walking, or controlled stair climbing and the risk of falls increases. This is where many people fall intensity. Light activities can often be

Are my children addicted to social media?

BREAK FREE with OSCAR BAMUHIGIRE

Q Dear Counsellor, I gave some of my children smartphones, including the toddlers, but they are spending too much time on the phones, on social media and video games. Is this a sign of addiction? My friends think this kind of behaviour will cause depression and mental illness. Should I take away the phones from them?

Natali, Mengo



Children exposed to excessive screen time are more likely to develop social media addiction if they are not handled with caution

A: Dear Natali,
I would like to thank you for being concerned about your children's mental health, and for being cautious about their use of smartphones. The decision as to whether you should deprive your children of their smartphones or not should be determined by whether they are addicted to them or not.

One of the biggest mistakes parents make when it comes to smartphone use among children is their tendency to worry about how much time their children spend on their screens, rather than the problems they get from them. According to a new study, parents need to focus more, not on the time their children spend on their phones, but on whether their children are addicted to their phones. This kind of problem is not unique, because children's use of smartphones, social media, and video games, has risen, and caused a growing concern about screen time and its link to mental health concerns. In some cases, this has caused legislation, which has led to measures like phone bans in some schools. Most people, including parents, are more concerned about the time their children spend on their phones, but according to a study published this year in the journal JAMA, it's less about the time a child or teen spends on screens and more about whether technology use has become addictive.

In this study, children who described feeling addicted to their devices were found to be at a significantly higher risk for suicidal thoughts and behaviours. According to the study, that distinction is critical. It helps us to focus on quality and function of use over quantity.

The issue of addiction to one's phone is very serious, because of its tendency to cause mental illnesses, and to impair one's ability to function normally. Researchers in the new JAMA study looked at more than 4,200 adolescents, with an average age of 10, to look for the association between addictive screen use and suicidal behaviour or ideation, and other mental illnesses.

The study found that about one-third had become more addicted to social media by age 14; nearly a quarter suffered from mobile phone addiction; more than 40% showed more symptoms of addiction to video games. The researchers observed that addictive use of screens was linked to higher mental health risks, including anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts or behaviours.

Addictive use is "excessive use" that interferes with home responsibilities, schoolwork or other activities, said Prof. Yunyu Xiao, the lead study author and an assistant professor in the department of population health sciences and department of psychiatry at Weill Cornell Medical College in New York. "They find a craving for it and cannot stop using it."

Signs of smartphone addiction include:

- Spending a lot of time thinking about or planning the use of technology
- Feeling an urge to use the technology more and more
- Using technology to forget about problems
- Trying to cut back on using the technology without success
- Becoming restless or troubled when the technology is not accessible
- Using technology so much that it has a negative impact on school or work.

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