

Steer youngsters to adopt healthy tech habits SCMP By Gweneth Rehnborg October, 2014

1. Most parents worry about the safety of their children more than just about anything else.
2. But according to visiting US occupational therapist Cris Rowan, keeping them quietly entertained indoors, where they are disconnected from nature and attached to video games and other technology, is an illusion of safety that is causing real problems in their physical and mental health. Rowan began to see significant changes in her clients about 15 years ago.
3. An increase in attention problems, poor academic performance, aggression, impaired sleep, obesity, and developmental delays prompted her to turn to research in the field of technology use and children.
4. Rowan identified two primary areas of concern, the addictive nature of video games and the impact of technology use on children's health, behaviour, and ability to learn. Beyond basic survival, Rowan explains that children need to be active and connect with nature in order to thrive. Being in nature, and physical movement, are attention restorative, sensory calming, and essential to healthy growth.
5. For example, playing on swings is not only fun, but has an impact on core physical strength, as well as the development of balance, proprioceptive, tactile and attachment systems that are needed for paying attention and reading. All of these needs are negatively affected by the sedentary practice of technology use, and specifically by video games. Urban children are three times as likely to present with symptoms of Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder as rural youngsters.
6. The good news is that as little as 20 minutes a day of time spent outdoors in nature can alleviate many of the symptoms.
7. Video game use is of particular concern to Rowan. She implores parents to regulate video game use by their children before it becomes an addiction. Avid game players experience the same physiological responses as sex and gambling addicts. Their heart rates race and their blood pressure escalates as their bodies release high doses of cortisol. After a while, they achieve a state of hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal fatigue and require more and more stimulus to get the same feeling.
8. Overcoming video game addiction is an arduous process which only has a 50 per cent success rate. Online games that are competitive and social are particularly insidious. China has more than 300 treatment centres for youths with video game addiction. Critics counter that video games can have some positive effects in sharpening focus, reasoning and decision-making skills. Rowan doesn't disagree that this kind of positive effect is possible, but counters that it is all in context of the child's overall health.
9. She says that "what they watch is who they become", and notes that pro-social media games, where characters are nice to each other, can have a positive impact on children when limited to roughly one hour per day for a healthy child. But antisocial media, where characters harm others, can cause antisocial behaviour, Rowan says.
10. Creating zones where there is no technology, say, the bedroom, is a good way to start setting boundaries to keep it from taking over the household.