Helping children and young people with MANAGING DEVICE STRESS AND ANXIETY

WHAT ARE THE RISKS?

LIVING ONLINE
The internet and advances in the capability of digital devices have afforded us arguably the fastest period of technological and social evolution in living memory, creating opportunities for us to interact with people anywhere in the world, 24 hours a day. It’s also, however, blurred safety boundaries and added new stresses for young people, who are often less aware of the hidden hazards. With almost half of 10-15-year-olds experiencing bullying online and algorithms pushing content in front of our children every day, it’s important to know how to address some of these challenges.

DIGITAL DEPENDENCY
As devices allow access to immediate external help in challenging situations, it’s a factor that some parents may not be developing the inner confidence to be able to sort things out for themselves. Likewise, group membership is largely important to young people – both in digital and ‘real’ life – and being excluded from online communities can cause damaging feelings of loneliness and isolation.

PUSHY NOTIFICATIONS
Content is also directed at us through notifications from our apps, letting us know we have a new message or social post to read, for example. While that’s useful in some circumstances, it conditions us to keep going back online (and it designates us as socially connected). Is there a near-constant demand on your child’s attention? As such alerts become more common, are we experiencing ‘an attack of the pings’?

BLURRED BOUNDARIES
There are now so many ways we can communicate online in real time (like instant messaging apps) or on social media (like Facebook), that it’s possible to be connected constantly. Using social media, people often prefer quicker exchange of text – but using fewer words can cause distressing miscommunications through the lack of non-verbal clues, facial expressions or tone of voice.

ADVICE FOR PARENTS & CARERS

LEARN THE BASICS
It’s impossible to keep up with every online change or new app. The best option is to make sure you are aware of all fundamentals of how the internet operates, so you can help your child to grasp how – and why – content reaches them. Linear and the internet are connected, so learning to understand them better will give you the confidence to talk to your child about them.

TALK IT OUT
If a child mentions a comment that’s been directed at them in a text chat or on social media, they may sound minor but can actually have a much bigger effect than we realise. In our evolved brains, any perceived threat can get internalised while your body reacts as if we were in physical danger – raising stress levels. It’s always worth encouraging your child to get any concerns out in the open.

LOOK FOR THE SIGNS
This is tricky – and may depend on the child’s age – but any sudden change in behaviour is worth looking into. If your child seems to be checking their phone or tablet more, doesn’t want to be parted from them, or appears uncooperative, anxious or withdrawn, it could be a sign that something is amiss in relation to their device – and, possibly, that they’re in need of extra support.

KEEP CHECKING IN
Healthy emotional regulation balances three systems: threat, drive and grounding. Down the rabbit hole of the internet, however, that balance can easily slip away – so it’s important to help your child manage their emotions when they’re online. Check in with them regularly when they’re on their device, and ask if they’re feeling good.

BE KIND: UNWIND
Be kind to yourselves as parents and carers. Remember that we’re all in the same boat, trying to stay safe and guide our children through this complex, fast-moving digital environment. Getting into the habit of having regular, informal conversations with your child about their online life (and yours) can also help you both to learn from each other.

Meet our Expert

Dr. Carolin Francis-Smith is an experienced counselling psychologist who specialises in parent coaching and workshops for communities. She consults with school and offers bespoke training to businesses and organisations, supporting positive and inspires digital citizenship by leading the way with strong educational skills, and engaging in a range of other hidden aspects of the virtual live-dom.

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