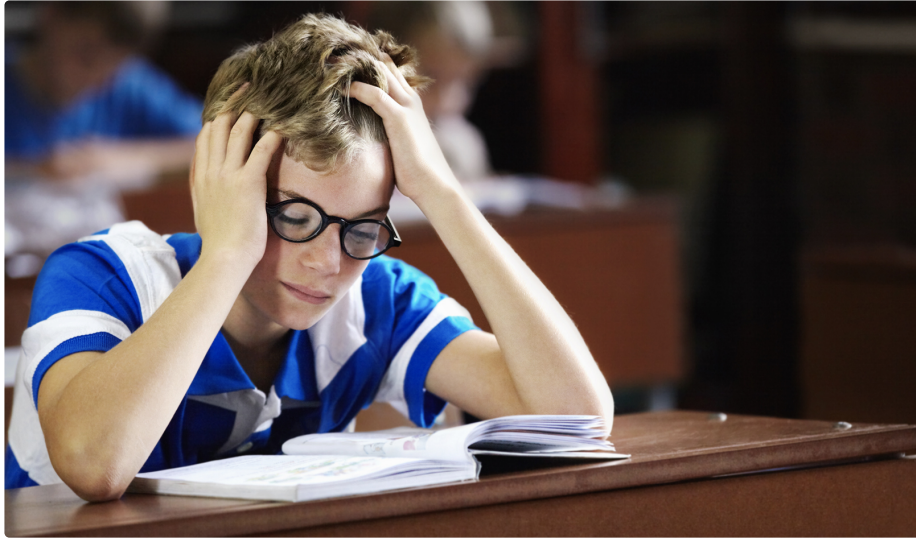**Dr. Nicole Beurkens**
Child psychologist

As technology use has increased over the past decade, so have the number of concerns I receive from parents about how it impacts the development of children. From cognitive and learning concerns to social and emotional concerns, parents and professionals are right to question the impact of something that consumes the time and energy of so many children. While there are certainly social benefits to digital device use and media consumption, concerns arise when excessive time spent on devices detracts from time spent engaging in and benefitting from in-person interactions and developmentally necessary activities.

Let's take a scientific look at how your child's time online impacts their social skills – empathy, compassion and sensitivity to human relationships – and what parents can do to encourage healthy social development.

Pros: Technology encourages positive social connection and support

The good news is that not all technology use is bad. It can be used to bring people together, and this is certainly the case for children and teens as well. Many report that use of social media platforms, texting, and other apps allows them to stay connected to peers they know in real life. It also can foster the development of friendships with peers around the world who have shared interests and goals.

Children with social anxiety disorders, who often struggle with engaging in social interactions in person, may find that online communities and social media platforms allow them to practice social interaction skills and gain confidence with social communication in a more comfortable way. Social support groups online also allow children to share their experiences and receive encouragement and guidance that may not be available to them in their local community.

Cons: Technology can create social disconnection and development

The bad news is that the overuse of screen time displaces time spent engaging in real life social interactions. We know that children develop communication, cognitive, and social skills through their relationships with caregivers and other adults and peers. They require face-to-face engagement to understand and use verbal and non-verbal communication, develop empathy, learn turn-taking, and more. Increased technology use has the potential to create social disconnection for young and older children alike, which can negatively impact the development of social and relational skills.

Recent research has shown that screen time is negatively associated with social skills development in toddlers. Specifically, the more time they spend with devices the more their social development suffers in the areas of relating and interacting with others and compliance with directions and ability to help others. **Levels of disruptive social behaviors, such as being bossy or bullying, increased with more screen time activity.**

The concerns about social disconnection extend to older children and teens as well. As time spent on devices increases, time spent in-person with peers and adults decreases. This can lead to a sense of isolation and loneliness, with studies showing that **teens who report the least in-person interaction and the most screen time have the highest rates of loneliness and depression.**

A study involving older children showed that **spending one week at summer camp without screen time led to a significant improvement in children's ability to read and understand non-verbal emotional cues.** This demonstrates the negative impact that screen time can have on the development of these critical social skills, but also highlights that these skills can improve in a relatively short amount of time (at least for older children) when device use is decreased and in-person social interaction is increased.

An additional concern regarding social development and overuse of screen time is the decrease in positive family interaction that occurs. Studies have shown that **increased use of devices leads to reduced quality time among family members, and increased parent-child conflicts.** Children and their use of devices play a role, but so do the device habits of parents. When parent use of devices infringes on quality engagement with children, their

social development suffers. Parents need to be mindful of their own device habits, as well as the amount of time they allow their children, in order to support healthy social development.

What parents can do to encourage healthy social development

Here are the steps that I recommend parents who come to me concerned about the impact of their child's digital device use and social development take to support healthy social development:

- **Enforce time limits** on devices and digital media using parental control apps like Qustodio. They help ensure your children have a balance of screen time and non-screen time activities, and enough in-person social engagement to allow for healthy development and prevent isolation and loneliness.
- **Talk regularly with your children** about their relationships with their peers. This can help identify concerns about a lack of real-life relationships as well as the social benefits a child perceives from their online activities. It can also help you be aware of inappropriate content or cyberbullying that may be negatively impacting your child.
- **Be a role model of healthy device habits.** It is critical that parents spend enough quality face-to-face time engaging with children to support healthy social and emotional development.

Listen to Dr. Nicole's 4-minute YouTube video related to this post:

- How does screen time affect social development in kids?

Read more online safety and digital wellbeing articles from Qustodio:

- For every hour of screen time, get one hour of fresh air
- Is problematic smartphone use making your child unhappy?
- Kids are more connected than ever before. Is this the new normal?
- Digital wellbeing: Are today's families worried enough about the effect of tech on their health and happiness?
- Is there a right age to give your child their first phone?

How can Qustodio help protect your family?

Qustodio is the best way to keep your kids safe online and help them create healthy digital habits. Our parental control tools ensure they don't access inappropriate content or spend too much time in front of their screens.

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