LETTER TO EDITOR

Behavioural shifts in toddlers: the consequences of early mobile phone usage

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Dear Editor,

I am writing to raise awareness about an issue in early childhood development: the impact of mobile phone usage on behaviour and development in children under five years old. With mobile devices becoming ubiquitous in our lives, understanding their influence on very young children is crucial for promoting healthy development and behaviour.

The Growing Concern: In recent years, mobile phones and tablets have become common tools for parents seeking to entertain or calm their young children. While these devices can offer educational content and facilitate connectivity, their effects on the developmental trajectories of children under five are increasingly concerning. Research indicates that early and excessive screen time can have profound implications for cognitive, social, and emotional development.

Cognitive Development: A significant body of research suggests that prolonged exposure to screens can negatively affect attention span, delay in language development, and overall cognitive skills (1). The American Academy of Paediatrics (AAP) recommends that children under 18 months should avoid screen time altogether, except for video chatting, to ensure they have ample opportunities for interactive and exploratory play that is crucial for cognitive development (2).

Furthermore, a study done in Canada have demonstrated that in 18-month-old children, an increase in 30 minutes per day in mobile media device use was associated with a 2.3 times increased risk of parent-reported expressive speech delay (3). These cognitive challenges can have lasting effects on a child's academic performance and problem-solving abilities.

Behavioural Implications: The influence of screen time on behaviour is another critical area of concern. A study done in Japan have found that children who engage in extensive screen time exhibit higher levels of aggression and poorer social interactions with family and friends that benefits the development of social competence compared to their peers who have limited screen exposure (4).

Moreover, the interactive nature of many mobile applications and games can sometimes foster compulsive behaviours, where children become increasingly dependent on screen-based rewards. This dependency can impact their ability to engage in non-digital activities and affect their social interactions with peers and caregivers.

Social and Emotional Development: Mobile phone usage also raises concerns about social and emotional development. Face-to-face interactions are crucial for developing empathy, emotional regulation, and social skills. A study done to find the association between mobile technology use and child adjustment have that excessive screen time can limit opportunities for children to engage in meaningful interactions with family members and peers, thereby affecting their emotional and social growth (4).

Additionally, studies have highlighted that mobile devices can interfere with sleep patterns in young children. The blue light emitted from screens can disrupt circadian rhythms, leading to difficulties falling asleep and obtaining sufficient rest (5).
Guidance and Recommendations

Conclusion

In conclusion, while mobile phones and tablets can offer convenience and educational benefits, their impact on very young children's development and behaviour cannot be overlooked. Evidence suggests that excessive screen time can negatively affect cognitive abilities, behavioural patterns, and social and emotional development. By adhering to established guidelines and fostering a balanced approach to screen use, we can better support the healthy growth and development of our youngest generations.

Recommendation

Given these concerns, it is essential for parents, caregivers, and policymakers to establish and follow guidelines for mobile phone usage among children under five. The AAP provides clear recommendations, suggesting that children aged 18 to 24 months should have only very limited screen time, and children aged 2 to 5 years should have no more than one hour of high-quality programming per day (2). It is also crucial that screen time is balanced with other activities, such as physical play, reading, and interactive, non-screen-based activities that foster cognitive and social skills.
Parents role in child mobile usage: Parents should ensure that the content your child is exposed is age appropriate. Setting a positive example by managing your screen time and engaging in other activities as well. Encourage your child to spend time with family and friends in person. Parents should also be encouraged to engage in shared media experiences, where they actively participate with their children during screen time. This approach helps ensure that the content is educational and appropriate and provides opportunities for discussion and interaction.

Authors Contribution

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