GOING DIGITAL...
- RESPONSIBLY
- IN COLLABORATION
- AT SCHOOL
- AT HOME

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SCRENS AND YOUTH:  
40 recommendations for parents

While schools in Quebec and elsewhere in the world are wrestling with the concept of online learning, it seems appropriate to offer this information from the document Les écrans et les jeunes: 40 recommandations pour les parents.

The sedentary behaviour of youth and their excessive use of devices is worrisome not only to parents and teachers, but also to public health experts. Despite these concerns however, a summary of some 13,659 studies looking at the impact of screens on the health of young people shows that this is not so obvious. These studies reveal that we still know too little about the impact of devices, even if we know that young people use them a lot. Indeed, according to a study carried out by Common Sense Media, adolescents (13 to 18 years old) devote nearly nine hours per day to them, or some 3276 hours per year.

Nevertheless, a major 2019 study of some 355,358 adolescents and published in Nature Human Behaviour, reveals that despite the impressive amount of studies over the years seeking to show the contrary, screen time and use of technologies have little impact on youth health. Indeed, researchers note, with a hint of sarcasm, “eating potatoes regularly was almost as negatively associated with well-being as using technology.”

These 40 concepts drawn from various research are presented in their most simple form. Parents should not try to painstakingly apply these ideas, but rather use them to be better informed when making decisions for their children regarding devices. We must not forget that the use of screens at home – as at school – must above all be based on research, but also judgment, discernment, enthusiasm, and sometimes even moderation.

The stance to adopt by public health experts, parents, schools and teachers should be neither pessimism in the face of challenges posed, nor euphoria in the face of the world of possibilities opened by this technology. Rather, it should be one of clear-headed engagement.

The speed at which technologies are evolving calls for careful vigilance, and above all, constructive and sometimes preventive education. Parents needs to understand that children will make mistakes, with or without screens, and that they can help their child learn from their errors. Why not consider, like Michel Serres, that perhaps by opening a respectful dialogue, young people will understand both the advantages and the excesses associated with devices?

“He or she writes otherwise. To observe them, with admiration, send, faster than I can ever do with my stiff fingers, send, I say, text messages with two thumbs, I have baptized them, with the greatest tenderness that a grandfather can express, Petite Poucette and Petit Poucet.”

A. Helping your child learn with digital

1. Help your child use digital technology to learn.
2. Have your child develop critical and constructive thinking about technology and the Internet.
3. Encourage your child to be a responsible digital citizen and consult the Government of Quebec’s Digital Competency Framework.
4. Help your child develop a set of digital skills: seeking information, creating, communicating, collaborating, producing content, solving problems, etc. Here again, the Digital Competency Framework is an excellent tool.
5. Employ your child's computer skills to help the family, to motivate them to accomplish tasks where their expertise will be recognized (planning outings, trips, finding contacts, etc.).

6. Demonstrate that you are open to and aware of these technologies and platforms.

7. If your child primarily uses digital technology for entertainment purposes at school, contact school staff. In class, technology should primarily be used for learning.

**B. Guidelines for devices: establishing rules in a collaborative way**

8. With devices such as phones, tablets, computers, and televisions so pervasive in their lives, it is necessary to define their use for young people. That is, establish clear rules in a collaborative way if possible.

9. Develop rules for using devices in an atmosphere of calm and good humour: It is in the parent's interest - even if it may seem frustrating that the child does not understand or adhere to the new rules quickly. Learning is a long process, and parents should be patient to be effective in helping their child adopt responsible practices.

10. We must also think about applying these rules and strategies along with consequences, to ensure that the child respects them. The word 'punishment' should be avoided. Instead, parents can help empower their children by speaking of 'consequences,' which are a function of the child's own actions. Occasionally, parents may feel that children deserve consequences for inappropriate device usage, and these are easier to establish if they are clear and not overly subjective, and the child understands why they are applied.

11. These guidelines must include device-free times or places, such as during meals, after certain hours in the evening, etc.

12. Establishing screen-related routines can help kids become more independent. For example, they will know that during meals, their phone should be in the bedroom, and not on their person.

13. Do not let younger children sleep near their phone, tablet or computer, which they can be tempted to use while parents are sleeping.

14. As much as possible, digital devices used by young children must be kept in a common and visible space in the home so that parents can provide supervision.

15. Guidelines must clearly distinguish between screen time for educational purposes and games, entertainment, etc. Research shows there may be no ideal amount, so it is up to parents to determine screen time with their child, for learning and for fun.

16. Establishing guidelines is a challenge. For example, a child who performs a school task on the computer may also have their phone with them connected to social networks. Parents should thus explore several possibilities before setting rules.

17. Some mobile devices and applications allow you to keep track of screen time. Use this data both to be aware of the child’s usage, but also to make them aware of it.

18. Screen time does not always have to be 'alone' time. There may also be collective, family screen time as well.

19. Rules should vary, depending on the age of the child, day of the week, and context, such as exam period, vacation, etc.

20. You must also try to set an example for your child even when difficult: If their phone is prohibited at the table, yours should be too.

21. Help your child find the right balance between leisure, schoolwork and technology.

22. Teach your child that access to devices and technologies (games, Internet, etc.) is not a right, but a privilege.

23. Make sure that screen time never interferes with essential activities such as sleeping, eating, and personal hygiene. Even though research shows that little is known about the real impact on youth, it is understood that there is a significant problem when screen time takes on such magnitude that it interferes with essential activities.
24. If a parent notices that their child has an intense and compulsive need to use a device, the child may be experiencing a problem with cyber-addiction, and a specialist should be consulted. This is particularly evident when the child cannot refrain from using their device despite the known consequences. Help prevent it by establishing guidelines in collaboration with your child and ensure that they are applied.

25. Parents must understand that there is no ideal age to own a cell phone or smartphone: they are the only ones who can decide for their children.

26. Parents should seek to limit and avoid conflicts over screen time, one of today’s greatest household challenges. If you feel that a conflict is mounting, try to resolve it quickly before it becomes a pitched battle. This does no good for parent or child, so we must quickly find common ground to prevent escalation.

27. Be sure to regularly congratulate children for their responsible use of devices. Frequent praise limits the emergence of conflicts.

28. Take the time to listen carefully to your child when he or she talks about screen time as it allows them to shed emotional residue, (or ‘bad vibes’). Developing this skill requires time and patience, so take the time to get them used to opening up.

29. Parents must speak to their children regularly and express their concerns, avoiding long lectures at all costs. Children will be much more receptive to certain criticisms or comments if they do not feel they are being admonished. Speeches that are too long can aggravate a conflict rather than resolve it. It is in your interest to be succinct and calm.

C. A safe environment for all

30. All parents need to learn about the technologies and applications so pervasive today, especially those popular with youth. For example, teenagers prefer Instagram to Facebook, while young girls favour TikTok. You should not hesitate to discuss this with other parents or friends who have children of the same age.

31. You must know which websites your child visits most frequently.

32. Find the right balance between allowing a private and personal space for your child and learning about what he or she is doing with technology.

33. Talk to your child about cyberbullying, to prevent it, but also to act.

34. It should also be made clear that if your child is a victim of cyberbullying that they should talk about it; it is behaviour that cannot be tolerated; the law protects them; that it is not their fault; that you will help them put a stop to it immediately; and there will be no consequences for them.

35. Pay particular attention to changes in your child’s behaviour. They can be linked to events that have occurred on the Internet, or on social networks.

36. Talk to your child about the benefits and challenges of the Internet and explain the four main types of risk: unwanted contact, unwanted content, unwanted conduct (by them or others), and unwanted costs.
37. Be sure that they understand what they can and cannot do, and for what they must absolutely seek permission before doing.

38. Regularly remind your child that certain private or personal information relating to them or your family must not be published online.

39. Ensure your child uses a pseudonym and not their real name, especially younger children.

40. Have your child be responsible for what they do, or do not do, with technology.

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