



WHY THIS MATTERS

Televisions, smartphones, tablets, computers, and gaming consoles are a common part of daily life for the majority of kids. Since the pandemic began, the use of virtual interactions has increased markedly. At the same time, alarming rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide among children led to the U.S. Surgeon General to issue an [Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health in December 2021](#).¹

The more time kids spend on screens, the less time they have for healthy sleep habits, physical activity, and time outdoors, all of which improve well-being.

WHAT THE RESEARCH SAYS

Rates of anxiety and depression were on a steep rise even before the pandemic. Since COVID-19, kids have engaged in less physical activity, logged more screen time, and reported more sleep problems, as well as emotional exhaustion, isolation, and screen fatigue.² Prior to the onset of the pandemic, on average, kids aged 8-12 spent 5 hours a day on a screen while teens spent up to 9 hours a day.³ A large National Institutes of Health (NIH) study on adolescent brains found the average during COVID increased to 7.7 hours of screen time – excluding schoolwork – for 12-13 year olds.⁴ The CDC reports that 78% of high school students do not get sufficient sleep.⁵

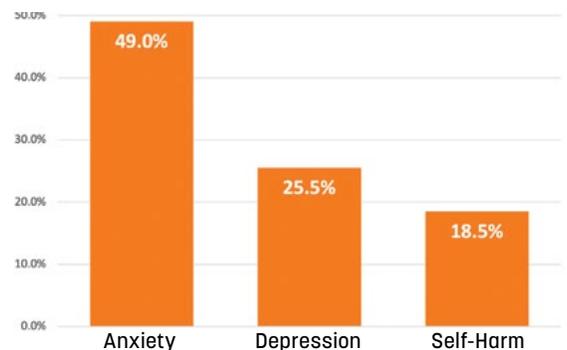
Some studies suggest an optimal amount of time can have a 'Goldilocks' effect. Facebook users who spent one hour a day on the social networking site were the least lonely; those who spent less or much more than an hour were lonelier.⁶ Experts suggest social media breaks, especially if your child feels bad, jealous, or negative; or shows signs of low self-esteem after being online.⁷

Researchers continue to investigate the relationship between screen time and youth mental health. The [Surgeon General's Youth Mental Health Crisis Advisory](#) called on technology companies to provide data to help move this research forward.⁸

HOW THIS IMPACTS CHILDREN

Spending too much time on a screen physically alters the brain due to a premature thinning of the cortex, resulting in lower cognitive skills.⁹ Researchers have warned that too much time on a smartphone can impair the development of social skills, critical thinking, and impulse control. Many experts advise delaying smartphone use until age 14 or older, when kids' brains are more developed. Kids with smartphones have increased risk of exposure to inappropriate content on the internet and cyberbullying. Researchers have tracked how technology addiction disrupts concentration and the ability to focus, but also how it leads to depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts.¹⁰

PERCENT OF KIDS SELF-REPORTING (2019 WISCONSIN YRBS, AGES 13 - 18)



WHAT'S HAPPENING IN WISCONSIN?

In 2019, 55% of Wisconsin high school students said they were not physically active (60 minutes per day on five or more days). Rates of inactivity were higher for girls than boys.¹¹ Further, the majority of our high school students are not getting the minimum recommended amount of sleep (8-10 hours) on the average school night.¹²



Nearly half of all Wisconsin kids 13-18 reported anxiety; 28% reported depression and 18% reported self-harm in 2019.¹³ Teens and young adults in OCMH listening sessions said they were exposed to harmful content on social media and that parents should be involved in curating content, especially for young children.

WHAT WE CAN DO

- ➔ **Start Basic:** Start your child with a basic cell phone—not a smartphone. Commit to [Wait Until 8th](#).
- ➔ **Establish Limits:** Create a family technology use contract. Example: agree to keep devices, especially smartphones, out of bedrooms at night and plug-in devices by 9pm in a central location like the kitchen. Plan on social media breaks.
- ➔ **Monitor Use:** Set time restrictions on apps, use parental controls, and monitor all devices.
- ➔ **Discuss Why:** Unfettered Internet use and cyberbullying can quickly become dangerously harmful; technology can overwhelm the brain; can be addictive; and can leave users feeling lonely, disconnected, anxious and depressed.
- ➔ **Model Healthy Screen Time:** Keep mealtime tech-free, with no devices at the table for either parents or children. Limit yourself and your children to about one hour per day on social media, following the Goldilocks rule. Turn off all screens at least one hour before bedtime.
- ➔ **Cultivate Healthy Habits:** Schedule outdoor activities, in nature if possible, and encourage plenty of daily physical activity. Ensure kids are getting the recommended amount of sleep. Prioritize in-person connections.

REFERENCES:

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⁸ U.S. Surgeon General Advisory on Protecting Youth Mental Health. December 2021. <https://www.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/surgeon-general-youth-mental-health-advisory.pdf>

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¹² Centers for Disease Control Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS). Wisconsin 2019 results retrieved from: <https://nccd.cdc.gov/Youthonline/App/Results.aspx?LID=W1>

¹³ McCoy, Katherine. 2019 Wisconsin Youth Risk Behavior Summary Report. Madison: Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction, 2020.