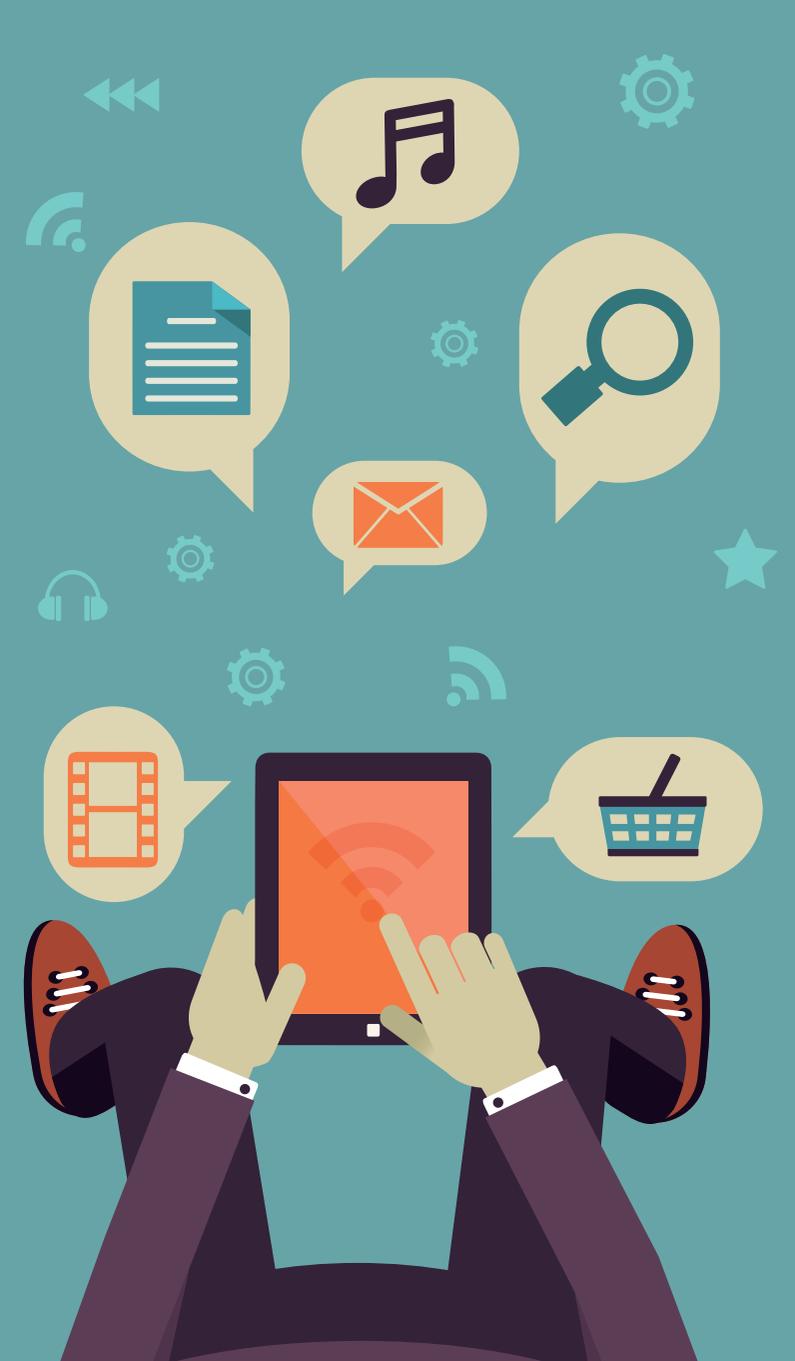


Screening SCREEN USE

Preparing Students for Healthy Technology Use



Screens are everywhere, so how do we make sure students are using them safely and responsibly? ALISON STEGERT has some advice for teachers striving to foster healthy student–screen relationships.

The technological revolution has changed everything from personal banking to classroom management. While we educators have been busy discovering and exploiting the myriad benefits of media at our fingertips, an important teaching opportunity has all but slipped through our grasp. This digital potential comes at a cost, and all of us – young people and adults – risk paying with our health. Practising healthy media habits is the new priority in an age when technology rules everything. While a few years ago, screen-related activities were primarily recreational, nowadays technology has fused communication, business, homework and play, making it harder to regulate the amount of screen time we are accruing.

Our educational scope must broaden slightly to include a focus on healthy engagement with technology and media. At last count, the Australian Bureau of Statistics found that 96 per cent of children aged twelve to fourteen use the internet,¹ which indicates that middle school students should be the target group for health promotion around technology. Just as middle schoolers need to acquire good research skills and the ability to use common software, they must also be trained for healthy, responsible technology use. As students turn thirteen, the world of social media *officially* opens up to them.² Furthermore, according to a study by Edith Cowan University, students in Years 5–9 constitute the age group most likely to be victims (or perpetrators) of cyberbullying.³

Hand-wringing over the impact of media on children's development is nothing new. For the past several decades, adults have blamed excessive television, arcade games and even frequent cinema visits for everything from 'square eyes' to antisocial behaviour. What has changed with the advent of digital technology is the ubiquity of screens and our relationship to them. And now, instead of mere anecdotal evidence, we have cold, hard clinical proof. Advances in neuroimaging technology mean we can see inside the brain and map changes wrought by some forms of media interaction.

Unbalanced technology use can negatively impact learning, relationships, sleep, and even mental and physical health, but the risk penetrates deeper to the very structure of the brain. Psychologist and author of *iDisorder* Larry Rosen suggests that excessive screen time may adversely affect brain development, particularly in the vulnerable adolescent brain.⁴ Neuroimaging research depicts changes in brain structure and function in gaming-addicted patients.⁵ While there is much debate about

the values and dangers of children's screen use, studies such as these highlight the need to at least be aware of how students are interacting with screen technology. Child psychiatrist Victoria L. Dunckley believes the rise in adolescent psychiatric diagnoses such as attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) and bipolar disorder is linked to too much computer time, especially highly stimulating video games. Labelling the problem electronic screen syndrome (ESS), she explains that

*excessive screen-time appears to impair brain structure and function. Much of the damage occurs in the brain's frontal lobe, which undergoes massive changes from puberty until the mid-twenties. Frontal lobe development, in turn, largely determines success in every area of life – from sense of well-being to academic or career success to relationship skills.*⁶

Dunckley's remedy starts with parents tightening the regulation of digital devices at home, adhering to the notion that the foundations for this critical skill of technology management are laid in the family home. Ultimately this is a job for parents, and the clue ones will start very early by setting firm boundaries and model-

For example, shut-down times so their sleep is not interrupted, break-taking habits, and accountability.

- Can recognise and heed the signs of fatigue that result from excessive screen time: sore/tired eyes, cramped muscles, fuzzy thinking, irritability, etc.
- Have an awareness of the addictive nature of some screen activities.
- Desire and strive for balance in their lives by experiencing a rich variety of interpersonal and physical activities, and consider online time just one facet of their lives rather than an overarching element.
- Practise good etiquette with digital devices, including prioritising real-world interactions over calls and messages, not using devices during mealtime, etc.

Schools have focused on equipping students to be cybersafe and cybersmart. The trouble is, knowledge and awareness do not necessarily translate to action, which is something to remember as we endeavour to educate about healthy media use. Even adults can read books on healthy practices without applying what they learn to their lives. How much trickier is

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ling healthy use as soon as children start to engage with devices. Just as responsible parents set the tone and parameters for eating habits and acceptable behaviour, so it goes with technology. No sane parent would have an 'anything goes' approach with food or conduct, and nor should they with media.

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WHAT HEALTHY MEDIA USE LOOKS LIKE

Healthy technology habits are characterised by *awareness* and *moderation*. Students who have a healthy relationship with media and technology:

- Make value-guided choices about how much and what kind of media they consume.
- Are able to discern the quality of content, selecting things that are age-appropriate, reliable and preferably educational.
- Possess skills to regulate their media activities, such as scheduling, monitoring durations, setting goals and limits, and shutting down without a fuss.
- Can recognise uncomfortable emotional states (such as boredom, anxiety and loneliness) and possess skills to handle them without making technology use their default strategy. They have several coping methods that do not involve electronic devices.
- Have protective routines in place to safeguard their health.

this for adolescents, whose prefrontal cortices are undergoing a huge overhaul? Teaching students to notice physiological and psychosocial cues and react proactively is the aim.

GOAL-ORIENTED TECHNOLOGY USE

The advent of handheld devices and touchscreens has made using technology second nature. Today's touchscreen devices are so intuitive that babies can work them out. In the classroom, this gets easily distracted kids into trouble. Encourage students to be mindful whenever they are about to engage with technology. Make a routine of zeroing in their focus. Train students to ask themselves task-orienting questions and to answer with specific (rather than vague) responses:

- **What do I want to accomplish?**
Identifying their aim enables students to be the masters of the technology rather than its slaves. While fulfilling their aims, *they* are in charge. Without a purpose, students can lose control.
- **What could stop me from accomplishing my goal?**
This timely reminder to be on guard against distractions can serve to focus students.

Whenever activities involving technology are completed, allow students a chance to reflect on how well they managed their behaviour. Did they achieve their goals? Did they avoid distraction? If not, what things derailed them? What can they do to stay better focused next time? Praise those who stay focused.

This small routine can lay down a foundation for good habits that can last a lifetime.

MEASURING AND EVALUATING SCREEN TIME

Screen time is difficult to monitor because it is ubiquitous, so it's best to focus on its most problematic uses. Students are not as likely to encounter problems during task-oriented activities, such as those found in the classroom, as they are during unscheduled time.

As part of their personal development or life-skills program, set aside a week or two during which the students track their media time at home. This exercise has two elements: measuring and evaluating. The measurement side is straightforward – simply entering start and finish times into a chart to raise awareness about exposure durations. The evaluation component is most effective if the students generate their own evaluative labels; predetermined adult labels such as 'unhealthy' or 'responsible' may turn them off the activity.

After they have collected the data, give the students time to evaluate together. This exercise provides an excellent opportunity

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for them to discover the link between moods and technology use and to draw conclusions about habits that may need amending.

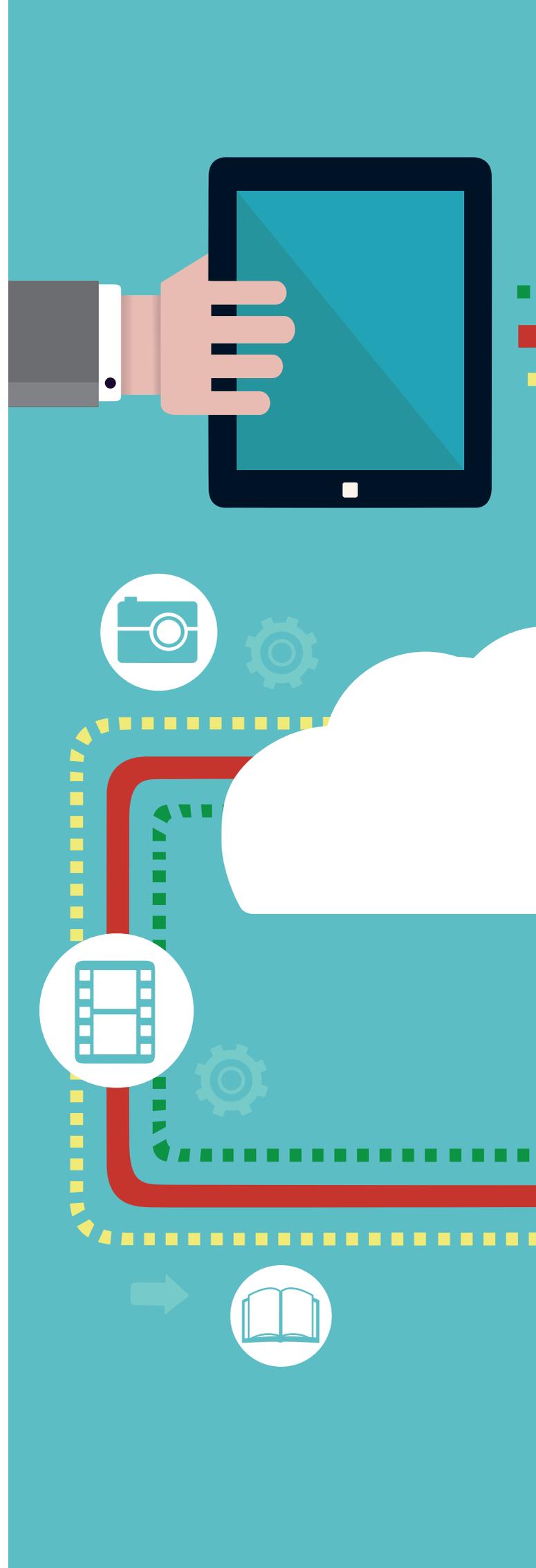
The final phase of the activity comes after the students make adjustments to their media use and track their results. Celebrate discoveries and improvements.

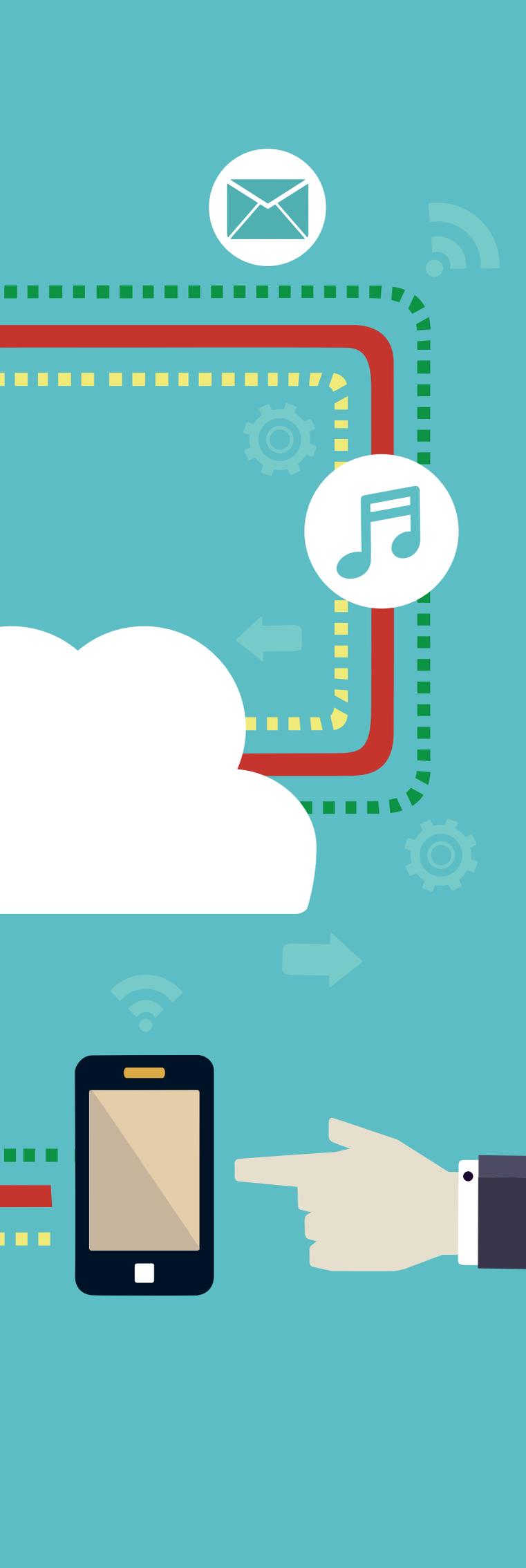
EMOTIONAL AND PHYSICAL AWARENESS

One of the most important questions technology users can ask themselves is *How do I feel right now?* Whether it's through endless YouTube clips, video games or online shopping, numbing out on media serves the same function as comfort eating: it is an easy refuge from uncomfortable emotions.

Some kids are good at naming emotional states; others need lots of help and practice identifying moods. What does boredom feel like in the body? How is it different from anxiety and anger? Once these are recognised, kids can generate a variety of strategies to deal with their emotions. Of course, favourite coping methods include avoidance and escapism, particularly when they are technology-facilitated. While avoidance is a legitimate strategy, it becomes a problem if it's a student's *only* strategy.

Teachers can help students create a list of coping methods that don't involve electronic devices. Brainstorm healthy, non-digital alternatives such as journalling, exercising, art, altruistic endeavours, talking to a trusted adult, playing music, writing poetry and doing a puzzle. We resort to iPads and games because they are easy to access, but with a little forethought and planning, students can prepare equipment for analog fun.





Helping students recognise the signs of screen fatigue can be useful too. The sore eyes, fuzzy thinking, irritability and stiff bodies that result from excessive screen time can become cues. Adults may have to help them make the link and plan steps to shut down the computer and redirect energy into a different type of activity – the simpler the better. Rosen advocates standing outside in nature to ‘reset’ the brain.⁷

MAKING GOOD CHOICES AND BEHAVING WELL

Schools cannot make decisions for students any more than we can force them to behave, but we can equip young people with the necessary information to make informed, healthy choices. It’s critical that our students know the facts about:

- The physical health risks of sedentary lifestyles, including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, deep vein thrombosis, hypertension, back problems, etc.
- Psychological health risks, including anxiety, depression, addictive behaviours, etc.
- The vulnerability of adolescent brains to become addicted not only to substances but also to habits, including excessively playing highly stimulating video games, pornography use, gambling, etc.
- The negative impact of technology overuse on sleep patterns, and the importance of good sleep hygiene throughout adolescence.
- Emerging digital etiquette vis-a-vis social norms.

It’s time to grasp this teaching opportunity to ensure today’s generation thrives amid the technological revolution.

*In the decade Alison Stegert has worked as a school counsellor, she has witnessed with growing fascination and steadfast optimism the impact of technology on youth wellbeing and family harmony. She blogs at <<http://www.e-Quipped.com.au>>, a cyber-parenting website, and is an emerging author of children’s literature. **SE***

Endnotes

- ¹ Australian Bureau of Statistics, ‘Australian Social Trends, Jun 2011’, 29 June 2011, <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/lookup/4102.0main+features60jun+2011>>, accessed 8 September 2014.
- ² Facebook’s guidelines stipulate, for example, that users must be aged thirteen and over.
- ³ Donna Cross et al., ‘Cyberbullying in Australia: Is School Context Related to Cyberbullying Behaviour?’, in Qing Li, Donna Cross & Peter K Smith (eds), *Cyberbullying in the Global Playground: Research from International Perspectives*, Wiley-Blackwell, Chichester, 2012.
- ⁴ Larry Rosen, *iDisorder*, Palgrave Macmillan, New York, 2012.
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- ⁶ *ibid.*
- ⁷ Rosen, *op. cit.*