Screen and Digital Behaviour

A Summary of the related School Board Policies

Introduction

The rapid increase in screen time, driven by technological advancements and our increasingly digital society, has become a growing public health concern due to its multifaceted impact on health. This trend was notably exacerbated during the COVID-19 pandemic, when canceled recreational activities led to a spike in screen use, resulting in only 25.6% of Canadian children and youth aged 5-17 adhering to screen time guidelines six months into the pandemic.

Excessive screen time is closely linked to sedentary behaviour, characterized by low energy expenditure activities like watching TV, using computers, and sitting in vehicles, which pose serious health risks, including cardiovascular disease, diabetes, cancer, and depression. Additionally, prolonged screen exposure has been associated with negative effects on mental health, such as increased anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances, particularly in children and youth.

Social media and gaming contribute to a significant proportion of the reported screen time in children and youth and is associated with harmful outcomes related to substance use, sleep, and risky/self-harming behaviours. Issues such as cyberbullying, sexting, and eating disorders have also been linked to social media use.

To address these risks, the Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines recommend limiting leisure screen time to 2 hours or less per day for children and youth and reducing prolonged sitting. For adults, it is advised to cap sedentary time at 8 hours per day, with no more than 3 hours spent on recreational screens, and to break up long periods of sitting whenever possible. Public health messages emphasize that minimizing sedentary time, along with managing screen use to reduce its broader impacts on physical and mental health, is crucial for improving overall well-being.

The financial burden of excessive sedentary behaviour, largely influenced by screen use, was estimated at $1.8 to $2.2 billion in 2021, with conditions like cardiovascular disease and type 2 diabetes being the most costly. A modest 10% reduction in sedentary behaviour could potentially save Canadians $219 million annually.

While enhancing school policies to limit cell phone use can help reduce screen time, high levels of screen time and sedentary behaviour persist, with social media use and gaming remaining significant concerns. Addressing these issues requires a collaborative community approach that involves parents, educators, health professionals, and policymakers. By working together, they can develop strategies to mitigate the harms of excessive screen time, promote healthier digital habits, and prioritize the overall well-being of students.

Contents

Screen Time Recommendations - Canadian 24-Hour Movement Guidelines (24-HMG)

Ages 5-17: No more than 2 hours a day of recreational screen time.
Limited sitting for extended periods.

Age 18-64: Limit sedentary time to 8 hours or less, which includes: no more than 3 hours of recreational screen time and breaking up long periods of sitting as often as possible.

Statistics (Public Health Ontario, Health Canada)

- Over 50% of Ontario's children and youth aged 3 to 17 years adhered to screen time Canadian 24-hour Movement Guidelines (24hMG)
- 54.1% of children ages 3-4 years, 65.9% of children ages 5-11 years, and 51.5% of youth ages 12-17 years adhered to screen time guidelines
- Total screen time was higher in boys and boys adhered to guidelines less than girls.
- Boys spend greater time video gaming and watching/streaming videos, while girls spend greater time on smartphones
- The median screen time per week was 5.9 hours 10.0, and 11.7 hours per week, respectively.
- Screen time tended to increase with increased income
- Children and youth living in the most urban and population dense regions had lower screen time compared to those living in more rural regions
    - youth living in rural areas were more likely to watch television and, less likely to use a computer compared to youth living in large metropolitan areas
- Over ¾, 83% of students spend 3 or more hours a day in front of screens in their free time ('recreational screen time'), exceeding the recommended amount of screen time for children and youth
    - Increased from (71% to 83%) 2019 to 2021
    - As grade levels increase, so does the amount of recreational screen time of 3 hours or more a day. Garde 7/8, 72%; Grade 9/10, 85%, Grade 11/12, 91%
- 93% of youth ages 15 to 24 years regularly use text or instant messaging services, 91% use social networking sites or applications, 91% reported watching content of video sharing websites and 66% playing online games
- 47.6% increase in students grades 9-12 spending 5 hours or more a day on social media between 2019 and 2021 (21%, 31%)
- 100% increase in students grade 9-12 spending 7 hours or more a day on social media from 2019 to 2021 (7% to 14%)
- 5 hours or more a day on electronic devices in free time increase 35% to 52%, 2019-2021
- 116.7% increase in students who spend 7 hours or more a day on electronic devices in their free time (12% to 26%, 2019-2021)
- Playing video games 5 hours or more a day increased 11% to 24% (2019 to 2021)
- Playing video games daily increased 24% to 42% (2019 to 2021)
- 27% of youth ages 15-24 years spent 20 hours or more using the internet
- 30% of students report being cyberbullied at least once in the past year

Understanding Personal vs. Educational Screen Use

When discussing screen use in schools, it's important to distinguish between personal device use and educational use. **Personal device use** often involves students accessing social media, games, or other non-educational content, which can lead to distractions and negative health impacts.

Educational use, on the other hand, refers to the intentional use of digital tools and resources to enhance learning, foster collaboration, and prepare students for the digital world.

Benefits of Educational Screen Use

- Educational screens offers enhanced learning, interactive and personalized experiences, making learning more engaging and accessible to all students.

- Technology in the classroom promotes collaboration, communication and teamwork, allowing students to work together on projects and communicate with teachers and peers effectively.

- Educational screen use contributes to future readiness, by equipping students with essential digital skills needed for future careers.

Risks of Personal Device Use

- Excessive personal screen time can lead to sedentary lifestyles, sleep issues, and eye strain.

- Overuse, especially of social media, is negatively linked to anxiety, depression, and body image concerns.

- Personal device use can significantly distract students, reducing focus and academic performance.

- Increased use of personal devices raises concerns about online privacy and security, with potential exposure to cyber threats.

Balancing educational and personal screen use is key to ensuring that technology in schools supports learning without compromising student well-being.

Learn about the Board Cell Phone and Digital Use Policy 2024

Educators/Administrators: Support for students, parents and school staff:

The Ministry of Education has updated PPM128, their Provincial Code of Conduct which includes stronger rules to help students focus on learning at school and supports lowering screen and digital use among children and youth. The new provincial Code of Conduct will come into effect September 1st, 2024. Each and every school and school board will have their own codes of conduct consistent and in alignment with the provincial Code of Conduct. Ministry of Education: [Cellphones and other mobile devices in schools](#)

The Ministry of Education's [Foundations for a Healthy School](#) framework, provides guidance for schools, school boards, parents, and community partners to work collaboratively in developing healthy school environments that promote student well-being.

Digital Literacy curriculum supports and resources:

[Media Smarts](https://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework) (K – 8): Media Smarts provides educators with information and tools to help students develop the critical thinking skills they need for interacting with media.
https://mediasmarts.ca/teacher-resources/digital-literacy-framework

[Common Sense Media](https://www.commonsense.org/education/digital-citizenship/curriculum) (K – 12): This non-profit US based organization provides lesson plans include videos, lesson slides and family resources that can help you address digital citizenship in the classroom and prepare students to take ownership of their digital lives.
https://www.commonsense.org/education/digital-citizenship/curriculum

Understand current research on [Youth, smartphones and social media use](#) from the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) and in the infographic below

Victim Services Toronto: [Youth Leadership and Social Media Guide](#)

The principal associations ([ADFO](#), [CPCO](#) and [OPC](#)) with Victim Services Toronto: [Healthy Relationships in a Digital World Toolkit](#)

School boards Requirement:

- have a policy explaining how they will enforce mobile device restrictions

- send parents and students a reminder of their policy about cellphones and mobile devices every year

Students and families can expect:

- School boards will be required to notify parents annually on the restrictions and requirements for student cellphone use and the consequences for non-compliance.

- A commitment to have report cards include comments on students' distraction levels in class.

- Schools to post standardized provincially developed signage in public spaces that reflects the behavioural expectations of the Provincial Code of Conduct.

- Improved links to progressive discipline for students and labour policies for staff to clarify how to address inappropriate behaviour.

- Marketing campaigns directed at students and parents in the fall to support prevention through enhanced education and awareness of enhanced code of conduct standards in all schools.

- Dedicated mandatory training through the use of professional development/PA day and extensive webinars for educators and school staff, with emphasis on classroom management practices to remove distractions and strengthen student achievement. Financial supports will be provided:

    o to promote healthy behaviours and reduce distractions in the classroom by actively supporting students who are at risk of problematic substance use and addictive behaviours.

    o to School Mental Health Ontario to develop webinars and resources for students and parents across the province on the adverse effects and tools to reduce cellphone usage and addictive behaviours and response.

    o for Parent Involvement Committees to enable parents and community partners to run grassroots campaigns to deter cellphone distractions in classrooms.

    o for digital literacy supports for students during the 2023-24 and 2024-25 school years.

- Ontario will set up a task force comprising education partners, parents, students and health experts on the implementation of the Provincial Code of Conduct.

- Beginning this fall, Grade 9 students will be required to earn a Grade 9 or 10 Technological Education credit as part of their Ontario Secondary School Diploma. These courses will allow students to explore and apply fundamental technological concepts as well as the engineering design process.

Cellphones and mobile device restrictions in schools:

- Every school will have uniform policy to have cellphones on silent and removed from sight at the beginning of instructional time – the new default unless explicitly directed by the educator.

- If students do not comply, cellphones are immediately surrendered where there is no explicit allowance from the educator.

- For students in kindergarten to Grade 6, there will be a cellphone restriction for the entire school day, but they may be used with permission from the educator.

- A strengthened personal mobile devices policy with clear responsibilities broken down amongst staff and a requirement for best practices to be developed and shared with staff.

- Social media sites will be banned on all school networks and devices, if not done so already.

- Requirement that educators and staff model behaviour and not use personal mobile devices during class for non-work related reasons.

- New ban on sharing and recording videos or photos of individuals without explicit consent.

Parents/care givers:

Ministry of Education: [Cellphones and other mobile devices in schools](#)

- Students are responsible for their personal mobile device, how they use it and the consequences of not following the school board's policy.

- If the student does not hand in their device when required, they will be sent to the principal's office. Principals will review each situation and decide the appropriate response.

- Your school board or school may have a policy with more consequences and limits on using mobile devices at school (for example, in other school areas or while on school trips). This policy must set out clear roles and responsibilities for students and staff. Any disciplinary action must be consistent with our provincial Code of Conduct and progressive discipline policy.

- Talk to your child's school or school board to learn more.

What parents and guardians can do

You can teach your child about finding a healthy balance in using technology by limiting screen time at home. You can also:
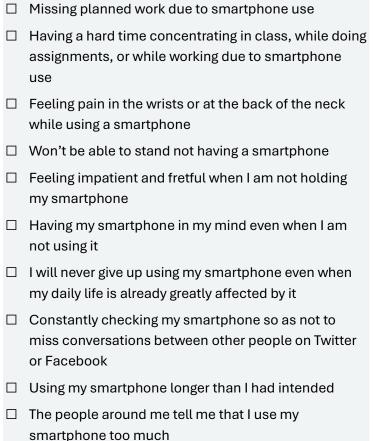
- Read Media Smarts' [tips for managing your kids' screen time](#)

- Explore [Centre for Addiction and Mental Health's (CAMH's)](#) services and resources if you have concerns about your child's use of technology

- Understand current research on [Youth, smartphones and social media use](#) from the Canadian Mental Health Association (CMHA) and in the infographic below

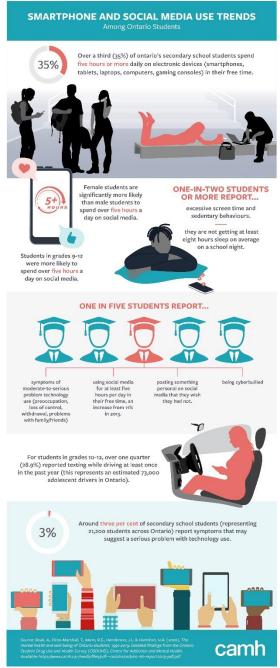- School Mental Health Ontario also has resources to help you [manage your child's screen time](#)

The 2019 CAMH Ontario Student Drug Use and Health Survey showed that the majority of Ontario students do not experience problem technology use. Currently, there is no formal clinical diagnosis for smartphone, social media or Internet addiction in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM-5). To date, only Internet gaming disorder has been included in the DSM-5 as a condition requiring further research.

Screening for Smartphone and Social Media Overuse

10-item Smartphone Addiction Scale–Short Version for Adolescents (SAS-SV). The SAS-SV's reliability and validity have also been confirmed by research with 18- to 24-year-olds in the United States as an accurate indicator of problem smartphone use

The scale is currently open access and asks individuals for a rating of strongly disagree (1), disagree (2), weakly disagree (3), agree (4) and strongly agree (5) for the following 10 statements:

☐ Missing planned work due to smartphone use

☐ Having a hard time concentrating in class, while doing assignments, or while working due to smartphone use

☐ Feeling pain in the wrists or at the back of the neck while using a smartphone

☐ Won't be able to stand not having a smartphone

☐ Feeling impatient and fretful when I am not holding my smartphone

☐ Having my smartphone in my mind even when I am not using it

☐ I will never give up using my smartphone even when my daily life is already greatly affected by it

☐ Constantly checking my smartphone so as not to miss conversations between other people on Twitter or Facebook

☐ Using my smartphone longer than I had intended

☐ The people around me tell me that I use my smartphone too much

The *Bergen Social Media Addiction Scale* (BSMAS) is regarded as an accurate and valid measure of problem social media use among adolescents Take the Social Media Addiction Questionnaire to See How You Measure Up | BlockSurvey.

All items are scored on the following scale: very rarely (1), rarely (2), sometimes (3), often (4) and very often (5). During the last year how often have you:

- ☐ spent a lot of time thinking about social media or planned use of social media?
- ☐ felt an urge to use social media more and more?
- ☐ used social media in order to forget about personal problems?
- ☐ tried to cut down on the use of social media without success?
- ☐ become restless or troubled if you have been prohibited from using social media?
- ☐ used social media so much that it has had a negative impact on your job/studies?

[Youth Family and Interactive Technology Brochure (PDF)](#)

[Problem Gambling and Technology Treatment Groups (PDF)](#)

Events

To promote healthy screen use and time in schools, align efforts with various health promotion events focused on screen time, social media, and overall digital well-being. Here are some key events and resources:

Screen-Free Week and Turn Off The Screens (TOTS) Week: Previously celebrated in the first full week of May, but can be celebrated anytime is an invitation to turn off devices to play, explore and rediscover life beyond entertainment screens. [Screen-Free Saturdays](#) or [Screen-Free Week (screenfree.org)](#) Have a resource library of activity ideas, [101 Screen Free Activities](#), organizing kits and resources. Grey Bruce Public Health has TOTS resources and event kits from previous years available.

Safer Internet Day (February 6th) EU: Celebrated globally in February, Safer Internet Day aims to promote safer and more responsible use of online technology and mobile phones among children and young people. More information can be found at [Safer Internet Day](#). Events and activities taking place throughout the whole month. [Resources - Safer Internet Day](#)

Digital Wellness Day: This event, observed in May, raises awareness about digital well-being and encourages balanced use of technology. Visit [Digital Wellness Day](#) for resources and event details. **Digital Wellness Day is May 2, 2025** Workplace and Individual Kits available

World Mental Health Day: Held on October 10th, this day focuses on mental health awareness and education. Schools can use this opportunity to discuss the impact of screen time on mental health. More details are available at [World Mental Health Day](#).

Stress Awareness Month: April is designated as Stress Awareness Month, highlighting the effects of stress and promoting healthier lifestyles. Schools can incorporate sessions on managing stress related to digital device usage. Learn more at Stress Awareness Month.

World Health Day: Celebrated on April 7th, World Health Day is an opportunity to discuss various health topics, including the impact of screen time on physical and mental health. Visit [World Health Day](#) for further information.

Family Safety Week: Occurring in April, this event focuses on safety at home and online. It provides a platform to educate students and families about safe screen practices. More information can be found at Family Safety Week.

Resources

1. MediaSmarts - DigitalSmarts Program: https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/general-information/digitalsmarts

2. MediaSmarts - Use, Understand & Engage: Digital Media Literacy Framework: https://mediasmarts.ca/digital-media-literacy/general-information/use-understand-engage-digital-media-literacy-framework-canadian-schools

3. Common Sense Education: https://www.commonsense.org/education

4. ISTE (International Society for Technology in Education): https://www.iste.org/standards

5. Government of Canada - Digital Literacy Exchange Program: https://www.ic.gc.ca/eic/site/102.nsf/eng/home

6. Ontario Ministry of Education: http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/

7. Continuum M-8 - ÉBAUCHE - Google Sheets Digital Curriculum k-12

8. https://pedagogienumeriqueenaction.cforp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/Definir-les-competences-du-21e-siecle-pour-l_Ontario-Document-de-reflexion-phase-1-2016.pdf

9. edugains.ca/resources21CL/About21stCentury/21CL_21stCenturyCompetencies.pdf

10. Conseil scolaire de district catholique de l'Est ontarien - CSDCEO - Centre de resources - Âˆre numérique

11. https://mediasmarts.ca/sites/mediasmarts/files/publication-report/full/ycwwiii_trends_recommendations_fullreport.pdf (2015)

12. https://yrdsb.civicweb.net/document/126729/ Mandatory Online Learning BWDSB letter to the Ministry

13. (PDF) Unpacking the Toronto District School Board's Vision for Learning: Research Brief on Global Citizenship and Character (researchgate.net) 2016

Additional links/resources

- Cybertip.ca online safety resources
- NeedHelpNow.ca
- ProtectKidsOnline.ca

- [Zoe and Molly online](#)
- [Protectchildren.ca trending resources](#)

Advocacy

[Screens in Schools Action Kit | Children's Screen Time Action Network (screentimenetwork.org)](#)

[Resources & Research: Reviewing the Enforcement of App Age Ratings in Apple protectchildren.ca](#)

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12. Statistics Canada (2023) *Online digital media use and adolescent mental health*. Retrieved from https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2023002/article/00002-eng.htm

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