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COVID-19 and Child Health, Special Aspects

There are countless benefits of using technology in today's world, where almost everything is based on it. All, including children, are seen equipped with devices like cell phones, ipads, tablets, TVs, etc. Since COVID-19 became a pandemic in March 2020,¹ it has greatly affected lives, forcing people to be locked down at homes. Stress and anxiety are increasingly seen in adults and children as well. This situation had adverse effects on mental and physical health on a large scale. One of these effects was the drastic increase in the time spent on screen use by all, especially children. The main risk factors were staying away from schools, restricted outdoor activities, mandatory online classes and poor parenting practices.²⁻⁴ Children and adolescents were seen to be affected more having screen time approximately 5-8 hours/day, much higher than the American Academy of Pediatrics recommendations of 2 hours or less/day. While some children love to watch TV excessively, others are addicted to exploring internet or playing online games, whereas still some use multiple gadgets for the same purpose.

Excessive exposure to electronic devices can affect physical as well as developmental health. Children are more likely to be prone to these hazards. Evidence shows negative effects in the form of obesity linked to decreased physical activity,⁵ poor cognition and school performance,⁶ visual problems, psychosocial behavior disorders like depression, ADHD, etc.⁷ One important aspect affected most is sleep as well which can result in hypertension and various cardiovascular diseases.⁸ Most of the above stated problems have been seen to be somehow linked to youth sleep quality.⁹

Being restricted at homes during the pandemic, adults and children were prone to increased screen time. A study conducted in a teaching hospital in Lahore by Ijaz and Ijaz is being published in this issue. It reveals association between excessive screen use during the pandemic and sleep disorders in children. 6-10 years old children were affected the most. This is the most vulnerable age when keeping mobiles, exploring them and using them most of the time becomes a habit. It is not limited to this age, rather leads to excessive screen use in adulthood too. Studies show that screen use increases with growing age in preadolescents and disrupts both quality as well as duration of sleep.¹⁰ Compromized sleep quality was in form of altered sleep behavior, bedtime and wake up habits. They slept late, woke up even later, remaining tired and restless the whole day. Hale and others reported similar results.⁸ Some reasons for this association included screen use just before bedtime causing melatonin suppression, TVs placed in bedrooms¹¹ and time displacement with more time spent on screen and lesser for sleep.

As the pandemic continues invariably, partial home confinement and resulting excessive screen use shall be unavoidable both by adults and ultimately by children, as it seems to be a major source of relieving stress. The risk to children's eyesight as well as mental and physical health being affected would also continue, rather increase in parallel to screen use. Measures need to be taken to limit screen time in children as much as possible, encouraging healthy sleep habits and preventing the hazards of poor sleep quality. Firstly, screen time should be restricted and rules should be set for children including no TVs in bedrooms or use of any media before sleep. Secondly, parents should be encouraged to restrict their own media use as well and set 'family-time', as children's habits often reflect

parents' habits. Parents are the closest and best source for changing their children's routine. Thirdly, children should be engaged more in physical activities like playing sports together, baking or reading healthy books. Fourth, pediatricians should include questions regarding media use at every well-child visit. Fifth, further research may be carried out in future regarding children screen use and its effects. Sixth, children's eyesight should be screened regularly for any visual problems. School authorities should also be involved to provide guidelines for children regarding safe and limited use of screen time.

Thus screen time should not, at any cost, replace sleep or physical activity, both being necessary for a child's healthy growth and development.

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