Effects of Technology on Youth and Establishing Best Practices

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Abstract

Technology and media have a significant adverse effect on youth today. As youth spend more time on electronic devices and media consumption, these negative effects increase. While much research is available concerning the negative effects of technology, many parents and youth development leaders struggle to address these problems. Best practices for electronics and media consumption need to be developed; however, more research is needed to identify these best practices and what impact they could have on youth and technology.

Keywords: youth, technology, best practices, media, effects

Effects of Technology on Youth and Children and Establishing Best Practices

Children and youth today are exposed to an ever-increasing amount of technology in their everyday lives. As the accessibility to these technologies increase, the access and exposure to greater amounts of information increase proportionally. Additionally, children are being exposed to these technologies and information at an increasingly younger age. With children and youth being influenced by technology and information in this manner, can youth development leaders begin to develop best practices for computers, mobile computing devices, and media consumption devices? With the development of these best practices, how can youth development leaders reconcile the negative effects of these technologies with the positive educational and social impacts? As exposure to electronic devices increases, the answer to these questions may have a significant impact on children and youth in coming years.

Summary of Relevant Readings and/or Research

Youth Exposure to Technology and Media

Perhaps one of the most significant aspects of technology, as it relates to children and youth, is the overall amount of time that is spent using them. Research shows that youth spend between 7 and 11 hours per day consuming some type of media (Strasburger, Jordan, & Donnerstein, 2012). A recent Kaiser Family Foundation survey put the average daily media consumption of youth at 6 hours and 21 minutes (Ray & Jat, 2010). From this research, we can conclude that sleep may the only activity that may still outweigh the amount of time spent on media consumption. While many devices exist by which youth can consume media, television still remains the most predominant. Additionally, if a television resides in a child's room the amount of media consumption rises to more than 11 hours per day. When children have at least three electronic devices in their bedroom, they sleep an average of 45 minutes less than those

with no devices in their bedroom (Calamaro, Yang, Ratcliffe, & Chasens, 2012). This is especially troubling when we consider that over 42% of children 8 years old and younger have a television in their bedroom (Strasburger et al., 2012). Based on the increase in the level of exposure over past decade, we can only assume that this trend will continue. With so many options, it is no wonder that over 80% of youth today currently own some sort of device for media consumption (Ray & Jat, 2010). While television may still top the list of most used devices, Internet media consumption is not far behind. American 18-year-olds spend nearly 40 hours per week in Internet consumption from home computers alone (Strasburger et al., 2012). This is even more disconcerting when one realizes that this statistic does not include mobile devices. From a survey taken in 2009, we know that 70% of 12- to 17-year-olds owned a cell phone (Strasburger et al., 2012). It may seem that youth would simply run out of time to consume any more information, until you consider how often youth today multitask. While older youth are using electronic devices at an extremely high rate, it is important to note that children and youth of all ages are participating in the usage of these devices. It has been reported that the Apple app store lists over 5,000 apps that are marketed to toddlers and over 1,000 apps that target newborns (Ernest, Causey, Newton, Sharkins, Summerlin, & Albaiz, 2014).

Effects of Technology and Media on Youth

With the level of exposure so great, what effects have been observed through researching the topic of youth and technology? Unfortunately, the documented negative effects of technology on youth are abundant. However, it is encouraging to note that many of the negative effects are identified and well researched, which should be of great assistance in the establishment of best practices. It would be impossible to include a comprehensive list of these negative effects in this paper, but it will be important to include a broad overview for

consideration. I have grouped these factors into four categories: imitation, violence, obesity, and sexual pervasiveness.

Younger children who observe negative behaviors in media are more likely to be influenced by these behaviors, as they are not yet able to understand the distinction between fantasy and reality. Additionally, they are also at an increased risk of imitating negative behaviors (Ray & Jat, 2010). While these effects should be considered, it is also important to note that in 2013, Plowman and McPake state that their research showed that technology did not influence the day-to-day life of 3 to 4-year-old children as much as we may think.

Youth in India showed an increased likelihood to exhibit suicidal behavior when exposed to television. It has also been shown that excessive amount of television watching increases the risk of depression in young adults (Ray & Jat, 2010). Additionally, violence has been linked to television consumption through many studies, so much so that the link seems to be commonly accepted as a health risk. In "Children, Adolescents, and the Media: Health Effects," the correlation coefficient between media violence and aggression is only .08 less than that of the correlation coefficient between smoking and lung cancer (Strasburger et al., 2012). In other words, it has been proven that violence in the media is one of the causes of youth violence.

There is also a significant link between childhood obesity and electronics. A 2001 research study on childhood obesity stated that each additional hour of television viewing per week increased the risk of obesity by 2% (Dietz & Gortmaker, 2001). Also, there was nearly a 2-fold increase in the risk of obesity for every hour that youth spent playing games on an electronic device (Ray & Jat, 2010).

Sexual content is an additional concern also, as it relates to youth and electronics. This is particularly pervasive in electronic media. Research now shows that programming directed at

teen audiences has more sexual content than adult programming. In as early as 2001, studies showed that 30% of teenage girls had seen an X-rated movie in the past 3 months, and longitudinal studies show that the risk of early sexual intercourse seems to double when youth are exposed to large amounts of sexual content (Strasburger et al., 2012).

The list of negative effects of media on youth is significant and too extensive to fully cover. While this list is not exhaustive, Farber, Shafron, Hamadani, Wald, & Nitzburg, (2012) state, "depression, sleep deprivation, social anxiety, aggression, Internet addiction, social isolation, and susceptibility to the influence of online advertising have all been noted as potential consequences of adolescent social media usage."

While the list of negative effects is great, electronics and media can also play a positive role in youth development. Research shows that when video games that teach positive behaviors are played, youth respond with positive outcomes. In Japan, students that were asked to play more prosocial games reported greater prosocial behaviors in the following months (Strasburger et al., 2012). These types of outcomes require that we frame our opinion on media and technology around the potential effect on behaviors and not just on the negative effects. Technology is a tool and forward-thinking youth development leaders must recognize them as such so that they can create positive outcomes.

To gain a greater understanding of the issue, it is also important to note some of the theories that relate to the effect media can have on youth. Three notable theories are the Social Learning Theory, the Script Theory, and the "Super Peer" Theory (Strasburger et al., 2012). While all of these theories have individual merit, the over-arching theme that connects these theories is the assumption that television is a means by which youth can learn behavior. For this paper, it is most important to note that while differing opinions exist concerning the means by

which the influencing takes place, it is generally accepted that the influence of media on youth is real and substantive.

Addressing the Issue

When so much research is available concerning the negative effects of technology, why do parents and youth development leaders do such a poor job at addressing the problems? There are many theories surrounding this question, as well. Many would argue laziness and apathy are the main cause, but Cynthia Hoffner proposes another interesting theory. Hoffner calls it the "third-person effect" (Hoffner, 2006, p. 283). This refers to a phenomenon that may cause parents to believe that the negative effects of technology and media could have an effect on others, but not on themselves or their families. Hoffner (2006) specifically noted that participants in the study, "showed much less willingness to admit effects on their own aggressive tendencies than on their own mean world perceptions" (p. 194). Perhaps this could provide some insight as to why parents and youth development leaders have a strong tendency to ignore problems that are related to youth and technology.

Analysis of Weakness and Gaps in Research

While there has been much research in the area of media and technology as it relates to youth, some important issues still need to be addressed. For instance, what would be the effect of limiting time spent on electronics and content of media for youth at specific ages? To what extent should limitations be administered before positive outcomes would be observed? As previously mentioned, research shows that positive outcomes can be achieved when youth observe positive content on electronic devices. However, can schools and youth developers provide enough competitive positive content to compete with the negative content that exists and is being created? Additionally, parents are the front-line defense for youth related to setting

boundaries for their media consumption. Should more research be done on how educating parents about the dangers of electronic media and communication may affect the limitations that those parents place on children? We should also work to determine if companies are providing parents with the proper tools to limit content and time and devices and if parents are well informed enough to use those tools if they exist. What role should the government play in restriction of content that youth can access? Also, what will be the future anticipated increase in healthcare cost if the problem is not addressed soon? What effect does technology have on students' ability to learn soft skills when increasing amounts of their interactions are online or on mobile communication devices? While much research has been done to identify the problems with youth and technology, we must move toward research that will identify proven solutions.

Conclusion

The negative effects that technology is having on youth are widespread and easily identifiable. Research continues to confirm these negative effects and prove that they are increasing at an alarming rate. Given that access to computer-based technologies and mobile devices will only increase in the future, youth development leaders must create action steps and best practices to help counteract the negative effects of these technologies. While some organizations have identified some action items, such as limiting screen time and monitoring content, parents continue to fall behind in the area of supervision and creating limits for children. I recommend creating a council of parents, youth development leaders, and researchers that could define the problems, create best practices, and implement programming that would be a resource to parents and youth. By combining quality researchers with youth development leaders that can create quality programming, we could better assist parents in this endeavor. It is important to close the gap between research and solutions and provide communities with the

tools they need to succeed. Once created, we could begin to shift research and research dollars from the identification of the problems toward the improvement of the programs that we create. While some of the solutions to technology are easy to understand, such as limiting screen time, other solutions are more complex. For instance, parents may know that they need to set content limits on devices for their children, but may also need training on how to accomplish the task. Those types of issues that require training and continuing education could be addressed by these programs and then studied for effectiveness. Since many of the negative issues are related to morality issues, programs could partner with churches to help reach the desired audiences.

While there are many ways that we can begin to address the problems of technology and youth, the most important thing we can do is to get personally involved. As youth development leaders, we must find the ways that we can have a positive effect on the youth that we impact and use our individual strengths to become part of the solution. While the problem is widespread and can feel daunting, we must realize that change begins at home and we can all make a difference.

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