

Dr. Tam's 'Top Healthy Digital Diet Tips'

Computers, smartphones and other digital devices are now a well-established part of schoolchildren's daily life – in their education and study, their leisure time, and in helping keeping them connected. We believe that overall, technology is a great benefit to students, but it is also clear that there are potential risks of over-use or inappropriate use of technology that parents and families should be aware of.

We have prepared some easy-to-implement tips and suggestions to ensure that your child maintains a 'healthy digital diet' and avoids developing problems such as internet addiction or video-game overusage.

#1 Always set clear limits and boundaries around using devices

It is important to be clear with your child that they are not to have 'free rein' over their time spent on their devices. You could set agreed and reasonable time-limits on how much they can be online, both on a schoolday and on the weekend. A useful rule of thumb would be they have to do their daily commitments first, before online time – eg. doing homework and household chores, and that they cannot spend more time online than they spend on 'real world' activities and sports. It may be useful to set out an agreement on time limits, when first buying the device for the child.

#2 Make sure they have a rich and active set of 'real world' activities

We know that many people, of all ages, go online because they do not have other regular activities to engage in – in other words, they are a bit bored and don't know how to manage their time. Going online to game, to browse or to watch videos is a very easy option in situations like this. From as early an age as possible, make sure your child engages in a range of external social activities that they can enjoy and participate in, such as team sports, learning a musical instrument, joining an art or craft club, or other regular hobby. Research has shown that the earlier one engages in hobbies and activities, the more likely will there be a benefit to their future wellbeing and even to their physical health.

#3 Ensure they stick to a healthy daily routine

It is very important that children of all ages have a regular, structured and healthy daily routine. This will involve ensuring they go to bed at a reasonable time, get enough quality sleep, eat regular and healthy meals (avoiding too much snacking on highly-processed foods), and doing regular exercise ideally at least 3 times a week. Experts recommend that all digital devices are switched off at least 1 hour before bedtime to prevent them becoming distracted by the online world and being affected by the intense blue light that devices emit. Ideally, devices should be removed from the bedroom at night time. We also recommend

that the child gets all their morning commitments done, before being permitted to go online – eg. getting dressed, having breakfast, tidying bedroom.

#4 Take time to learn about the things they do online

The online world that young people engage in can often be bewildering, confusing or even frightening to parents who did not grow up in the ‘digital age’. Nonetheless, it can be useful to learn a bit about the different types of websites, games or online chatrooms that the young person goes on, and to show an active interest in what they do. You could even play computer games with them, which would be an enjoyable family activity and would show the child that you are interested in what things they like doing when online.

#5 Be a good digital role model yourself

We know that people of all ages, even young infants, are very good at observing the world around them and learning behaviours from others. This is particularly true for children observing what their parents and families are doing. So, for children of all ages, ensure to be a good role model yourself around your own digital habits. Try not to take calls or go online when you are doing family activities, have ‘no device’ rules when having family meals, and give your children your full, positive and undistracted attention. Your children will really appreciate this. After all, if you are asking children to cut down their digital usage when you are always online yourself, they are much less likely to respect what you say!

#6 Don’t be afraid to seek professional help if you are very concerned

Many clinicians and researchers around the world now believe that problems like internet or video-game addiction are real mental health conditions. If you notice that the problem is getting worse over time, and that your efforts at home to control online time are not working, it may be appropriate to seek professional assistance. Your child’s school counsellor is well-placed to help with the problem, and may also be aware of issues that have been noticed at school, such as a student getting distracted a lot during a class. An increasing number of clinical psychologists and child psychiatrists are also assessing and treating cases of internet-addiction in young people. Most importantly, there may also be an underlying mental health condition in the student that will need treatment, such as anxiety, depression or attention deficit disorder.

- ***For an in-depth exploration of these issues, have a listen to our free series of Podcasts. Search in iTunes podcasts for ‘The Healthy Digital Diet’***