

Pathway Linking Early Use of Electronic Device and Psychosocial Wellbeing in Early Childhood

Authors : Rosa S. Wong, Keith T.S. Tung, Winnie W. Y. Tso, King-Wa Fu, Nirmala Rao, Patrick Ip

Abstract : Electronic devices have become an essential part of our lives. Various reports have highlighted the alarming usage of electronic devices at early ages and its long-term developmental consequences. More sedentary screen time was associated with increased adiposity, worse cognitive and motor development, and psychosocial health. Apart from the problems caused by children's own screen time, parents today are often paying less attention to their children due to hand-held device. Some anecdotes suggest that distracted parenting has negative impact on parent-child relationship. This study examined whether distracted parenting detrimentally affected parent-child activities which may, in turn, impair children's psychosocial health. In 2018/19, we recruited a cohort of preschoolers from 32 local kindergartens in Tin Shui Wai and Sham Shui Po for a 5-year programme aiming to build stronger foundations for children from disadvantaged backgrounds through an integrated support model involving medical, education and social service sectors. A comprehensive set of questionnaires were used to survey parents on their frequency of being distracted while parenting and their frequency of learning and recreational activities with children. Furthermore, they were asked to report children's screen time amount and their psychosocial problems. Mediation analyses were performed to test the direct and indirect effects of electronic device-distracted parenting on children's psychosocial problems. This study recruited 873 children (448 females and 425 males, average age: 3.42 ± 0.35). Longer screen time was associated with more psychosocial difficulties (Adjusted $B=0.37$, 95%CI: 0.12 to 0.62, $p=0.004$). Children's screen time positively correlated with electronic device-distracted parenting ($r=0.369$, $p < 0.01$). We also found that electronic device-distracted parenting was associated with more hyperactive/inattentive problems (Adjusted $B=0.66$, $p < 0.01$), fewer prosocial behavior (Adjusted $B=-0.74$, $p < 0.01$), and more emotional symptoms (Adjusted $B=0.61$, $p < 0.001$) in children. Further analyses showed that electronic device-distracted parenting exerted influences both directly and indirectly through parent-child interactions but to different extent depending upon the outcome under investigation (38.8% for hyperactivity/inattention, 31.3% for prosocial behavior, and 15.6% for emotional symptoms). We found that parents' use of devices and children's own screen time both have negative effects on children's psychosocial health. It is important for parents to set "device-free times" each day so as to ensure enough relaxed downtime for connecting with children and responding to their needs.

Keywords : early childhood, electronic device, psychosocial wellbeing, parenting

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