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des jeunes

The English Parents Committee Association (EPCA)

**Brief Submitted to the Special Commission on the
Impact of Screens and Social Media on Young
People's Health and Development**

Empower and Guide: A Balanced Strategy for Screen Use

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1. Introduction

The use of screens and social media has become an integral part of the daily lives of children and adolescents. While these tools offer significant opportunities for learning, social interaction, and entertainment, their excessive and unsupervised use raises concerns about their impact on the mental, physical, and social well-being of young people.

The English Parents Committee Association (EPCA) is proud to present this brief to the Special Commission on the Impact of Screens and social media on Young People's Health and Development. Drawing from evidence-based research, parental surveys, and consultations with educational stakeholders, this brief aims to provide practical recommendations for fostering balanced and healthy screen use among children and adolescents.

2. Context and Prevalence of Screen and Social Media Use

Screen use is ubiquitous among youth in Quebec. A 2023 survey revealed that 90% of children are introduced to screens before the age of five, with the average adolescent spending 6–7 hours daily on digital devices. The COVID-19 pandemic further amplified reliance on screens, transforming them into essential tools for education, communication, and leisure.^{1,2}

A breakdown of screen use shows that time spent on devices rises sharply in secondary school, particularly on weekends, with over 50% of students reporting at least four hours of daily screen use during this period. Research indicates that increased screen exposure is correlated with diminished physical activity,³ reduced quality of sleep,⁴ and heightened risk of exposure to inappropriate content. This includes increased interactions with harmful online behaviors such as cyberbullying and exposure to false or misleading information.

In addition, while some students have access to high-speed internet and modern devices, others rely on schools for their only digital interactions. This disparity deepens the digital divide and the inequitable distribution of these technologies, highlighting the critical importance of addressing both overuse and unequal access through education and structured interventions.

These trends underline the need for targeted strategies to ensure that children and adolescents use screens in ways that are beneficial to their health, development, and education while minimizing potential harms.

3. Mental Health Impacts

Excessive screen time, particularly on social media platforms, has been linked to higher rates of anxiety, depression, and sleep disturbances among adolescents.⁵ Cyberbullying remains a prevalent issue, with victims experiencing heightened levels of stress and social withdrawal. Additionally, the curated nature of

¹ <https://www.inspq.qc.ca/en/publications/3015>

² <https://montreal.citynews.ca/2024/09/19/quebec-children-under-five-screens-overexposed>

³ <https://www150.statcan.gc.ca/n1/pub/82-003-x/2023010/article/00001-eng.htm>

⁴ <https://www.mdpi.com/1660-4601/19/15/9019>

⁵ <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/psychiatry/articles/10.3389/fpsyt.2024.1416130/full>

social media content fosters unhealthy comparisons, contributing to body image issues and diminished self-esteem.

Dr. Tracy Vaillancourt's work further emphasizes the link between screen overuse and psychological distress in youth. Her studies reveal that frequent exposure to social media amplifies feelings of inadequacy and negatively affects emotional regulation, particularly in adolescents already struggling with mental health challenges. Vaillancourt also highlights the increased vulnerability of youth to cyberbullying, which can result in long-term psychological trauma and social isolation.⁶

Moreover, research shows that constant notifications and the pressure to maintain a digital presence can lead to heightened levels of stress and disrupted sleep patterns, both of which contribute to deteriorating mental health. The cumulative effect of these stressors can impact academic performance, relationships, and overall quality of life, underscoring the need for targeted interventions to promote digital well-being.⁷

4. Physical Health Impacts

Excessive screen time among adolescents has been linked to various physical health issues:

- **Obesity:** Prolonged periods of inactivity associated with screen use can lead to weight gain and obesity. A study published in *American Academy of Pediatrics* found that increased screen time is correlated with higher obesity rates among youth.⁸
- **Musculoskeletal Problems:** Extended use of digital devices, especially with poor posture, can cause musculoskeletal issues such as neck and back pain. Johns Hopkins Medicine notes that many children and teens develop habits of sitting without proper back support while using devices, leading to hunched postures and associated discomfort.⁹
- **Eye Strain:** Staring at screens for long durations can result in eye strain, characterized by symptoms like dry eyes, blurred vision, and headaches. The Canadian Paediatric Society advises that excessive screen time can negatively impact visual health in children and adolescents.¹⁰
- **Sleep Disruptions:** Exposure to blue light emitted by screens, especially before bedtime, can interfere with sleep patterns by suppressing melatonin production, leading to difficulties in falling asleep and reduced sleep quality. Harvard Medical School highlights that increased screen time is associated with shorter sleep duration and delayed bedtimes in adolescents.¹¹

⁶ <https://evolutionlab.nipissingu.ca/wp-content/uploads/sites/68/2024/01/vaillancourt-et-al-2024-social-media-friendship-jealousy.pdf>

⁷ <https://www.frontiersin.org/journals/public-health/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2024.1459952/>

⁸ <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC5769928/#:~:text=Current%20evidence%20suggests%20that%20screen,habits%3B%20and%20reduced%20sleep%20duration>

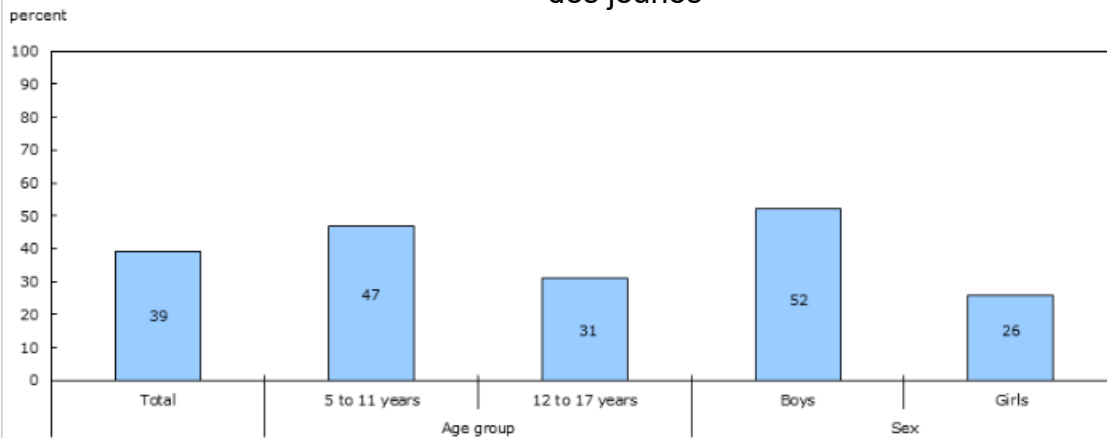
⁹ <https://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/health/wellness-and-prevention/screen-time-side-effects-in-kids-and-teens>

¹⁰ <https://cps.ca/en/tools-outils/digital-media-and-screen-time>

¹¹ <https://hms.harvard.edu/news/screen-time-brain>

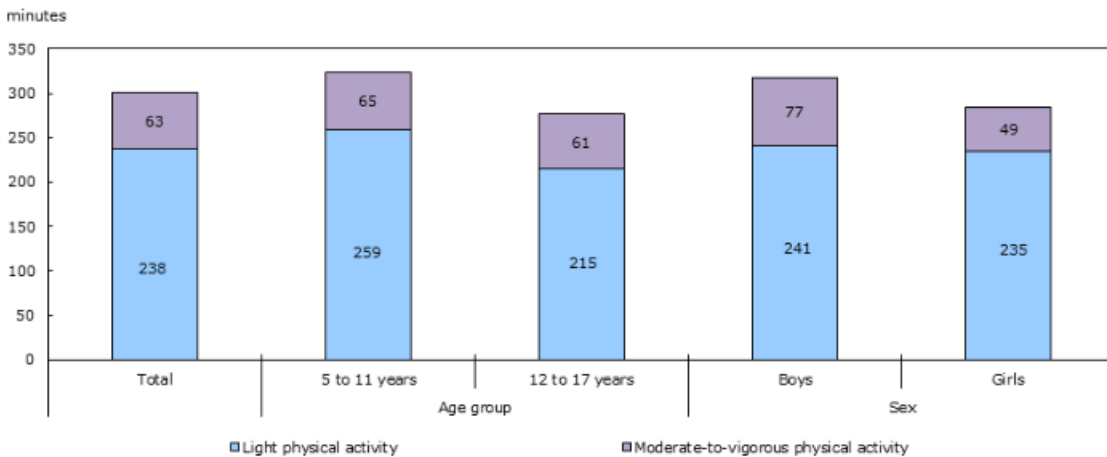
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Chart 1
Percentage of children and youth aged 5 to 17 who engage in moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (on average) per day, by sex and age group, household population, Canada, 2016 and 2017



Note: Children and youth aged 5 to 17 should get 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day according to the Canadian 24-hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Youth.
Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Health Measures Survey, Cycle 5 (2016 and 2017).

Chart 2
Average time spent in light and moderate-to-vigorous physical activity (minutes per day), children and youth aged 5 to 17, by age group and sex, household population, Canada, 2016 and 2017



Notes: Children and youth aged 5 to 17 should get 60 minutes of moderate-to-vigorous physical activity per day and get an additional several hours of light physical activity according to the Canadian 24-hour Movement Guidelines for Children and Youth.
Source: Statistics Canada, Canadian Health Measures Survey, Cycle 5 (2016 and 2017).

5. Educational Impacts

Excessive screen time among adolescents has been linked to various educational challenges:

- **Reduced Academic Performance:** High screen time, especially when involving non-educational content, correlates with lower academic achievement. A systematic review and meta-analysis found that increased screen media use is associated with poorer academic performance among children and adolescents.¹²
- **Impaired Attention and Concentration:** Engaging in media multitasking—using multiple digital devices or platforms simultaneously—can diminish students' ability to concentrate during learning

¹² <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2751330>

activities. Research indicates that multitasking with media during learning negatively affects academic outcomes.¹³

- **Decreased Homework Completion:** Excessive recreational screen use can lead to procrastination and reduced time allocated for homework, impacting overall learning. Studies have shown that background media can reduce the quality of concurrent activities, such as homework.¹⁴
- **Lower Reading Proficiency:** Time spent on screens, particularly on social media and video games, may displace reading activities, leading to declines in literacy skills. Research suggests that certain screen activities are negatively associated with academic performance, including language fluency.¹⁵

These findings underscore the importance of monitoring and moderating screen time to support adolescents' educational development.

6. Social Development Impacts

Excessive screen time can significantly impede adolescents' social development:

- **Diminished Face-to-Face Interactions:** Spending extensive time on digital devices reduces opportunities for in-person socialization, which is essential for developing communication skills and emotional intelligence. A review highlighted that excessive screen time negatively impacts children's social skills development, leading to social isolation and withdrawal.¹⁶
- **Impaired Social Skills:** Overreliance on screens may hinder the development of crucial social competencies, such as interpreting non-verbal cues and engaging in meaningful conversations. Research indicates that excessive screen time can lead to a decrease in empathy and emotional intelligence.¹⁷
- **Increased Loneliness:** Paradoxically, higher engagement with social media platforms can lead to feelings of loneliness and social isolation among adolescents. Studies have found that adolescents who spend more time on screens report higher levels of loneliness, despite having large digital networks.¹⁸
- **Reduced Empathy:** Continuous exposure to digital media may desensitize adolescents to others' emotions, diminishing their capacity for empathy. Excessive screen time has been associated with negative outcomes in children's social and emotional development, including reduced empathy.

These findings underscore the importance of moderating screen time to support healthy social development in adolescents.

¹³ https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/140/Supplement_2/S62/34180/Media-Multitasking-and-Cognitive-Psychological

¹⁴ https://publications.aap.org/pediatrics/article/140/Supplement_2/S62/34180/Media-Multitasking-and-Cognitive-Psychological

¹⁵ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics/fullarticle/2751330>

¹⁶ <https://childpsy.org/the-influence-of-screen-time-on-childrens-social-skills>

¹⁷ <https://childpsy.org/the-influence-of-screen-time-on-childrens-social-skills>

¹⁸ <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371%2Fjournal.pone.0256591>

7. Parental Perspectives and Concerns

EPCA's consultations with parents highlight widespread concerns about screen overuse and its implications for their children's well-being. Many parents report feeling underprepared to manage their children's screen time effectively, citing the rapid evolution of digital platforms and insufficient guidance on best practices.¹⁹ Key concerns include:

- Inadequate digital literacy among children and parents.
- The challenge of balancing educational and recreational screen use.
- The need for resources to address cyberbullying and online safety.

Parents overwhelmingly express a desire to be part of the solution, advocating for collaborative approaches between families, schools, and policymakers.

8. Empower and Guide: A Balanced Strategy for Screen Use.

Exploring AI Integration in Education

EPCA has highlighted the need for greater dialogue around artificial intelligence (AI) in schools.²⁰ Students are increasingly using AI tools without fully understanding their potential implications. To address this, schools must engage in proactive discussions about AI, equipping students with the knowledge to use these technologies responsibly and ethically.

Parents as Digital Guides

Parents play a pivotal role in shaping digital habits. By actively participating in digital education efforts, they can help address challenges such as stigma faced by students who use electronic devices for learning or health needs. Parents' perspectives, informed by research, peer discussions, and news, are essential in promoting effective screen use strategies.

Building a Collaborative Community

EPCA emphasizes the collective responsibility of parents, educators, and community members to guide young people in developing healthy screen habits. This shared effort must extend beyond the classroom, involving the entire community in fostering responsible technology use. By embracing this comprehensive approach, we can ensure our children grow into well-rounded, digitally proficient citizens of the 21st century.

In January 2024, the EPCA collaborated with Dr. Mélissa Généreux and the FCPQ on a national survey on family well-being, involving over 14,000 parents. The survey highlighted screen time as a top concern, particularly among parents of primary and secondary school children. Findings revealed a sharp increase in screen use from the end of primary school, with heavy usage (at least four hours daily on weekends) becoming prevalent in upper secondary grades. Youth who are heavy screen users during the week are

¹⁹ <https://epcaquebec.org/unveiling-of-the-results-of-the-national-survey-on-the-impact-of-social-crises-on-the-well-being-of-quebec-families/>

²⁰ <https://epcaquebec.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/EPCA-NEWSLETTER-VOL.-20.pdf>

twice as likely to experience a lower quality of life, with energy levels and social interactions being most affected.²¹

The Case for Education Over Prohibition

Research indicates that the mere presence of a cellphone, even when unused, can divert students' attention and impede learning.²² However, an outright prohibition of digital devices in schools is not a sustainable or forward-thinking solution. When integrated thoughtfully, digital devices can enhance education by developing essential skills and guiding students through online challenges.²³

For students in underprivileged areas, schools often serve as their primary access point to digital technology. Therefore, it's crucial to provide comprehensive digital literacy education to bridge social inequalities and equip students with the necessary skills to thrive in a digital world.²⁴

As screens are ubiquitous in both professional and personal contexts, students must learn how to use them effectively and responsibly. Schools have a unique opportunity to model balanced screen habits, setting the foundation for lifelong skills that students will need to navigate their future environments.

Information, Training, and Support

Many parents feel overwhelmed by their children's screen time and the unfamiliar digital content they encounter. Digital tools offer significant benefits when used properly, including app restrictions and communication blocking during specific times.²⁵ However, these features are only effective if parents and children understand how to use them.²⁶

Key Parent Insights and Recommendations:

1. Collaboration: Involve parents and students in decisions about the school environment.
2. Respect Community Needs: Ensure school policies reflect the unique needs of the community and respect the authority of governing boards.
3. Educate, Don't Ban: Promote education and awareness about healthy, ethical screen use instead of implementing prohibitions.

9. Recommendations

1. Enhance Digital Literacy: Integrate comprehensive digital literacy programs into school curricula to teach responsible online behavior, critical thinking, detection of fake news and cybersecurity skills.

²¹ <https://epcaquebec.org/unveiling-of-the-results-of-the-national-survey-on-the-impact-of-social-crises-on-the-well-being-of-quebec-families/>

²² <https://www.rutgers.edu/news/cellphone-distraction-classroom-can-lead-lower-grades-rutgers-study-finds>

²³ <https://www.tonybates.ca/2020/12/29/developing-digital-literacy-for-a-digital-world-a-quebec-report/>

²⁴ <https://digitalpromise.org/2024/10/31/bridging-the-digital-divide-a-path-to-empowerment-for-underserved-learners>

²⁵ <https://www.rutgers.edu/news/cellphone-distraction-classroom-can-lead-lower-grades-rutgers-study-finds>

2. Increase Access to Mental Health Resources: Provide schools with the necessary funding to hire mental health professionals and offer support programs addressing screen-related stress and anxiety.
3. Implement Ergonomic Guidelines: Educate students and teachers on proper posture and workspace setups to prevent physical strain and discomfort.
4. Strengthen Parental Education: Offer workshops and resources to help parents manage their children's screen use and navigate digital risks effectively.
5. Address the Digital Divide: Ensure equitable access to technology and internet resources for all students, while promoting alternative learning methods for underserved communities.

10. Conclusion

The challenges posed by screen overuse and social media are complex but not insurmountable. By adopting a balanced, evidence-based approach, we can harness the benefits of digital tools while mitigating their risks. EPCA urges the Special Commission to consider these recommendations and foster a collaborative effort among parents, educators, and policymakers to promote the healthy development of our children.

11. About the English Parents Committee Association (EPCA)

The English Parents Committee Association (EPCA) represents the parents' committees of Quebec's English school boards. Advocating for over 100,000 students, EPCA collaborates with parents, schools, and policymakers to ensure equitable access to quality education. Founded to amplify the voices of English-speaking families, EPCA remains dedicated to fostering the academic success and well-being of all students in Quebec.

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