



Smart Phone Addiction

Can School Communities Find an Answer?

By Wilson McCaskill

Former prime minister and chair of advocacy group Beyond Blue, Julia Gillard said eight million working days were lost to mental ill-health in Australia each year and called for teachers to be given more support to better understand issues among their students. One in every seven children has some form of mental difficulty. She said there was a lot that was unknown about today's children and young people, particularly when it came to new technologies, such as how much screen time and social media interaction was "enough".

(Sarah Ison, The West Australian Newspaper)

There's not a day passes without us being informed, through many different mediums, that smartphones are creating havoc in families, individuals, communities, schools, relationships and more. Millions are being spent on research to prove that this global addiction is doing us all harm in so many ways. Yet, for all this overwhelming evidence very few can resist the addictive pull of their phone and make any significant reduction in its usage.

Children with parents who aren't phone addicts are few and far between. Mums and dads must have smartphones to receive notifications from their child's school and without one they are more than out of the loop, they are out of every loop. Disturbingly, once connected to one digital loop they will soon be enticed into a binding relationship with other loops (such is the nature of loops) until eventually, even the most addiction resistant parents wake up to find that the first thing they reach for in the morning is their phone. If their children have a phone, and it is very likely they do, they too will have reached for it first thing to ensure that the Snapchats they were having under the blankets in the wee small hours have not moved on too far without them.

Mental health experts, social commentators, researchers, educators and many others are worried about the documented damage this smartphone addiction is causing to children, and the younger the children the greater the worry. Whilst all agree that smartphones are an indispensable and necessary part of life, leisure and business, too many fail to acknowledge the alarming degree of their own addiction and the rate at which their addiction is growing – preferring to point the finger at young mums and dads and their children.

Smartphone addicts, like addicts in general, tend to think they have their addiction under control. Sadly, few addicts beat addiction without first acknowledging their addiction, but in a time of global smartphone addiction, being an addict is nothing more or less than be entirely normal...so by implication, addiction is the new normal and that being the case, worrying about this addiction is little more than a predictable and misinformed resistance to change from those dinosaurs who need to get with the program.



Oh sure, information about the multi layered, quickly escalating damage of phone addiction is everywhere and yes, the stats and facts are deeply troubling but underlying our worry is knowing that those who are informing us are as addicted as we are. We know they won't close their Facebook page or terminate their Twitter account or reduce their use of Snapchat, Instagram or the number of apps that guide their lives or curtail the news feeds that feed their dependency. To do so would diminish their digital footprint and it is that footprint that tells them, as it tells us, that they are in the middle of the here and now – that are in the present, in the moment, connected. It's the new digital age and smartphone addiction equals connection and if the argument is that the reverse is true, then someone does not understand the twenty first century meaning of connection.

Let's get back to children. Their brains are being rewired by excessive screen time and their behaviour is confusing and deeply worrying to those of us whose early development was shaped without digital devices in our hands or those of the adults who cared for us. If you are a young, iGen teacher (born after 1995) the daily evidence of challenging and unpredictable behaviour will have you just as worried as those teachers whose own kids left home years ago. The only difference might be that you are more readily drawn towards punitive measures to control disruptive behaviour and you feel more slighted by blatant disrespect than your older colleagues. After all you are a teacher and you are entitled to teach without opposition, especially from a child who feels equally entitled to do as they feel, whenever they feel it.

You might also find yourself frequently protesting to a higher authority about the injustice of being treated poorly and be seeking constant reassurance that you're doing a good job in a difficult situation; a situation that's causing you unfair and intolerable stress and anxiety. You can easily remember your primary and high school years and are certain your behaviour was significantly better than the kids you are currently teaching. Kids who surprisingly, are less than two decades younger than you. You might also spend a lot of time searching on your phone for teacher tips that promise to make your classroom more manageable and your teaching more rewarding. This is an endless search because the tips proposed so often have a short shelf life, if they even work at all.

Educators are scrambling for solutions, protocols, strategies and directives that will help classrooms of children, adversely modified by their near constant immersion in the dopamine bath of today's digital world, raise their heads and benefit from more face time and less screen time.

It may be wise to remember that most addictions are not beaten by regulating use but by total abstinence. The only way to beat alcoholism is not to drink too much but to never drink alcohol again. So it is with drugs.

With smartphone addiction, abstinence is not an option for countless obvious reasons. This makes regulation the only pathway to beating the addiction. However, there are very few examples of severe addiction being beaten by anything other than total abstinence. I suspect that for regulation to work it will need a community of people motivating and supporting each other to all regulate at the same time, for a long time.



Weight loss is easier if others are losing weight with you, getting fit is easier if others are training with you and dating is easier if everyone else on the site is looking for love as well.

The best answer to this addiction problem may be to take a page out of the recycling handbook and *think globally while acting locally* and devise your own school community response to the problem. The important first step may also be to publicly admit that smartphone/screen addiction is indeed a whole school community issue, not just a student issue.

Finding out if a whole school community can work together to regulate their smartphone/screen addiction will need everyone willingly activating their phone's screen time monitoring capability and submitting that data on a regular basis. Tabulating that information to show individual classroom improvements as well as a whole school improvement may serve to motivate students and staff until regulation becomes an entrenched habit – a little like monitoring your weight and improvements in muscle mass and body dimensions helps you to achieve your weight loss and fitness goals. I suspect it will take the commitment of an entire school community to help every individual resist the addictive pull of dopamine.

As an aside, please consider this; if every time you activated your phone you took a swig of alcohol from a hip flask or bottle in you bag, how long would it be before you are too drunk to drive? If you took an extra swig for every three continuous minutes you engaged with your smartphone phone, with your first swig starting when you woke up, would you make it to lunch? If you would, is that still the case on the weekend?

It is well recognised that it is easier to change an entrenched habit of behaviour by substituting it with another than to simply stop the behaviour. In other words, if you always turn to booze in the late afternoon then going for a walk with a mate at that time breaks the habit.

This suggests that providing alternatives to screen engagement that require face-on-face communication, collaboration, cooperation and creativity may not only help wean children and adults off their addiction, but also build the skills necessary to maintain the healthy and appropriate use of digital devices. These skills are of course essential in all aspects of life and learning, so the more they are strengthened the more far reaching the benefits.

Classroom life has many opportunities, if not requirements, for students to work with one another, although increasingly this occurs while using a device of one sort or another or while gathered around an interactive white board. Students communicating, collaborating, cooperating and creating in pairs or groups, large and small, with nothing more than themselves or the tools of old is becoming steadily less common: most likely because teachers are seeing no justification for it.

To ensure more time is spent in device free environments/experiences to assist in the regulation of addiction, it may be necessary to create opportunities like chat clubs,



board game lunch breaks or perhaps global games gatherings that expose children to games like marbles, knuckles, skipping, elastics, clapping games, card games, balls bouncing off walls, balls in stockings and many others. Doing so may increase the risk of arguing, getting grazed or feeling less skilled than others, which for some schools and parents will be reason enough not to consider their many benefits.

All of this will naturally take time, and as no classroom time is available these pattern-changing opportunities will need to occur in free time. This will, undoubtedly, call for parent help and participation so that staff are not even more overloaded; not an easy proposition but just perhaps, real communities rise up in the face of a crisis and smartphone addiction is indisputably a behaviour-altering community crisis.

Once these game and activities are introduced and enjoyed by adults and children, they might become an everyday part of the playground experience and provide the skills, alternative interests, motivation and enjoyment to decrease the harmful affects of screen addiction after school and during the weekend.

Play, that brings people into close contact with each other, where all five senses are activated and the brain is engaged in understanding, responding, speculating, planning, sensing and searching may do more for bringing addiction back to manageable levels and keeping them there than rules, lectures, statistics, warnings and threats.

No one is excluded from this addiction, not our youngest or our senior citizens. It's a global problem and perhaps local school communities can be the first to find an en masse solution. As I see it, the answer will lie in convincing the community that it really is worth it to use their smartphones less and PLAY MORE and setting up the opportunities for them to do so.

Note: An Australian Child health poll found almost all Australian teenagers, two-thirds of primary school-aged children and one-third of preschoolers own their own tablet or smartphone.

[Click here for a link to a must-read article from Professor Mark Williams, a neuroscientist in the Department of Cognitive Science, Faculty of Human Sciences, Macquarie University.](#)

You will also enjoy these video clips and for many of you, warm memories will come flooding back.

Clapping Games https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RNVjc3c_SSc

Ball Games <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9BEwaNIf0ko>

Running Around Games <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=38LyRasoKvU>

Skipping Games <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I1KlQg6dOXc>