

How Much is Too Much Time Online?

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Every so often you listen in to a webinar and come across a helpful reminder that is worth sharing. This last week I joined the CMF webinar given by Dr Anisha Abraham, author of a new book released recently: **Raising Global Teens**.

The book itself is an easy read with lots of helpful and pragmatic advice gleaned from both Dr Abraham's 25+ years as a pediatrician and practicing clinician in Asia, Europe and the US, as well as the many research articles she cites for further reference. In the Q and A that followed the webinar one of the interesting questions that came up was on 'how much is too much' in terms of internet use?

Given the extended period of learning that young people have been undertaking it is somewhat ironic to be concerned with the amount of time online. But it is a real concern that too much time online or on social media can lead to negative consequences. There is no perfect answer to the question of 'what is the right amount of screen time?'. Dr Abraham quotes experts such as Dr Piotrowski co-author of **Plugged In: How Media Attract and Affect Youth**, who want to debunk the need to quantify screen time:

"Time is less relevant compared to content and actions,..In fact, you can cyberbully someone online in just three minutes flat but learn from an in-depth educational show lasting over two hours."

So if time is less relevant how do you manage and monitor your children's internet and media use? Dr Abraham highly recommends the 3Cs approach adopted from American researcher Lisa Guerney's work to determine whether internet or media use is problematic. In this regard, parents are called upon to be media coaches to help their children know when they need to pull back from their usage.



The 3Cs look at:

- **Child** - knowing your child - Is your child someone who can disengage from the screen easily? Or, are they a child who struggles to disengage or has poor impulse control? If this is the case, you might need to set up a lot more structure so that they learn over time the importance of organisation and balance.
- **Content** - parents should be focusing on the content on what they are seeing.
- **Context** - the context of your teens interactions with media is also very important - your children should be encouraged to be discerning in the use of their time and to know which forms of media will enrich them, and more particularly that not all time online should be viewed as equal, eg Khan Academy time is not the same as hours of viewing videos coming up on their Youtube feed. Some useful questions to ask include: 'What are your teens viewing?' 'What is the context for their use?', 'Is your child still connecting with others and managing their time well?', 'Are they maintaining friendships, keeping up with school work and getting enough sleep or are these things suffering because of screen time?'

Modeling behaviour and ensuring phones and devices are out of the bedroom at night are also important ways in which we can help children to learn to manage their internet and media use. Other tools parents can use are internet and media use contracts, such as the [Family Media Agreement from Commonsense Media](#), to agree as a family what appropriate screen time looks like. These tools can be useful as they can be reassessed as your child gets older and you are able to encourage more autonomy.

In some circumstances, parents may see a number of warning signs that are indicative of Problematic Interactive Media Use (PIMU). These include your teen spending long periods on screens, sleep disruption, a drop in grades or disinterest in school work, lying about or hiding the amount of time spent online, and using time online as a form of escape from day-to-day life. If your teen is having trouble, you might need to get help. Your child may benefit from some counseling and/or a mentor to help them adjust their approach to interactive media. At VSA, you can get support by contacting your child's homeroom teacher or Head of Year to raise your concerns or you can contact the counseling department by emailing counselling@vsa.edu.hk.