



SPECIALIST OPINION

TAMING THE TECH EFFECT:

USING TECH AS AN ALLY IN THE SCHOOL CULTURE

BY CATHERINE STEINER-ADAIR

WE ARE AT A PIVOTAL MOMENT IN OUR SOCIETY'S USE OF THE INTERNET, SMARTPHONES AND SOCIAL MEDIA. THIS IS ESPECIALLY TRUE IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AS NEW RESEARCH HAS DISCOVERED THE NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF TECHNOLOGY ON CHILD DEVELOPMENT.

Schools are increasingly banning smartphones in schools, based on research about how digitally disruptive they are. But smartphones are only one piece of the digital-age dilemma facing schools. A ban alone doesn't solve the underlying problem.

Our children (like the rest of us) need to learn how to manage their relationship with technology. As schools and as educators, that is our challenge, too. We need to manage our relationship with technology so that it serves the best interests of our students.

How can we maximise meaningful interactions in an increasingly digital world and use technology to transform education? How can we minimise overuse, and address unhealthy messages and behaviour borne from online culture?

WHAT WE KNOW FROM RESEARCH

We, understandably, have included tech into practically every aspect of school life – classrooms, hallways, dining halls, quads, homework, and how we learn – before we had any research on the impact of these choices. But emerging research suggests that, as educators, we must now think about the tension between “doing no harm” and what is pedagogically most advantageous for our students.

WHAT DOES NEW SCIENCE TELL US?

Research reports indicate that:

- Too much screen time is physically and cognitively unhealthy.
- A negative impact on cognitive ability and attention is associated with some common ways schools are using tech for learning.
- As we learn more about the way the brain works with smartphones, research says that students' ability to be mindfully present with peers and their environment is diminished, and that texting throughout the day impairs processing, memory and focus.
- There has been a steady increase in psychological distress in students that coincides with students increasing use of social media, as well as a decline in empathy, social confidence and healthy dating.

- Misogyny, racism, social cruelty and bullying are common tropes in the online world and have a negative impact on the psychological well-being of children and adolescents.
- Inadequate sleep is an increasing problem as students spend more time on tech than any other activity, including sleep.

New science and each wave of tech innovations put a finer point on the questions we must address:

- How can we mitigate the negative impact of smartphones on students' social and educational engagement during the school day, and outside of school?
- Are we nurturing the kinds of brains and hearts that we want to develop, with the capacity for social and emotional intelligence, ethical and moral decision-making?
- How do we, as educators, respond to research on the increase in psychological distress in our students, including anxiety and depression, and the role that excessive tech and social media use play in it?

EVIDENCE-BASED STRATEGIES THAT MAKE GOOD SENSE.

So many different tensions have schools grappling with questions of best practice. Since writing *The Big Disconnect*, I've been travelling the world helping schools address key issues and challenges. Every school's culture is unique, and the answers to these questions will vary for that reason. But in some essential ways

the challenge is the same. Evidence-based strategies can help us make effective decisions as we develop policies, programmes and a school culture and curriculum that embrace the best of tech. We need to use tech to support – not replace – the personal presence; we know that human interaction is vital in teaching and learning.

Responsible use of technology and fostering an ethos of digital citizenship would be an important start, but we have to go much deeper and broader. We need to consider what additional tools students need today to thrive as learners and to stay psychologically healthy in this tech-infused world.

This is necessarily an expansive conversation and fertile ground for debate as school leadership, faculty, students, parents and others in the school community seek common ground based on common values. In my experience working in schools across the US and internationally, the following steps provide the essential foundation for productive conversation and effective action:

Conduct a comprehensive technology audit or inventory. You need an accurate picture of the tech environment as it exists in your school. A thorough technology audit or inventory establishes an understanding of how, and how much, your students use screens. This includes all types of media and tech for school-related use, both during the school day and for homework. It requires an understanding of how that figure multiplies when a student is multitasking for school, social and other personal use.

AS EDUCATORS WE MUST CONSTANTLY THINK ABOUT THE TENSION BETWEEN DOING NO HARM AND WHAT IS PEDAGOGICALLY MOST ADVANTAGEOUS FOR OUR STUDENTS.

You need to evaluate how every component of school has changed, for better or worse. This includes classroom instruction and climate, hallways and passing periods, cafeteria, campus gathering places, faculty meetings, class trips, homework, weekends, and all the permutations of relationships between students, faculty and parents. Do you have a tech philosophy that is tied to your mission? How do you create, roll out and enforce your responsible use agreement?

Review core curriculum to identify new ways to fully integrate tech-rich and tech-free learning. From kindergarten through high school, more than ever, students need a strong grounding in social-emotional learning in the digital age. This will help them better prepare to engage fully in the world face-to-face, and use tech effectively (and enjoyably) to enhance learning and the richest human experience.

From kindergarten onward, routinely and not just in occasional classes, students need scope and sequenced lessons and practice in SEL, face-to-face communication and the art of difficult conversations, active listening, problem solving, diversity, equity and inclusion, ethics, and leadership education, so that they have the capacity for self-regulation and skills. They need this to be able to not just learn about different identities, but actually feel competent and confident having all kinds of conversations.

Make Advisory meaningful and relevant.

Traditional models of Advisory are inadequate to meet the needs of today's students. How can we rethink Advisory as a place where students can help each other deal with all of the issues that come up between how they relate at school versus online? This often involves reimagining the role of Advisory as a place where students practice the SEL tools they can apply to difficult conversations about social media, their life online, diversity and inclusion.

Students tell me that there's no place in school where they learn how to talk with each other about what happens online without the risk that it will turn into a disciplinary situation that can quickly escalate to extreme consequences. While all schools offer conversations with counsellors, and caring adults, what's missing from this picture is a sanctuary, a seminar or an approach to Advisory where kids can help each other think about how to solve the problems that come up online, practice learning how to listen to different perspectives and not shy away from difficult conversations. They need to be able to talk honestly - not in euphemisms - about the impact of the scary or hateful content they see, share and spread online.

WE ALL NEED HELP

Students everywhere are asking for help understanding their own lives, the social worlds they inhabit online and offline, and the political world they live in. There is a big disconnect between who they are in class and how they connect online, between the values in school and the values in media and politics. Not surprisingly, schools and colleges are reporting a spike in mental health referrals and disciplinary cases. We can respond to the mental health crisis in today's students and prepare them to be resilient, compassionate and ethical leaders in the digital age, but educators must face up to the challenge. Students need to learn about their brains on tech, the psychological fallout of tech, identification prevention and how to get help with anxiety and depression, mindfulness and self-regulation practices, tech health and well-being. Schools also need to move beyond current approaches to counselling, advisory and the occasional health class, to an integrated philosophical and pedagogical approach that supports the psychological resilience and digital wellbeing of students, and is embedded in school mission, culture and curriculum.

Parents need your help too. Schools can do more parent education and outreach, so parents are supported, informed and don't feel so clueless and anxious about how their children are using tech during the school day. Share best practices for family responsible use agreements at home. More and more schools are helping parents by recommending increasingly specific approaches to managing tech at home, as well as offering (and sometimes requiring) ongoing parent education about social media, and best practices for tech health and wellbeing at home.

For educators, the questions about technology are serious and very complicated, but ultimately, for this generation it is going to be the tools - not simply the knowledge of science and technology, but the tools of their humanity - that will determine how this generation lives in the future. And it is our job as educators to give them lessons and practices that prepare them to utilise technology in tandem with compassion, empathy and sense of stewardship, not just for themselves, their school and their country, but for the world and the planet.



THE AUTHOR

Dr Catherine Steiner-Adair is an internationally recognised clinical psychologist, school consultant and award-winning author. She helps schools figure out how to use tech as an ally to enhance learning, culture and connection while mitigating tech's negative impact and preserving the benefits of an offline environment. More information at www.csadair.com