

Myths and Facts about Students and Screens

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Myth: Giving kids phones or computers improves their school success.

FACT: Unfortunately, kids tend to use computers, phones, and other digital devices primarily for entertainment, not learning purposes (1). So, it's not surprising that the more time kids spend using screens or phones – including computers, the internet, TV, video games, social media, or texting – the lower their academics grades (2). In fact, after about 30-45 minutes of total screen and texting time per day, kids' grades start to suffer (3). High-school age kids who spend 4 or more hours with screens per day have grades that are a full grade point lower, e.g., A- to a B-, than kids who spend 30 minutes or less per day with screens.

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: Children's engagement with reading and books is a powerful predictor of their school success (4), so expose kids to books early and often. And, as kids get older, help them study away from the distractions of computers, screens, and phones. If kids need to use computers for school, help them stay on track by having kids use them in a common area rather than their room, and employ monitoring software to help your child keep track of their off-task usage.

Myth: Students generally learn better using technology than “old-school” methods such as paper and pencil.

FACT: While many claim that immersing kids in technology improves educational outcomes, most objective studies show that technology either has no effect, hurts kids' learning success, or that limited tech use has better outcomes than tech immersion (5).

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: Many “old-school” learning methods help kids learn better than electronic devices. For example, evidence shows that print books teach kids to read, and read better, than the electronic versions (6). Limited use of certain technologies for older children, e.g., teaching a coding class in high school, makes more sense.

Myth: Students' regular use of screens during the school day improves their chances of employment in the 21st century economy.

FACT: With minor exceptions, students are certain to be exposed to enough technology at home and school without substituting technology for traditional teaching methods. The technology taught in school today is simple to use and unlikely to still be in use when they go out into the job market.

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: Students' future success will depend not on having learned particular applications, but rather having gained basic skills in logical thinking, mathematics, reading, writing, and group work.

Myth: Allowing the use of smartphones during the school day promotes students' academic success.

FACT: Students in high school who are allowed to use phones during the school day tend to receive lower test scores than students who aren't allowed to use phones during the school day (7).

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: Many private schools, recognizing the profound distraction of smartphones, don't allow students to have phones out during the school day. And, with an increasing number of public schools acknowledging that smartphones hurt kids' ability to focus, many public school students are also now required to not use phones during the school day (8).

Myth: A harmful digital divide exists because less advantaged kids don't have the same tech access as more advantaged kids.

FACT: Less advantaged kids now have about the same access to technology as more advantaged children, and it hasn't helped close income and racial achievement disparities (9). In truth, it's increasingly recognized that the truly harmful digital divide is the one describing the greater entertainment screen and phone use of low-income kids and children of color as compared with higher-income and white kids (10). We believe this to be a new but powerful factor in the lower levels of academic achievement in less advantaged as compared to more advantaged children. Indeed, private schools serving wealthier students employ less technology on average than their public school counterparts.

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: Less advantaged children need opportunities to learn important school skills away from the distractions of screens and phones.

Myth: Health concerns about screen time are overblown.

FACT: There is still much to be learned about the long-term health effects of screens on children, but there is evidence for exercising extreme caution. Overuse of screens has been shown to cause myopia in children (11) and contributes to macular degeneration (12). Excess screen use in general contributes to obesity (13), and use at night contributes to sleep deprivation (14). Alarming, evidence now indicates that screen use in children appears to interfere with normal brain development (15). And the more time kids – especially teen girls – spend with social media or smartphones and other digital devices, the more likely they are to be depressed or have suicide-related behaviors such as cutting (16).

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: Young children need free play and natural light to foster normal brain and eye development. Physical activity remains crucial for older children. Strong face-to-face connections with family, teachers, and friends are also critical to students' emotional wellbeing.

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