

Study finds link between screen time and anxiety, depression in children

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The Canadian Pediatric Society recommends children over five spend not more than two hours per day on screens. Credit: Andrea Piacquadio/Pexels

New research from the Faculty of Education has found a link between screen time and anxiety and depression in children.

The study, led by assistant professor of education and Canada Research Chair in Neuroscience and Learning Disorders Emma Duerden, also found children were on screens for more than double the daily

recommended amount during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Duerden, who leads the Developing Brain research program, co-authored the study alongside Diane Seguin and Amira Hmidan.

Published in July in *BMC Psychology*, the study builds off previous research by Duerden that found children's [screen time](#) use skyrocketed during the pandemic to an average of just under six hours per day. Some children in the earlier study were on their screens for a staggering 13 hours per day—nearly every waking minute.

"We were pretty astounded by these findings, but of course this was a period of crisis for everyone," Duerden said.

"At that time, it seemed as though this could potentially be an isolated period, so that's why we decided to launch the COMPASS study—COVID-19 Managing Parent Attitudes and School Stress."

COMPASS gathered data from more than 200 parents who detailed their children's screen time use from November 2020 to November 2021.

Even with all the changes over that period, public health restrictions lifting and schools returning to in-person learning at times, screen time use remained high at an average of more than four hours per day. The Canadian Pediatric Society recommends children over five spend two hours per day on screens.

While surprising, Duerden says there is prior research on how early screen use predicts later life screen use.

"If children start using screens when they're young, then they're more likely to use them when they're older," Duerden added.

COMPASS also found that greater screen time use was associated with anxiety and depression in children.

While other studies have shown that screen time can have adverse effect on children's mental health, Duerden says it was surprising to see such a strong association.

"What we also found consistently in all of our studies was that parent stress was a key predictor of screen time," Duerden added.

"We don't understand that association yet, it can only be inferred."

Studying the long-term effects

The research is ongoing, with further data from the families recruited for the COMPASS study to be released in the coming months. By studying these families at various points in time, the research group hopes to identify the pandemic's long-term effects on children.

Duerden's team is reviewing other studies published on children's screen time use from elsewhere in the world as well.

"It was really surprising to see the number of studies published in such a short period of time," Duerden said, adding that there is also growing research on the impact of screen time on [older adults](#) and other groups in society.

"What we found is that this is a global health issue in children, there was no real association with educational or household factors at all. That means there isn't going to be a one-size-fits-all solution."

As the research unfolds, Duerden says there are steps families can take in the meantime to manage children's screen time, with awareness

serving as the most important tool.

She also suggests families begin monitoring and keeping track of how much time children spend on screens.

"For the parents who participated in our study, they were pretty surprised when they added up all the time that they thought their children were on screens," Duerden added.

Screen-free zones or screen-free times are other handy tools and Duerden says it's equally important that caregivers model the behavior they want to see in their [children](#).

"If your child has screen-free time, that means everybody should have screen-free [time](#)."

More information: Amira Hmidan et al, Media screen time use and mental health in school aged children during the pandemic, *BMC Psychology* (2023). [DOI: 10.1186/s40359-023-01240-0](https://doi.org/10.1186/s40359-023-01240-0)

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