

Multitasking may harm the social and emotional development of tweenage girls, researchers say

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When it comes to media use, the researchers' guidance: All things in moderation.
Credit: L.A. Cicero

(Medical Xpress) -- Too much screen time can be detrimental to girls 8 to 12 years old, but there is a surprisingly straightforward alternative for greater social wellness.

Tweenage [girls](#) who spend endless hours watching videos and multitasking with digital devices tend to be less successful with social and [emotional development](#), according to Stanford researchers.

But these unwanted effects might be warded off with something as simple as face-to-face conversations with other people.

The researchers, headed by education professor Roy Pea and Clifford Nass, a professor of communication, surveyed 3,461 girls, ages 8 to 12,

about their electronic diversions and their social and emotional lives. "The results were upsetting, disturbing, scary," Nass said.

The girls, all subscribers to *Discovery Girls* magazine, took the survey online, detailing the time they spent watching video (television, YouTube, movies,) listening to music, reading, doing [homework](#), emailing, posting to Facebook or MySpace, texting, [instant messaging](#), talking on the phone and video chatting – as well as how often they were doing two or more of those activities simultaneously.

The girls' answers showed that multitasking and spending many hours watching videos and using online communication were statistically associated with a series of negative experiences: feeling less social success, not feeling normal, having more friends whom parents perceive as bad influences and sleeping less.

The researchers say that while they found a correlation between some media habits and diminished social and emotional skills, a definite cause-and-effect relationship has yet to be proved.

The research was published this week in a special section of the journal [Developmental Psychology](#).

A time for social development

The survey findings are bad news, given that the 8 to 12 age range is critical for the social and emotional development of girls, and because children are becoming active media consumers at an ever-younger age.

But the survey also asked the girls a different, and very important, question: How much time do you spend participating in face-to-face conversations with other people?

The answers, Nass said, indicate that Mom and Dad should consider reviving the well-worn parental admonishment: "Look at me when I'm talking to you!"

Higher levels of face-to-face communication were associated with greater social success, greater feelings of normalcy, more sleep and fewer friends whom parents judged to be bad influences. Children learn the difficult task of interpreting emotions by watching the faces of other people, Pea said. It's hard work, he added, and is unlikely to be done if everyone at the dinner table is peering at the screens of their smartphones.

Advice for kids

Nass has some advice: "Kids, spend time, when you are with other people, looking at them, listening closely, and see if you can tell their emotions. And if you can't, that's OK, but it means you have some learning to do.

"When we media multitask, we're not really paying attention to the people around us and we get in a habit of not paying attention, and thus when I'm talking with you, I may be hearing the words but I'm missing all the rich, critical, juicy stuff at the heart of emotional and social life."

Children's media choices are changing in a new context of always-on media; neither they nor their parents have ways of self-regulating the extent of their media use and media [multitasking](#), said Pea. "All things in moderation" is his guidance for both children and parents.

The happy-face emotional slant of most Facebook postings doesn't help, either, he said. As shown in other Stanford University research, seeing the ubiquitous positive postings of online friends can lead to the erroneous conclusion that "[Everyone is happy](#) except me," Nass said.

The good news

There is good news in the recent survey, however. For the negative effects of online gorging, "There seems to be a pretty powerful cure, a pretty powerful inoculant, and that is face-to-face communication," Nass said.

"Kids in the 8-to-12-year-old range who communicate face-to-face very frequently, show much better social and emotional development, even if they're using a great deal of media."

The research was a follow-up to a [2009 experiment](#) that demonstrated that media multitaskers were not really doing two things at once and were paying a mental price for trying. "They're suckers for irrelevancy," Nass said then. "Everything distracts them."

Provided by Stanford University

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