

Sociable or screen addicted?

There is a problem. It has been growing for some time, and has the potential to reach alarming proportions. The purpose of the following article is not to condemn, but to flag up what is happening. It is not to discourage or frighten parents, educators and those who prepare missionaries for their overseas service, but to help equip them to navigate the new normal....screens. Teens and screens, children and screens, even babies and toddlers and screens. (Oh, by the way, parents too....)

Consider these comments.

Life is too busy for us to enforce rules for screen time, or help my child to develop other activities.

My ministry takes up all of my time. The screen activities keep my children occupied.

We live in an urban, technological environment with no garden, and concrete blocks all around us. What else can our children do?

There are no other kids around here for my son to make friends with.

We live in a very restrictive society. It's not safe here for our girls to go out and about.

We are noticing the rise of screen addiction amongst our MKs. In some cases this is severe, disrupting sleep, school work and mealtimes. It also generates deceitful behaviour, driven by an insatiable desire to be online. If this lifestyle issue is not addressed, it will destroy them!

What should we do, as carers for families, education consultants, and trainers of new missionaries? How do we challenge the default positions expressed in the quotes?

Training and preparation

The battle starts long before a family heads to the field. It starts with the parents' attitudes to screens, and with the action that they take – or do not take – as soon as their child is old enough to fiddle with a hand-held device, or watch a 5 minute TV programme.

How can those of us who prepare families for their overseas assignments engage in this battle? Organisations have different programmes, varying in timescale, style and content. In this article we will look at a range of suggestions, highlighted in green. Implementing some of these may require a radical rethink for our preparation programmes, and could involve lengthening the training, or sacrificing something else in order to include this essential learning area.

Let's think about a family entering a new culture. Where the Internet is available and functioning, it is difficult to avoid resorting to the screen as a kind of comfort blanket, especially during early adaptation, or periods of loneliness and isolation. The Covid 19 pandemic has only served to make this situation worse.

In our training programmes, it is normal to include input on long-term educational planning, and the welfare of children and teenagers at different stages of their parents' service. Transition and re-entry to the passport culture are normally covered.

But what about the screen?

We recommend including a module on raising sociable children, in any pre-field preparation for couples and families. This needs to be a 'hands on' experience, not just a presentation or even an online discussion.

We are so thankful for the technology that enables us to connect with family and friends, and continue with work, especially at present while we are affected by the pandemic. However there is a danger that adults, too, can become addicted to the screen. It is not enough simply to limit the time spent on the device – we also need to develop other activities and interest that are not screen-dependent. Before we can instil a balanced lifestyle in our children, we need to take control of our own screen life.

Trainers, ask your new workers to carry out the tasks and answer the questions below. Then ask them to present their findings to the rest of the group, and have a discussion. Challenge them to have a screen-free day.

How often, per day, do you check your phone for messages? If you don't know, keep a record for a day.

Where do you put the phone at night? Do you switch it off?

How much time do you spend each day on a screen? Divide the results into work, leisure and essential information-gathering.

Have you ever tried to be 'screen-free' for a day? How did it work?

Do you do something on the screen that could be done off the screen? Reading your Bible, for example?

This activity could also be done with single workers or those without children.

Physical exercise as an alternative to screens

It can be a challenge for missionaries to find opportunities to keep fit and engage in exercise, and some cultures and environments do not provide a ready context for this. Here are some more quotes.

I'm too busy because of the ministry.

We live in a tower block.

The sports facilities are on the other side of the city.

Everyone would stare at us if we did exercise as a family.

However, there is always something that you can do! If good exercise habits are cultivated before the family departs for the field, it is easier to continue on arrival, even if the nature of the exercise has to change. Include the whole family in the exercise plan, tailoring their participation to the age and capacity of each child. Develop a family expectation that fitness is valued, and that the family does things together. Ask each set of parents to make a fitness plan that they can work on in the new country. Once they arrive there, encourage them to keep on with it, or adapt it as necessary.

Look at these different scenarios. With each one, consider the cultural backdrop, and the attitude of the local people to exercise, sports and fitness. (This may vary according to different sectors of society, gender and age).

Family X lives in a city in a restricted country. What are the restrictions and challenges? (They may need to think about possibilities within an apartment).

Family Y lives in a rural, village location. How does this affect their possibilities for exercise? (They may need to think about privacy issues, especially for girls).

Work together in teams to devise an exercise programme for each scenario, and present them to the group.

Have each missionary couple think about the location where they are going. They research the possibilities for exercise in that location, including looking at the limitations. It is important that they are realistic and do not see this as a hypothetical exercise. They devise a programme that their family will seek to follow, and start following it already during the training.

This activity could also be done with single workers or those without children.

Life skills and help at home

Recently there has been a very popular TV documentary in the UK. 'Our Yorkshire Farm' follows the lifestyle of a family of 11 living on a remote sheep farm in the north of England. The children help with the farm work and household chores, from an early age, and grow up learning many different skills. They only appear to have time to look at screens occasionally, and usually this is for a functional purpose, such as finding out what is wrong with the tractor.

Today's mission workers come from many different cultures, some of which do not value practical skills as highly as academic achievement. Others expect the mother to do everything at home, and do not involve the children in household chores. This does not have to be so!

During our years serving at Bourofaye Christian School in Senegal, we saw how children of all ages and cultures learned to do practical tasks. Both boarding and staff students made their beds, tied up their mosquito nets, and were required to keep their rooms tidy. They had kitchen duties, cutting bread or making up milk from powder, or helping with washing up. At weekends they helped to prepare vegetables, washed the school vehicle, or did other cleaning duties.

One could argue that it is easier to do the washing up oneself, rather than having to supervise children and teach them how to do it properly. Or, when they prepare vegetables or cook something for the first time, it may not taste quite like the meal that mother makes. But they need to learn these important life skills, recognising that it takes time to do them. They will improve with practice, and will develop a sense of achievement and responsibility.

Discuss household tasks. Ask each couple to decide which jobs they will expect their children to do, and at what age. If they don't yet have children, or their children are very young, encourage them to think about how they will do it in the future. For those with children at the right age, start implementing the programme straight away.

Creativity and family time

Many missionaries already have well-developed hobbies and interests, and they are often able to continue with these on the field. They may use a special interest or skill as a bridge to reaching local people.

Could both husband and wife be encouraged to develop a hobby or skill area that could be shared with their children? As an example, my mother taught me to sew and make clothes, and while I was growing up, we spent hours together doing this. Mum learned to sew by going to a class.

What can a father do? For many families, this is a real challenge. Fathers are so often heavily involved in ministry, and in some cultures there is little expectation that they spend much time with their children. However, the Bible has a lot to say about fathers. The book of Proverbs indicates that the bringing up of children should not be left entirely to the mother. Proverbs 1:8 says:

Listen, my son, to your father's instruction, and do not forget your mother's teaching.

Both parents are expected to be involved.

Jesus demonstrated a commitment to children, as expressed in Matthew 18:1-6, Mark 10:13-16, and Luke 18:15-17. The issue of parenthood is also addressed by Paul in Ephesians 5.

During the time of preparation for the mission field, fathers may need to be challenged about thinking of ways to spend regular time with their children, even if it is just for a few minutes each day. Once on the field, it is easier to continue a habit that has already been started.

Some on-field situations involve family separation – parents and children, where boarding schools are used, or husband and wife, when the husband works in a remote place while the wife lives with the children in a city with access to education. In these cases, use of the screen is necessary in order to stay in touch as a family. We would encourage parents, and especially fathers, to schedule in regular times to talk with their children, and to connect emotionally with them. It is not enough for the father just to ask how their school work is progressing, and whether they are fulfilling other requirements. Perhaps the father and son can share a hobby that they can do or talk about together while they are online, or play a game that is not screen-based. It would be good to look at this issue before families depart for the field, but if they are already overseas, those from the sending office who are responsible for keeping in touch with families could still encourage the parents in this.

During training and preparation, both parents could be asked about their skills and special interests. Why not give them a project? Ask them to find and develop a skill or hobby that they can share with their children. It will need to be something that can be continued in the location where the family will be going. Get them to start engaging with this activity before departing for the field, and ensure that they take a supply of necessary materials and equipment with them, if they cannot be obtained in-country.

Our children grew up playing in sand and watching the activities of insects, toads and the occasional snake. In rural Africa, we could see lots of different birds, and it was much easier to see the stars than where we live now.

Many families are located in urban areas, so leisure activities may need to be limited to the indoor space, especially in a very cold climate. Hobbies that work here might be viewed as old-

fashioned in the modern West, but this depends on the mindset of the family. Develop an expectation that leisure activities will be done together and off-line, at least some of the time. For example – do a jigsaw, make a model, play a board game. The key feature is not the activity itself, but the time spent together interacting as a family, without a screen.

Have a family time regularly. It could be for a few minutes each day, or twice a week, or a longer time at the weekend...whatever works best. Try reading a story to your children for a few minutes each evening. With the right choice of book, this even works for older ones. We read lots of books together with our children even when the oldest was around 14.

Managing screen life

Even when we take action to provide alternatives to online activities, there remains the issue of managing screen time. The tips below are taken from a book by Gary Chapman and Arlene Pellicane, *Growing up social: raising relational kids in a screen-driven world*. This is an excellent book and well worth buying.

Children and teenagers cannot learn to concentrate or think deeply from looking at screens. Constant screen use makes them distractible, and reduces their ability to wrestle with problems. If they don't like what they see on the screen, they can navigate away from it to something easy and fun. They create a designer world characterised by instant gratification.

- Use eye contact a lot, with your spouse and your children.
- Don't give your children everything they want, when they want it. Teach them to be patient, and encourage them to be thankful. Value persistence and teach this to your children. Think about the parables of the lost sheep and the lost coin...why did the people in these stories find what they were looking for?
- Don't allow screen time for children under the age of 2. (As recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics).
- Decide on a policy for screen time for your children, and enforce it. Have some phone rules that you agree with your child. If you don't do this, they will easily become addicted.
- Encourage family conversation at mealtimes. Don't allow screens at the same time.
- When your child meets with another child to play, develop the expectation that they will be playing together and not just watching screens.
- While they are online, teach them to interact positively with others. Don't allow them to copy the prevalent online culture of rudeness and negativity.
- Teach your children to apologise properly to their friends when they get things wrong, not just text a quick 'sorry'.
- Build in time for children to rest and recharge, without access to a screen.

- Don't allow screens in your child's bedroom. Collect up electronic devices at night.
- Children and teenagers learn far more about interpreting body language and facial expressions by interacting with real people. The Covid pandemic has limited this, but make the most of the opportunities that you do have.
- Work on making your home a warm and loving environment where each member relates to all of the others. Don't allow screen time to interfere with that – manage it! Limit its use, and find opportunities to do things together on the screen.
- As parents, take responsibility! Don't allow your children to dictate to you – decide on how and when technology will be used in your home and family, and expect them to comply. You do not have to understand how every gadget works in order to do this. However if you have a team member who knows a lot about technology, ask for their help, and become a learner yourself.
- Don't give in to your children if they become angry when you try to take their phone or device away from them. Be resilient and push through the anger. It is not about whether your children like you at that moment, but about what is best for them. Practise good anger management yourself, and role model this to your children.
- If your children are reserved, don't let them just hide behind a screen. Don't reinforce habits of withdrawal by constantly explaining that he or she is 'just shy'. Role-play some scenarios to help them to relate to others. Get them to practise asking questions to others – 'tell me about your family', 'what do you like doing?' There are further ideas in Chapman and Pellicane's book on pages 115 to 118.

Staying safe

- Teach your children how to be safe online. The June 2018 issue of *Educare* focuses on this topic – it can be accessed here: <https://eurotck.net/tck-education/educare-publication/>
- If they have a phone, don't let them share their number with anyone else without your permission. When they are somewhere else, expect them to answer or call you back when you try to contact them.
- Don't let them relate online with people that they don't know.
- If your child has a play date with another child, get to know the family. Check what kind of films or games they are happy to allow for their children. If you are uneasy about their response, don't allow the play date.

Further resources

A parents' guide to Smartphone addiction [AXIS.org]

https://www.heritagechristian.net/uploaded/Heritage_Documents/Parents/Resources/Axis-Parents-Guide-to-Smartphone-Addiction.pdf

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