

## **A Summary of *Unplugged Parenting* by Dr Elizabeth Kilbey**

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### **Introduction: Why do we need to unplug**

Most parents are gravely concerned about the amount of time their children are spending in front of a screen. The internet has replaced TV as the most popular past time for UK children.

We have an internal working model which is passed down from our parents on how to parent and a moral map that is passed through families. Our children are the first generation of digital natives from the day a child is born digital devices are part of their world. As parents we have no experience to relate to that is in any way comparable to the way our children live today. In the UK we have no guidance or knowledge to draw on and this is the first time we have been faced with a parenting challenge with no guidance from the previous generation.

When comparing the digital world to sugar, another global health crisis affecting our children. Most parents wouldn't dream of handing a biscuit tin to their child every day and letting them help themselves to as many biscuits as they want. But many parents don't think twice about giving their child unregulated access to a digital device e.g. a tablet or smartphone.

Banning screen time is not the answer what is important is for parents to create and teach good digital habits. The very best time to create these good habits and stop screen time from becoming an obsession is in latency age (or primary school children).

Latency covers the period from 4 yrs. to about 11. This is time when the brain is highly "plastic" (term used by neuroscientist to describe the ability of the brain to organise and reorganise itself to meet changing demands). Latency is all about socialisation making friends and developing independence if children are glued to screens they are at risk of becoming socially isolated.

### **Chapter 1 The effects of screen time on a latency-aged child**

Children are starting to go online younger in 2014 according to Ofcom (The office for communications) 47% of 3-7 yr. olds used tablets with internet access by 2015 this had risen to 61%.

Many parents are worried about the effects of this on their children's development as are many professionals. In 2016 a public letter was written by 40 clinicians, academics and authors about their concerns that a screen based lifestyle is harming children's health. They stated "If children are to develop the self-regulation and

emotional resilience required to thrive in the modern technological culture, they need unhurried engagement with caring adults and plenty of self-directed outdoor play, especially during their early years (0-7)” and they called for national guidelines on screen based technology for children up to age 12.

Interesting to note the world’s most famous tech gurus are very low tech when it comes to their offspring. When Steve Jobs was asked how much his children loved the latest iPad his response was “They haven’t used it we limit how much technology our children use at home”.

Many executives in Silicon Valley send their children to Waldorf Steiner homes which exclude screen time before the age of 12!

Physical problems – many children have impaired motor skills from so much time sitting down. They haven’t developed core strength and their posture is poor as they cannot sit because their core does not hold them still. Children who have run around and active have good muscle control and are better at sitting still. Chiropractors have seen an increase in a condition they have describes as “text neck” where teenager’s spines are abnormally bent because of time spent bending over tablets and phones.

Latency age children need to experience the real world this is hugely important for their development if they spend most of their time on a device they are missing out on lots of real life learning. Focus and concentration is compromised by the digital age and a Canadian media survey found that the digital age has left humans with such a short attention span that even a goldfish can hold a thought for longer! The average human attention span across all ages and genders has fallen from 12 second 2000 around the time the online revolution began to 8 seconds. The goldfish has an attention span of 9 seconds!!

Children’s developing brains become used to the rapid pace of information and they become used to instant gratification and reward. If children cannot focus then this is a huge problem for their future education. A study found that children who exceed 2 hrs per day of screen time were 1.5 to 2 times more likely to have attention problems in the classroom. The study also showed that these children showed less ability to exert self-control and tended to be more impulsive.

Learning and Education – Parents try to justify screen time by saying it is used for educational apps and game but a US survey found that less than half the time children aged between 2 and 10 spent in front of screens was actually spent on educational material. A concern is that children are being spoon-fed they are not allowed to work things out for themselves. In order to learn children need to explore and they need to fail and experience trial and error. In an age where everything can be Googled answers are always there and children don’t question or evaluate what they have found.

Social problems – Children who spend inordinate amounts of time on digital devices do not develop socially as they no longer have real friends but rather online ones this is screen time not true social interactions. During latency children start to form close relationships and learn the rules of friendship in a safe way. Screen time may be inhibiting children’s ability to recognise emotions. Researchers discovered that 11 and 12 year olds were much better at reading human emotions after 5 days of taking a break from technology.

## **Chapter 2 – Owning a device**

There has been a steady increase in young children owning their own devices. A recent survey found that 38% of 2-5 year olds own an Android tablet, 32% own a tablet and 32% have a mobile phone

The majority of latency aged children do not have the cognitive skills to be able to delay gratification and they have a poorly developed internal clock. The two main reservations about children owning their own devices is will it lead to more screen time and will it lead to private/unregulated screen time?

Unregulated screen time – Alarming 44% of children are browsing the internet on social media and streaming contents from the internet without adult supervision and nearly half of six year old surf the web alone in their bedrooms. Parents need to take responsibility and have rules and a plan in place.

Some solutions –

Before giving a child their own device ask yourself does my child understand the concept of time and the value of objects. Are they able to acknowledge that they have had enough screen time and put down the digital device? If not they are unable to manage their own device without supervisions at this point,

Regardless of who owns the device screen use needs to be monitored and regulated. Put firm rules and boundaries in place.

Ownership can give children the illusion of control This is my tablet therefore I can do what I want with it. Parents have to let children know from the start that they are in charge of the device and that owning the device does not mean the child gets to control it.

## **Chapter 3 – Time online – how much is too much**

No official guidelines in the UK. AAP has recently revised its guidelines due to the changing nature of digital technology. Recommends one hour of screen time per day for children aged two to four and for children aged six and older it simply states parents should limit digital media.

Average 3-4 year old spends 3 hours each day in front of a screen and a recent survey found that children are spending an average of around 17 hours a week in front of a screen almost double the 8.8 hours spent playing outside!

Can too much screen time be harmful – in a nutshell yes! Contributory factor to ADHD as certain types of screen time can trigger the release of adrenalin. This is a hormone the body releases when it is under stress. One of the adrenal glands main functions is to instantly ready the body to go into flight of fight mode. Every time adrenalin is released the body also releases cortisol. Cortisol is known as the stress hormone and can increase blood pressure and blood sugar as well as lowering immune system. It also has an effect on mood increasing levels of anxiety so excessive screen time means our children are subjecting their bodies to a chemical attack that is having a detrimental effect on their physical health. Cortisol is particularly damaging to latency-age children the developing brains of whom are not mature or resilient enough to manage the effects its causes.

## **Chapter 4- The physical problems caused by screen time**

The world is in the grip of a modern obesity epidemic and in the UK we have hit a record high for childhood obesity. One in ten toddlers are active enough to be healthy and only 9% of children aged between 2 and 4 are meeting UK guidelines which recommend at least 3 hours of physical activity a day. Even the vast majority of preschool children – 84% do not manage one hour a day on the move! Although no clinician can say that screen time causes obesity the link between the two is undeniable.

One of the reasons for high rates of inactivity is that society is becoming increasingly risk averse. In the 1980s and earlier children would go off with their friends or go out to play and would only come back home when they were hungry or for dinner. Most parents would not dream of doing that today because of perceptions of risk. Parents are keeping their children at home mostly inside to know they are safe.

The importance of allowing children to be bored – children need to be bored. The ability to self-occupy is a really important skill for a latency-age child to learn. Parents are very hands on and strive to do things with their children and for them. Although this is very positive as parents have a better understanding of their children's needs there is a tendency for “helicopter parenting” hovering around their offspring making sure they are happy and stimulated at all times. What many parents do if their child says they are bored is to turn to screen time. If this is the case screen time needs to be more active and physical activity like Nintendo Wii or dancing games like Just Dance encourage movement,

Screen time and sleep studies have shown that screen time leads to delayed bedtimes and shorter sleep times. Screen time does not just affect the length of sleep a child has but also appears to have a negative effect on the quality of sleep.

## **Chapter 5 – Addiction**

Internet addiction is being recognised globally. Rehab centres are springing up throughout the United States for young people suffering from Internet Use Disorder (IUD).

Latency age children are particularly vulnerable to becoming addicted to screen time as they tap into a child's need for control and order that is part of the development profile of latency. They want to collect all the cards and have the full set of stickers or toys so throw a game like Minecraft or Pokémon O into the mix then a latency age child can get obsessed very quickly.

Scientists have found that playing video games causes the brain to release dopamine. Dopamine is the so called pleasure chemical and it stimulates the brain's reward system. A recent study showed that video gaming releases a comparable amount of dopamine as drugs such as amphetamines and Ritalin. Internet addiction is associated with structural and functional changes in the brain regions involving emotional processing, executive attention, decision making and cognitive control.

Addiction or obsession – Dr Kilbey believes the vast majority of latency age children are facing issues of addiction, in her experience this issue relates much more to obsession than clinical addiction.

Some solutions: Go cold turkey and take devices away – not best option Reintroduce screen time in very small doses. All parents should have a plan in place for their child's screen time. Parents have got to police the timetable if they want to avoid the children becoming obsessed.

## **Chapter 6 – Social media and age restrictions**

Minimum age for Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Pinterest and Snapchat is 13 and for YouTube is 18. A recent survey found that 53% of parents did not realise that there was a minimum age and one in five parents were unaware there were any age restrictions at all.

Neuroscience tells us that adolescence is a crucial time for the development of the brain's prefrontal cortex which is the part that helps us form judgements, control impulses and emotions, and functions like decision-making, self-awareness and understanding others. Before this develops latency-age children are much less likely to have the emotional regulation and resilience necessary to cope with the things they might see or experience in online environments that are not designed for them.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has warned parents about something they term "Facebook depression", which is experienced by children and teens when they see a status update, a wall post or a photo that makes them feel unpopular.

### **Body image and selfies**

Young people today are selfie-obsessed and latency-age children, girls in particular, using social media will often post photos of themselves and invite people to comment on their appearance. Negative reactions naturally cause great distress. It is important that children are made aware from a young age that images in adverts and magazines are Photo shopped and airbrushed.

### **Encouraging digital responsibility**

Children need to understand that the internet is a permanent record and their digital footprint lasts forever. Children should be encouraged not to post anything online they would not want their teacher or future employer to see. A recent survey has shown that 60% of employers look at a candidate's use of social networking sites when considering who to interview.

### **Don't just restrict and ban**

Social media is an important tool for teenagers and it is part of their social life. Educate them, talk to them about it and help prepare them and build up resilience. The recent "Growing up Digital" report by the Children's Commissioner called for earlier and wider technology education in school and recommended that this should be expanded to include the social elements of line online.

### **Loneliness**

Social media appears to be exacerbating feeling of loneliness and isolation in children. Imagine your phone pinging all day with messages and photos of your friends enjoying an event you haven't been invited to!

## **Chapter 7 – Online risks and keeping children safe**

This is the number one worry for most parents, how do we keep them safe? Parent Zone describes the online world as being "like another high street for kids, stressing we need to be in it and parenting in it. When it comes to screen time parents need to be vigilant.

## **Virtual friends are not real friends**

It is important to make children realise that if they don't know someone in real life then they are still a stranger, even if they have talked to them online.

## **Online grooming**

Grooming is a process during which someone prepares a child for sexual abuse.. A person might pretend to be a child and use a child's profile picture. It is about building a relationship with the child and getting the child to trust them. Parents need to transfer the idea of stranger danger into the online world and talk to children about grooming in an age appropriate way. Children often view social media as a popularity contest and think the more friends or followers they have the better.

## **Cyberbullying**

ChildLine has seen an 88% increase in calls about online bullying over the past five years. Cyberbullying includes sending threatening or abusive text messages, creating and sharing embarrassing images, trolling – the sending of menacing or upsetting message on social network, excluding children from online games or friendship groups, setting up hate sites, encouraging young people to self-harm etc.

## **Red Flags**

- Are any of the following true of your child?
- Your child seems anxious, tearful or low in mood
- They are angry and agitated in a way they have not been before
- Reluctant to go to school
- Change in their friendships, certain friends are not being mentioned
- Their eating, sleeping patterns change
- Secretive about their screen time
- Suddenly spending more time ogling

Some solutions to keep your child safe on social media

- Teach your child to tell you straight away if they feel uncomfortable about anything that happens to them online
- Use privacy settings
- Teach your child how to block or report someone
- With latency age children parents should have access to their social media accounts
- Talk to your child and have your own rules about what they can post online.
- Talk to your child about online safety
- Encourage your children to tell you about good and bad experiences they have on social media
- Transfer stranger danger into the online world
- Control what your child is looking at.