Chasing Stimulus 24/7

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Researchers are struggling to keep up with the neurological, psychological and social impact of this generation’s ‘fast and furious’ technology revolution. Unregulated and poorly managed technology use is negatively influencing the mental health and well-being of our children. The speed of change in hand-held technology continues to outpace our understanding of its effect on the developing brain.

Agitated adolescents driven to get back into gaming or social media will typically argue with, and hassle parents. Hormonally driven, they seek increased screen time in order to feel good. This is the real threat of the virtual and social media world, where increased bursts of dopamine (the brain’s ‘feel good’ hormone) are sourced without physical activity. Teenagers sleep with the phone under their pillow waiting for that next text message, to alleviate anxiety or to get their next dopamine hit.

When gaming and social media replace natural activities like sport, music and the arts as the primary source of dopamine, mental health consequences can be expected.

To help negotiate your teen’s electronic world, psychologist Gayelene Clews, takes a harm-minimisation approach for sensible technology management. If you are concerned about your child’s technology use, their ability to emotionally regulate frenetic, impulsive, disorganised or inattentive behaviour, or are concerned about signs of anxiety or depression, then consider the following...

Our changing physical and mental environment

- 77 per cent of Australian teenagers spend more than two hours using electronic devices for entertainment on school days.
- 89 per cent of Australian teenagers exceed the recommended two hours of screen time per day (includes television).
- 82 per cent of Australian youth are not getting the recommended minimum of 1 hour of physical activity each day.

See the [February 2015 National Secondary Students’ Diet and Activity Survey](#)

To help balance unregulated technology use that may be contributing to poor mood regulation, then trial the recommendations below:
**Sleeping well**

1. To encode learning into memory, teenagers need about 8–9 ½ hours’ sleep each night, slightly less for older teens.
2. Keep all screens out of bedrooms at night. Your body has its own internal clock that controls your natural cycle of sleeping and waking hours. Melatonin, a hormone made by a small gland in the brain, begins to rise in the mid-to-late evening, remain high for most of the night, and then drop in the early morning hours. Light impacts how much melatonin you produce this can include artificial light which can have a negative impact on the brain’s production of melatonin and delay sleep onset.
3. Have a switch-off time — at least a half hour before bed time.
4. It is less mentally stimulating to watch a television program or read a book than interacting with others on the computer or over a phone, gaming or surfing the net.
5. Explore light screens that do not interfere with melatonin production for sleep.
6. Use a timer for computer game playing and social networking. An alarm can help remind the individual when it is time to switch-off because heavy users can lose track of time.
7. Get an alarm clock instead of a phone alarm.
8. To wake your teen in the morning, open the curtains and let the light shine in to cease the brain’s production of melatonin.

See the [ABC Catalyst report on the importance of sleep for teens](#)

**Studying efficiently**

Consider negotiating the following with your teen so that use they study time effectively...

1. Study is best done before TV/Games/social networking, use it as a reward.
2. Study in a central area of the home, such as a dining room table.
3. Monitor multi-tasking, make study time efficient and effective.
4. Switch-off the social network pages and phones while studying.
5. Restrict screen time to a maximum of 2 hours per day (phones, gaming, surfing the web and television). If your child has access to recreational screen time at school then the amount of time they socially network, gaming or surf the net after school should be moderated accordingly.
6. Block websites you do not want your child to use. Or, turn off the household modem or WiFi to restrict access at certain times of the evening.

**Regulating mood**

1. Keeping recreational IT use to no more than 2 hours per day is essential for emotional regulation.
2. Maintain engagement in physical activity, exercise and school sport because — apart from the physical health benefits — it regulates mood, helps with social relationships and improves academic performance.
3. Be mentally present when your children talk with you. It is not enough to be physically present; they need to feel heard in order to feel connected.

4. When putting boundaries in place and restricting IT use, you may experience push back from your teens, it may take a couple of weeks for their neurochemistry to adjust to less screen time.