



Is this what your family's dinner table looks like? Maybe it's time to give the screens a break.



Children are taking to social media at a very young age.



The *scary* side of screens

Too much screen time is hampering kids' physical growth and ability to socialise properly

KERUSHUN PILLAY

IT may educate and entertain with charming, funny and colourful characters, but your child spending hours on social media like YouTube can have a serious effect on their development.

Children these days are taking to swiping on a touch-screen as easily as they are to walking and talking, and experts say it is severely hampering their physical growth and ability to socialise properly in the real world.

Another side of a young child having access to social media is that it exposes them to predatory dangers. Experts warn against parents posting photos of their children, saying they can be picked up by people with bad intentions.

A social media platform like YouTube is awash with child-friendly content, and YouTube in 2015 launched YouTube Kids, which is specifically targeted at children 12 years old and younger.

YouTube, like any other social media platform, hooks its viewers by providing endless content at the touch of a button. It presents a much easier way for children to be entertained than, say, trying to make friends or playing outside.

And children themselves are superstars on YouTube: the channel *Ryan's Toy Reviews*, for instance, which features U.S. boy Ryan Kaji (8) reviewing the latest toys for children, has 21,5 million subscribers and more than 30 billion overall views.

South African author Nikki Bush, a human potential and parenting expert, wrote a book on this very issue called *Future-Proof Your Child For 2020 And Beyond*, and has labelled local children's access to



Be wary of posting about your child on social media.

devices "a growing problem".

She said parents unwittingly allow young children time on social media platforms. "It's an easy thing to allow children to do," Bush told *Weekend Witness*.

"The child sits still, they stay in one place, don't make a mess or noise and doesn't demand anything when on the phone. Parents are busy and tired sometimes and any solution is a good solution.

"That's the trap that we're falling into." But the consequences for a young child can be serious, especially since the child is still in the stages of their life where they are developing.

"Children under 10 years old are still in foundation phase and are learning value systems and are learning how to be decent human beings. It is a multi-sensory experience; they need more than just a screen."

"The child needs to socialise with other people and develop emotional intelligence, and they need to be able to see the effect of their actions on people's faces so they can learn what their actions mean."

Bush said parents need to avoid what she terms "SSS Syndrome" — the child having a sedentary, solitary and screen-based life.

"Parents need to ensure that children learn how to be their own boredom-buster, because with social media and apps they don't get used to using their brains in that way. It's not about being anti-technology; it's about showing a child how to live with and without social media. Because what happens when there's no electricity or they can't open the apps?"

Bush said there are also serious physical side-effects to SSS Syndrome, including developing short-sightedness. "Screens are usually the same distance away from the eyes, so the eye rarely has to adjust the focal length."

She added: "Their core body strength is impacted. Their posture becomes bad because of slouching.

"Fine-motor co-ordination becomes impaired. They're good at dragging and dropping things

on screen, or completing a puzzle on screen. But in real life they'll struggle to complete a puzzle because they don't understand spatial planning and how to manipulate it.

Bush said parents need to intervene by showing the child there are other experiences in life that are as exciting as social media. "Parents must understand: you are still the brightest crayon; you are what your child wants. They seek real and authentic time with their parents, and that fills their emotional cup."

She advised parents to control when the appropriate time to use a screen is. "Applaud their curiosity and celebrate their busyness. Have regular conversations. Parents must acknowledge their children.

"But parents must also remember that we are the role models, so if we're constantly posting and refusing to stop using apps, then the child will learn that."

Bush added: "It's about teaching a child that love doesn't come without a pulse; devices don't have a pulse, and they won't fill their emotional cup."

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HOW CAN I MAKE MY CHILD SAFER ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

THE blog *ScaryMommy* advises the following.

1. Turn off the search function and turn on any restricted mode functionality.
2. If you come across something you think is harmful, block and report it immediately.
3. Install any advertisement blockers you can. This will curb the number of pop-ups that the child is greeted with and, therefore, curb the number of potentially harmful sites they can get to.
4. Set up a family Google account to view YouTube. Having just one account will allow you to monitor what the child is watching and give you control over what they can and can't watch.
5. Pre-select videos you think are appropriate for your children and make a playlist. Then allow them only to watch from that list.

HOW CAN WE INTERVENE?

SOCIAL media expert Arthur Goldstuck, who has written extensively about this problem, said the issue of children being planted in front of a screen is not a new phenomenon.

"In the 1970s, children in front of the TV was pretty much a national emergency in the U.S. Then it came to SA and we had the same issue.

"The Internet and social media are evolutions of this, and parents are losing control of the situation," he said.

"So when we talk about intervening, it usually means it's too late because [the addiction] has been allowed to develop. Once they're teenagers, they will feel as if you're trying to 'take over their territory'."

Goldstuck said it is important to control children's social media usage from a very early age.

"Introduce specific parameters around using the device. In our house, for example, no one is allowed to have their phone at the meal table — it's not negotiable, it's just how it is. Computers in the bedroom are also not allowed. Phones must be put in the kitchen before bed. It's the culture of our home."

Goldstuck warned that not curbing screen time can lead to the "phone ruling the child's life".

He added that parents should think twice before posting excessively about their child on the parent's own social media accounts.

"For a start, that invades the child's privacy. It's fine to celebrate their achievements, but showing every detail can be harmful," he said.

PARENTS, THINK TWICE ABOUT POSTING PHOTOS OF YOUR CHILDREN ONLINE

HERE are ways that posting about your child makes them vulnerable.

1. Posting information like your child in their school uniform, the sports they play, their favourite places and the like, can make them vulnerable to people like traffickers, who are now armed with information to gain the child's trust.
2. Paedophiles can download photos of your child. They would target photos like your child topless at a swimming pool, or early photos of them having a bath or on the toilet. And just because you have made your posts private, doesn't mean unscrupulous people can't get to them. Nothing is really private on the Internet.
3. Making posts about times when your child did something naughty can compound the child's shame because they are being disciplined in public.
4. Congratulating your child, or boasting about them, can make the child feel they constantly have something to live up to, and they may feel they're not worthy if unable to continue excelling.

— Weekend Witness Reporter, Parent24.



IS MY CHILD OVERUSING SOCIAL MEDIA?

NIKKI Bush provides "the BEEPP checklist". Ask yourself the following:

Babysitter: Is the screen acting as a babysitter? Is it keeping your child quiet and in one place?

Experience thief: Children need multisensory experiences and face-to-face interactions. Is the screen keeping them away from these?

Emotional crutch: Will your child only eat their supper if sitting in front of a screen? Will they not fall asleep without watching something?

Pacifier: When the child is having a meltdown or tantrum, does being given a screen calm them down? This is negative because they don't learn how to resolve negative emotions.

Prompt: Apps and social media have prompts, they tell the child what to do. This means a child doesn't learn how to use their own initiative in how to solve things. Are you noticing this?

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