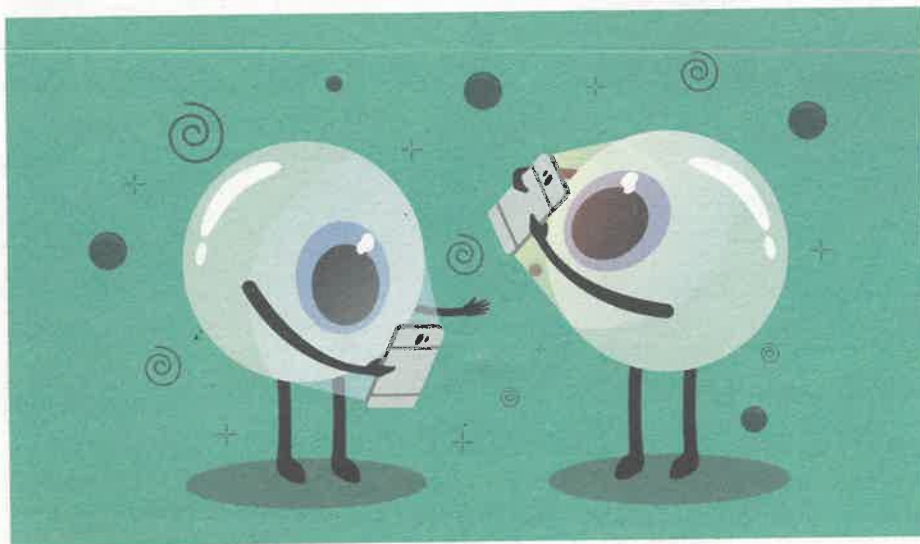


Screen wipe

Evidence shows technology may be harming, not helping, our students, says NEU-ATL Northern Ireland director **Mark Langhammer**



SCHOOLS AND COLLEGES invest enormous sums of money to keep up with the latest technologies. The argument for technology in the earlier years is often rooted in the fear of children falling behind, as most children will use technology in their future jobs and everyday life. In today's classrooms, you will find smartboards, smartphones, tablets and Chromebooks. We have accepted tech in the classroom as inevitable – a benign educational evolution.

However, ATL's 2016 survey and research literature review, conducted by Liz Fawcett of Queens University Belfast, suggested technology in the classroom had pedagogical benefits, but myriad drawbacks too. Teachers observed that students raised on a high-tech diet appear to struggle more with attention and focus, seeming to suffer from an adolescent malaise related to digital immersion. A year on, and we now know of 200 studies pointing to a correlation between screen time and increased ADHD, screen addiction, aggression, depression, anxiety, and even psychosis. Screen addiction leads to worse educational outcomes for children. It may also clinically hurt them.

Dr Nicholas Kardaras, author of the book *Glow Kids*, says: "Over 200 peer-reviewed studies correlate excessive screen usage with a whole host of clinical disorders, including addiction. Recent brain-imaging research confirms that glowing screens affect the brain's frontal cortex — which controls

executive functioning, including impulse control — in exactly the same way that drugs like cocaine and heroin do. Thanks to research from the US military, we also know that screens and video games can literally affect the brain like digital morphine."

Many parents intuitively understand that ubiquitous glowing screens have a negative effect on children. What parent cannot recognise aggressive temper tantrums when tech devices are taken away and the wandering attention spans when children are not perpetually stimulated by hyper-arousing devices? Teachers report children becoming bored, apathetic, uninteresting and uninterested when not plugged in.

How do we keep our children from crossing this line? Developmental psychologists understand that children's healthy development involves social interaction, creative imaginative play and engagement with the real, natural world. The immersive and addictive world of screens dampens and stunts those developmental processes.

At a recent London conference on technology addiction and adolescent development, Harley Street rehabilitation clinic specialist Mandy Saligari said screen time was too often overlooked as a potential vehicle for addiction in young people. Saligari argued that greater emphasis was needed on sleep and digital curfews at home as well as a systematic approach within schools,

for example by introducing a smartphone amnesty at the beginning of the school day.

The key is to prevent your four-, five- or six-year-old from getting hooked on screens to begin with. That might mean books instead of iPads, nature and sports instead of TV, and Lego instead of Minecraft. If you have to, demand that your child's school not give them a tablet or Chromebook until they are at least 10 years old. Have honest discussions with your child about why you are limiting their screen access. Eat 'device-free' dinners with your children just as Steve Jobs, co-founder of Apple, used to.

Finland, whose school system routinely ranks close to the top of global OECD and PISA rankings, has consciously chosen to skip technology-heavy standardised testing. Instead, students enjoy up to four daily outdoor free-play breaks, regardless of weather. By comparison, a sedentary British child sits glued to screens, playing edu-games while stressed by standardised testing, on-screen assessment and internet-driven coursework.

Children are vulnerable to addictive escape if they feel alone, alienated, purposeless or bored. The solution is to help children to connect to meaningful real-life experiences and relationships. The creatively engaged child connected to their family is less likely to escape into a matrix-like digital fantasy world.

If the growing body of research is true, why would we have allowed the "educational" trojan horse of technology to slip into our schools? There is significant corporate interest in encouraging technology use in schools, as Rupert Murdoch's failed attempt to sell tablets into US schools through his then-company Amplify shows, while controversy and accusations of cronyism surrounded the city of Los Angeles' \$1.3 billion contract in 2014 to buy iPads loaded with Pearson educational software for all its 650,000 post-primary students.

In Britain, we have our own corporate persuaders, seeking to convince naive school administrators that screens are the educational panacea. Yet as schools make teachers redundant, and scarce funds are set aside for technology, many educators and parents alike are beginning to ask if these digital-age hypnotic marvels actually produce better educational outcomes for the kids who use them. ■

What do you think? How big an issue is this? Have you observed problems with your pupils? Would schools be better off if we took all the screens away? Let us know your thoughts at report@neu.org.uk.