlight the downsides of modern Western culture, I turn to mental health statistics. And for seriously big impact, I turn to child mental health statistics. Did you know, for example, that rates of anxiety and depression among children and adolescents in the US were far lower during the Great Depression, during World War 2, during the Cold War, and during the turbulent 1960s and early 1970s than they are today? Peter Gray' states: 'This increased psychopathology is not the result of changed diagnostic criteria; it holds, even when the measures and criteria are constant.' After explaining the constant measures used over that period of time, he adds: 'If progress is measured in the mental health and happiness of young people, then we have been going backward at least since the early 1950s.' And among teenagers in the UK, rates of depression and anxiety have increased by 70 per cent in the past 25 years.²

All this sounds pretty damaging for Western ideals of progress. But before we panic (and these kind of figures make me feel panicky), we ought to stop and think for a moment about how we might interpret such data. In an article with an ingeniously cheeky title, *The McDonaldization of Childhood*, psychiatrist and professor Sami Timimi suggests that there are three ways of understanding these statistics:

- There has been a real and huge downslide in the emotional wellbeing of children in the Western world in the last 30 years.
- There has not really been an increase in mental illness among children, but instead, we have changed the way we 'think about, classify and deal with children's mental health'.
- Some combination of these two.³

On balance, it seems obvious that options a) and b) would go hand in hand, feeding off each other, so that an overall deterioration in children's mental health would exacerbate the need for new systems to understand these changes, and those new systems would better note a downslide. But in either case, it comes as no surprise to me that the mental health of our children is deteriorating in real terms: there are too many aspects of our modern Western culture that are created by people whose main motive is profit, and not the developing needs of a child's mind. Here, though, I want to consider only one aspect of this culture, and that is digital technology.

Digital ubiquity

I was recently at a presentation delivered by a senior executive of a leading, global advertising firm. The lady speaker told us that she was working closely with three of the world's biggest digital brands. She shared some rather scary insider information with us: that the biggest battle currently going on between these corporate giants was to create digital products that will completely take over our living rooms. The goal, she said, was to create digital mechanisms that would absorb as effectively as possible the attention of all members of the family. There is a term for this, 'digital ubiquity', which is fast becoming common currency, suggesting that the powerful drive to 'digitalise' – a hybrid word that encompasses a user's online world – is inevitable, almost natural, as though digital products and worlds just sprout up like mushrooms in the rainy season. Steve Brown, whose title at Intel is Chief Evangelist and Futurist, spoke at London's first Wearable Technology Show, cheerfully sharing this imagined future where 'computers are getting smaller and smaller, closer and closer to our fingertip, our

nerve endings, our brains'.⁴ This is alarming to consider if you imagine children growing up in such a culture.

I then did my own research and discovered that this digital assault on the family nervous system was in fact already well under way. Fisher Price has created a baby's 'Apptivity Seat' – a baby bouncer with an iPad holder. Although this may shock some, with its suggestion of an insidious colonisation of children's brains, I don't wish to be reactionary and suggest better approaches, without reason. After all, perhaps the baby with the Apptivity Seat will end up being better adjusted to our modern world than the baby left with organic, wooden toys.

But the question then becomes: how would a parent, an educator, or anyone with a sense of responsibility for children, reasonably assess the effects of the digital revolution on young people's wellbeing?

Two ways to assess effects

I suggest there are two main forms of evidence on which we can form our opinions on the matter. The first form of evidence is the research kind – evidence generated by the scientific community, in peer-reviewed, repeated, repeatable experiments. And here, it seems, the evidence is inconclusive, almost across the board. There is, apparently, no clear, simple answer as to whether screen time is good or bad, social media is good or bad etc. In an interview with neuroscientist Susan Greenfield, the baroness produces for the interviewer a huge list of research papers investigating the subject from various angles, the information garnered from which appeared in her next book.⁵ But the quality of those papers is challenged in the same article by biological psychologist Pete Etchells, who adds that we do not yet have many good *longitudinal* studies to support the evidence one way or another.⁶

The second form of evidence is personal experience. This kind of evidence is really the origin of the scientific approach, where we take time and space to assess how our interactions with digital technology affect us on a personal, experiential level. Ask yourself now (if you haven't already) how you actually feel after spending perhaps two hours in front of a computer screen. For me, the answer depends on what I am doing. I know that if I am flicking between 25 different tabs on my browser, then this tends to leave me feeling very ungrounded. If I am watching a movie on my laptop, however, the effect is very different. Based on this and my other experiences, I feel quite sure that there is no simple answer to simplified (and perhaps sensationalist) questions such as the title of Paula Coccozza's piece in *The Guardian*, 'Are iPads and tablets bad for young children?'⁷

For this reason, I do not wish to go into detail here about all the potentially good and bad sides of the digital revolution, because there are already huge numbers of books and articles on the subject for those who wish to pursue the matter (I highly recommend

watching Beeban Kidron's film, *InRealLife*, for a beautiful and insightful overview of the issues).⁸

Instead, what I would like to consider for a moment is how, on a meta level, trying to research the effects of the digital revolution on children's minds is an almost impossible task – and also a perfect example of the wider challenges to truth in our postmodern times. With the information superhighway opening up access to vastly greater amounts of knowledge, perspective and opinion than people could ever have had access to before, this particular medium is delivering an increasingly *confusing* message about evidence and truth. If you want to find evidence to support your belief, however wild or wacky, you can find it via Google. This potential for confusion is proving a challenge for many parents looking for advice about their children's health, and also for therapists, who are expected to make their decisions based on the best available evidence. If you consider that a recent book, *Blur: how to know what's true in the age of information overload*, contains a hefty 132 pages of strategic advice on how to sift through the reams of data available on the web,⁹ then clearly, not all evidence is of equal quality. So the almost suffocating (and equivocal) amounts of information available at our fingertips in this digital age can serve the purpose of bringing us back to the importance of our own experience.

The evidence of personal experience

And this is why I recommend a personal, experiential approach to assessing the impact of any new technology as the most sensible way to navigate the sea changes we are submerged in. I have found it valuable to reassert the authority of my own experience, rather than unknowingly (or perhaps knowingly) to hand authority over to those corporate giants who do not often have our best interests at heart. And, significantly, I have also found it is possible to facilitate this experiential mode of being in children too. It's less 'do as I say' and more 'how does spending two hours on Facebook, Twitter, or Instagram actually make you feel?' Constant, gentle encouragement to a child to check in with their own experiences is the key to them remaining self-aware and mindful, in the midst

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of such rapid change, and I would argue that parents, therapists and anyone responsible for children's wellbeing would do well to pay attention to the child's authentic experience rather than to any rule book.

Indeed, my own experience of working with children for the last 15 years has given me large amounts of data by means of which I understand the impact of digital technology on children's mental health. As the leader of a therapeutic education provision, I worked with a number of children who slept with their Blackberrys under their pillows, coming into school exhausted because they were involved in a group chat that rolled on throughout the night. I have seen a 15-year-old boy break down into a tearful, violent rage because his controller broke in the middle of his *Call of Duty* session. And I can confess that I have been in at least one therapy session where I have had several intrusive thoughts about wanting to check my own social media accounts. On the more positive side, I have worked with young clients who were able to reduce their destructive behaviours (self-harming, eating problems, sexual identity issues) because of supportive messages from YouTube celebrities and other online forums.

There can be little doubt that our online worlds intrude into our consciousness, for better or worse. And children and young people – because these worlds are so especially appealing (and therefore intrusive) – have less and less space in their lives to reflect on how their digital behaviours affect them psychologically, emotionally or physically. Lost in ever-expanding, multitasking, digitised social identities, our children are increasingly divorced from their own authentic experience, from their true selves. It bears argument that this separation from authentic experience *must* be affecting children's mental health.

Inner attention

To access the kind of inner experience that seems to me so essential in these times, *inner attention* is required. And for the development of inner attention, children need the responsible adults around them to provide quiet, reflective spaces – distraction-free zones. Paradoxically, I believe we can harness the ubiquity and power of digital technology to help us do this.

Two years ago I set up a partnership between two excellent organisations: Kids Company, a charity that works with severely disadvantaged, vulnerable children, and Headspace, an organisation that provides mindfulness in an app.¹⁰ Since then, we have been playing with and designing ways to harness the power of technology to encourage children, even those with high levels of emotional disturbance, to become more mindful. I have also been working on a project called Wisdom Connects, which is developing technological solutions to guide young people back to their own authentic experience, to their own inner wisdom. These have been really exciting projects for me, as they have opened up digital fields of immense potential. This kind of technology, in the right hands, can be a huge force for good in children's lives, and indeed in adult lives. My dream for the future is that the intrusive power of digital technology can be reclaimed as a force for good in the lives of our children. If we can find more ways to support children in retaining a healthy connection to their inner and outer worlds, then we can enable them to make their own, authentic decisions about whether the latest gadget, app or game is good or bad for them.

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