

INSIGHTS

Conquering kids' techno-tantrums



Many of us have witnessed our kids or teens emotionally combust when asked to switch off their gaming console or put their phone away. I colloquially call these 'techno-tantrums'. Many of us fret that this signals that they're 'addicted' to technology and find ourselves worrying about why they behave in such intense ways.

So, what makes technology so psychologically appealing for kids and how can we help them to unplug so that screen-time doesn't end in scream time?

Technology is so appealing

Technology has been intentionally designed to cater for our kids' most basic psychological drivers. As humans, our three most basic psychological needs are the need for connection, competence and control.

Technology caters for these needs in very clever ways. For example, our need for relational connection explains why many of our boys are obsessed with multi-player video games and girls are infatuated with social media. These online tools have also been designed to help young people experience competency- gamers see tangible measures of their performance by their levels of attainment, or battles won. Scrolling through YouTube and 'selecting' which video they'll watch next also enables young people to experience a sense of control and agency over their lives – something they biologically crave.

Here's what technology does to their brains and bodies

Digital technology impacts on children and young people in the following ways:

'It feels good'

When our kids use a screen it's usually a pleasurable experience for them. Their brains secrete the neurotransmitter dopamine, which makes them feel good. This means, when you demand that they turn the device off, you're terminating their production of dopamine (pleasure response). It's better to provide a choice of more appealing transition activities when you want them to move away from a screen. For example, suggest that they ride their bike, or walk the dog after they've switched off the device.

'I want more'

parenting * ideas

The online world has no stopping cues, so our kids and teen never feel 'complete' or 'done'. They can always refresh social media; continue to play to attain another level in a game; or watch another YouTube clip. This is also referred to as the state of insufficiency.

One parenting tip that works is to give your children and teens hard end points. Rather than giving them a quantity of time (for example, you can watch an hour of TV today), give them the finish time (for example, I'd like you to switch off the TV at 4:30pm).

'It's so novel'

Our brains are wired to seek out new and interesting stimulus. The online world is always instantly gratifying, fast-paced and requires minimal cognitive effort. In comparison the offline, real world doesn't always offer novelty. The real world is a lot slower-paced, and it's not always instantly rewarding and interesting like our kids' digital world.

Ensure your kids and teens have ample time to experience boredom. Our brains were never designed to be switched on and processing information as they are in the digital world. Opportunities for boredom allow the brain time to reset and help our kids become accustomed to not always being 'switched on'.



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Dr Kristy Goodwin is a digital wellbeing and performance speaker, author and researcher (and mum who also deals with her kids' techno-tantrums!). She's the author of Raising Your Child in a Digital World, and a media commentator who doesn't suggest that we ban the iPhone, or unplug the gaming console (digital abstinence isn't the solution). Kristy translates research into essential information and realistic strategies for parents to ensure kids and teens thrive in the digital world. For further details visit www.drkristygoodwin.com.