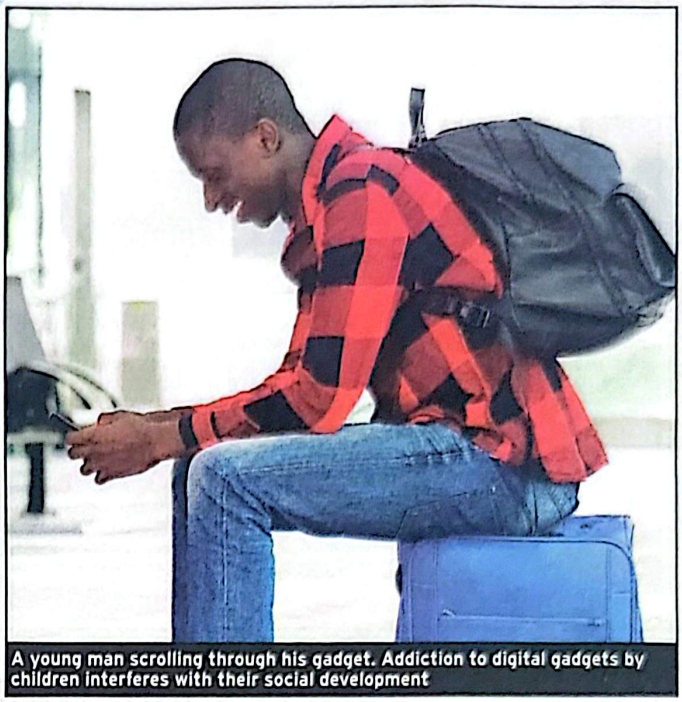
MONITOR

Help learners end addiction to gadgets this holiday



A young man scrolling through his gadget. Addiction to digital gadgets by children interferes with their social development

Reduce their screen time

At the moment, learners are enjoying their first term holidays and in many homes, digital gadgets have become their source of comfort and relaxation to the point of being addicted. According to parenting experts, such a phenomenon impedes a child's natural development, writes **MAUREEN NAKATUDDE.**

At the age of 10 in 2012, Davis Wasswa received a laptop from his father as a gift.

He got excited, but did not know that the gift would later become a point of addiction and a danger to his health.

After receiving the gadget, Wasswa installed games, such as GTA, Mad Raid and Down the Hill, which played all day, sometimes forgetting to take meals. He

"I was blinded by ignorance and lack of guidance on how to use the gadget. I spent entire days playing, unaware of how deeply the habit was taking hold," Wasswa, who is now 24 years old, says.

One night stands out clearly in his memory. He played, until dawn, not because he was not tired, but because he had bought a discounted night Internet bundle and did not want the data to go to waste.

"At this point, my father realised that I was addicted and tried to find ways of weaning me off the gadget," he says.

The war against Wasswa's addiction was not easy.

"My laptop broke down and my parents did not bother to repair it. At first, it was difficult for me to live without a laptop, but slowly I got used to the 'new normal.' I started focusing on other things. I don't play football, but I discovered board games like chess and scrabble, which I really enjoy. Those games kept me busy and helped me pass time," he says.

He says the days that followed saw him interact more with children in the neighbourhood, something he did not do when his laptop was up and running. "I even began attending Sunday school, something I never did when the laptop was working. The truth is, when I had the laptop, I was not interested in people, but once it was gone, I found myself connecting with them," he says.

With the increasing digital penetration of the country and smart phones going for as low as sh150,000, a number of homes in Uganda are struggling to get children off gadgets.

Julianne Mweheire, the director of content development and industry affairs at the Uganda Communications Commission (UCC), advises parents to sometimes withdraw gadgets from children so that they understand not being preoccupied with anything is fine.

She says the boredom that comes with not being pre-occupied with anything teaches children how to handle frustration and also be in charge of their emotions.

"If young children are constantly being stimulated by screens, they forget how to rely on themselves or others for entertainment. This leads to frustration and hinders imagination and motivation," Mweheire says.

Mweheire says when children spend too much time on the screen unsupervised, they are at a greater risk of exposure to inappropriate content and they can fall prey to unsolicited sexual innuendos like on-line pornography and indecent images. Instead of keeping that innocence, Mweheire notes that the children view nudity as normal. It is not surprising that some can copy the way others dress.

According to the 2019, UCC report, one in every five children see sexual images in Uganda. The report further indicates that 40% of children in urban areas have been exposed to sexual images and have also faced on-line sexual harassment

Owens Mwesigye, a digital marketing expert, says children of all ages easily get addicted to games, videos and betting, which impedes their social progression.

"Those gadgets can become addictive, just like the way an individual gets addicted to drugs," he says. He adds that unlike traditional media where the content is regulated and edited, the Internet is open and any one can post anything whether good or bad — indecent images, fake news, location tracking, cyber bulling, etc.

When not well-handled, Mwesigye says that too much exposure to screens can lead to children being impulsive. He says habits, such as shouting to other people can be as a result of playing violent video games.

"In real life, friends and the people we associate with become our teachers or role models. The same applies to screens," he says.

FOLLOWING WRONG INFLUENCERS

Instead of children being influenced by the right people, such as parents and teachers, social media personalities of questionable character end up becoming their role models.

"When children are on-line, they are unable to distinguish between what is right and wrong. There are many people with selfish agendas on the Internet. That is why the parents' guidance is crucial."

Moses Ssemakula, a clinical psychologist at the Integrative Centre for Mental Health Uganda, says, with increased access to digital media, children are being exposed to screens at much younger ages, increasing the risk of developing unhealthy and addictive patterns of use.

Screen addiction occurs when a child uses digital technology excessively to the point of

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