





# LEFT TO THEIR OWN DEVICES

Schools must be at the forefront of preventing tech addiction among children in order to head off its often devastating effects

*By Lisa Strohman*



**F**ew schools in the country can say they don't have a problem with personal devices. Even with all of the great advances in educational technology, students have taken a massive step backward in regard to social and emotional well-being due—in part—to their ever-present internet-connected gadgets.

The devices not only impact learning by reducing students' focus, but they also create barriers to healthy student-teacher and peer relationships. And the challenges of living an online life with offline consequences are putting many children in crisis.

This article reviews technology trends, the impact of these trends on the social and emotional development of students, and best practices in digital citizenship on campus.

### **Educational Technology**

Few can dispute that technology has created massive improvements in our classrooms by allowing students to pursue individualized learning in academics and introducing a robust system of tools that allow teacher and peer feedback through platforms such as Google Classroom. With all of these advances, however, are we making tradeoffs that rob students of the human connections they need? Are we looking to these platforms as mechanisms to simplify and stretch our teaching time, and is this resulting in a hard cost of more “distance” in personal relationships? The best answer is maybe.

Educators report that even our youngest students are experiencing adverse effects from an increased reliance on technology. Students are displaying issues that impact learning, such as a lack of executive function, vision problems (there are more myopic children than ever before), mood disorders, and what many argue is a tech-acquired ADHD.

It is difficult to determine whether the benefits of educational technology outweigh the harm personal devices produce. Although some students thrive when using educational technologies without demonstrating any negative consequences, the majority seem impacted in ways that are not only challenging for schools to address but also nearly impossible to contain with limited budgets.

In the past, we tried to integrate personal technologies into classrooms with limited success. What we now know is that the research on technology and its impact on the brain is clear: Overuse is causing the highest levels of anxiety and depression ever seen among children.

### **Impact on Social-Emotional Development**

How are schools responding? After serving as a panelist in a recent webinar, it became clear to me that every school in every district is trying to figure out how to manage technology on a day-to-day basis. Some are working to share the burden through partnerships with churches, hospitals, and community resources, and most are still looking for advice.

The global consensus is that students everywhere are in crisis. A 2018 NAESP survey reported that nearly 75 percent of principals were worried about their students’

emotional well-being—more than were worried about assessment, instructional practices, or providing a continuum of services to at-risk students.

As a clinical psychologist, I can say that this concern is not misplaced. Socially, our children are losing the ability to create authentic connections with one another, are extremely reliant on social media for their sense of personal worth, and are exposed to concepts such as pornography, self-harm, and suicide by age 8, on average. Children are living through tech-induced trauma on a daily basis and aren’t emotionally ready to learn.

There should be little question about the source of this social and emotional crisis, and even more frustratingly, it is coming from the home—a place over which educators have little control. Most students in the U.S. have access to a personal device by age 6 and have nearly unfettered access to social media by 10.

The online world they navigate as digital citizens is rife with danger, questionable platforms, and inappropriate content. Still, most families and students are left in the dark as to the real cost of technology. With the



deterioration in personal privacy, children risk being denied admission to college due to inappropriate social media posts, and they often have trouble with intimacy.

Schools aren't supplying the devices at issue, but educators do need a plan for how to work together with parents to find solutions that connect educational goals with students' needs. Without guidance, children in our classrooms might become another statistic—or we might soon find the school's name in a headline. It is time to band together and implement a robust plan to help kids become better digital citizens.

### Enhancing Digital Citizenship

Administration leadership in professional development, student programming, and parent involvement is essential to creating the psychological and emotional shift needed on campus. Recognizing that Generation Z has been steeped in technology their entire lives—and has often been given permission to avoid offline activities in lieu of it—is the first step.

Next, we must recognize that one-time trainings or discussions are not enough to counter the hundreds of hours students spend online.

There are a few “free” solutions, but they are often outdated, impersonal, and lacking the expert voice that an administration needs to navigate online trends. Ask yourself: Is the short-term intervention you use now good enough for your students, or do they deserve better? Do you feel as if you have a partner or a resource that you can lean on or call when a real crisis arises?

As educators, we have to accept that technology is part of the path on which this generation will travel. We must work with students and their parents to create sound, thoughtful, and ongoing support for this journey. As more and more families opt to provide personal devices for their children at younger ages, we must address this head-on in our schools. Here are two strategies:

- 1. Sign a contract.** Require a technology “contract” with families that includes a home education course in online dangers and digital citizenship. Educational programming that empowers and inspires students to become part of the solution instead of being told what boundaries or limits they have can also be essential in the school.
- 2. Educate from within.** Administrators and staff will need ongoing professional development courses that are contemporaneous to news cycles to ensure that all school personnel not only understand how students are using their devices but are also confident, educated resources students can trust. Children deserve resources that keep up with current trends and are built with their best interests in mind.

In many situations, educators are children's last line of defense against the digital world. Work together to establish the best strategies you can to protect your students today, so that they all can have a safe and healthy tomorrow. 

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### SCREEN SENSE

More than half of all children in the U.S. (53 percent) have their own smartphone by age 11, according to a nationwide 2019 survey from Common Sense Media, and one-fifth have a phone by age 8. Young people from families making \$35,000 or less per year spend, on average, two hours more per day with their screens than children from wealthier families.

To encourage good digital habits, parents should model healthy technology use for their children, says Temple University professor Jordan Shapiro. Parents and educators can also set limits on device usage, allowing phone or tablet use only at specific, designated times.

