PROTECT AND SUPPORT VULNERABLE TEENAGERS 2019

Managing mobile phone use in boarding schools

How much do we know about the impact of screen time on pupil wellbeing? **Dr Helen O'Connor** explores the evidence and offers ways to manage phone use and improve mental and physical health.

It has been found that adolescents who spend more time on electronic communication and screens and less time on non-screen activities demonstrate less happiness than adolescents who spend a small amount of time on electronic communication. Worrying statistics are emerging about the use of mobile phones among our youth.

- On average 16-24 years olds in the UK spend less time sleeping than they do on media and communications.
- 83% of 12-15-year olds have their own smartphone.
- 39% of 8-11-year olds have their own smartphone (Ofcom, 2017).

This is likely to be indicative of children in boarding environments due to the need to remain in contact while away from home and more commonly now being encouraged by schools to use their own technology for learning. It is therefore key to try and assess the potential for children to remain connected while considering the likely impact on their overall wellbeing and education.

Improving wellbeing

We know that using mobile phones is similar to a 'dose-response' relationship, where each extra hour of screen time impacts significantly on children experiencing more socio-emotional problems (Public Health England).

Talking to others releases oxytocin, unlike instant messaging which removes young people from interpersonal relationships and the natural release of feel good hormones (Seltzer. Prosoki et al, 2012).

An erosion of healthy relationships has also occurred through the increase in social media and the decline in face to face time. 'Facebook depression' exists in its users due to the comparisons people make, and in the lack of real contact (O'Keefe & Clarke-Pearson, 2011).

Increased stress was reported in girls who could not speak to their mothers after an exam but messaged instead. This was linked to them not releasing oxytocin, but rather having higher levels of salivary cortisol. The lack of talking did not provide them with the opportunity to release their stress (Seltzer, Prososki et al, 2012).

Physical health impact

Physical health can be affected by phone use. Most commonly cited is the impact of phone use on sleep and the decline in physical activity. Blue light which naturally occurs and makes our sky blue is responsible for our circadian rhythm. It helps us to feel alert and affects reaction time and mood. Artificial blue light in mobile and computer devises lowers the production of melatonin, which is the hormone responsible for helping us to know when to sleep.

There is an association between longer periods of time spent on phones and poor mental health, including poor quality of sleep (Sampasa-Kanyinga et al, 2018). There is also demonstrated to be a reduction in sleep quality when people spend time on their phones in the evening (Yoshimura et al, 2017).

It is well reported that links to mental health and increases in mood can be alleviated by being active. Digital use, however, puts this at risk as it is a purely sedentary and often a lonely activity.

It has been perceived as having an impact on mental health, wellbeing and showing signs of increasing depression (Sigman, 2017). Monitoring from parents is difficult due to the activity of phone use often being private and occurring in bedrooms.

Relationships can be affected through mobile phone use, not least due to cyber bullying, intense social comparison, competition and peer influence on unhelpful or difficult behaviours (APPG report on a fit and healthy childhood).

School approach to mobile phone use

Schools need to be mindful of both advantages and disadvantages of screen use among their pupils. Provide clear boundaries and guidelines about how much phone use is acceptable in a day, what can be done as an alternative, and provide reasons behind any advice.

- Set limits
- Encourage companionship
- Role modelling
- Don't deny physicality
- Educate

Set limits

Acceptable limits of screen time are considered to occur generally at less than two hours a day; over this more associations between screen time and health risks are reported (Sigman, 2017). Ideas for approaching this in a boarding environment would be to consider no phone use in rooms, unless to make calls to parents (particularly after a certain time), regardless of age. After all, it is well documented and encouraged that no one should sleep with their phones in the bedroom.

Encourage companionship

Mobile phone use encourages isolative behaviour thus advice should be to ensure phones are kept to a minimum in rooms (if at all allowed) and are used in communal areas. Promote the idea that being communal and around others encourages less screen time and more face to face communication.

The use of role modelling as a tool

Consider the impact of role modelling on the boarding community. Appropriate role modelling from adults and older children to the younger ages in a boarding house would be beneficial.

Modelling as a psychological concept is one of the most powerful tools for changing behaviour in others. Seeing senior pupils and adults in a boarding house engaging in other activities and not continuously using mobile phones promotes a positive message.

Don't deny physicality

Promote opportunities for physical activities to try and encourage the use of non-sedentary activities and greater interactions with others. While some young people will be easier to involve in exercise type activities, opportunities for non-sedentary activities can occur easily in the boarding house. For example, board games or baking activities could be used for those less likely to engage in the more traditional sport type physical activities.

To assist with becoming more active, challenges could be set to see pupils increasing their steps and reducing screen time (apps are available for both of these).

Educate

What better way to educate children than in an educational setting. Boarding houses are similar to the child's home; we would encourage a conversation about mobile phones at home, so why not in a boarding house.

Ask questions related to the child's use of the phone to enable a thoughtful approach. Consider simple questions which pose the child to think about the risks of screen time in house, such as 'How long is long enough?'

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