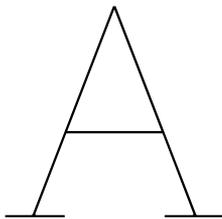




De-confinement

Rethinking screen-time in a post-COVID context

Jacques Brodeur



At the time of writing, our entire country is still struggling to survive a deadly pandemic that traveled across the world. With the exception of workers in sectors deemed “essential”, most of our fellow Canadians have stayed at home hoping to avoid damage for themselves and their family. The economic and social impacts have taken a tremendous toll, which we are grappling with as we move towards de-confinement.

But in the context of physical distancing, the COVID-19 shutdown has had huge implications for how we engage with media and technology, as workers, students and educators. Within three months, “global downloads of Skype, Houseparty and Zoom each surged by more than 100 percent in March, with the latter proving particularly popular among people meeting up virtually while being confined to their homes. The videoconferencing app was downloaded nearly 27 million times this month, up from just 2.1 million times in January.”

When school resumes, life at home during confinement will be the first topic on the agenda, allowing students (and educators) to express feelings and relay their experiences and opinions. Recognizing that so much has changed since mid-March, here are five resources or considerations for educators, parents, students and families in preparation for

the eventual resumption of in-person classes, and a world lived less on-screen.

1. Emotional and mental health during confinement

Addressing the emotional and mental health of students will be a priority. A QMI Press Agency survey of 1,408 Quebec adults, conducted between April 12–20th and released on the 22nd, found that among psychological and emotional impacts of confinement, loneliness was the greatest, as confirmed by 42 percent of parents. Mood, frustration, worry, and insecurity were the four sentiments that deteriorated the most: 48 percent of respondents saw their child’s behavior degrading since the beginning of pandemic, and 35 percent found their children more irritable and aggressive.

2. Screen time and isolation

When kids are forced to stay home, screen entertainment is an easy way to keep them quiet and occupied, particularly when parents are also trying to get their own (paid or unpaid) work done. This sort of engagement — watching TV, playing video games, and social networking — is common but, unlike online homework or communicating with friends and relatives, is not particularly collective in nature. According to researcher Linda Pagani from University of Montréal: “[Kids] should plan a certain amount of time each day for altruistic communication with friends and acquaintances. Isolated people

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will need human contact during the crisis. Older people are a priority right now because they often live alone and are more concerned about their well-being than others are.”

3. Intentional use of technology

Confinement has forced families to change daily habits, and for parents working in their home, letting their kids watch cartoons is an easy alternative. The Children’s Screen-Time Action Network (launched by the Campaign for a Commercial-free Childhood — CCFC) recently hosted an online webinar presenting strategies to develop healthy digital habits and to help parents use design-thinking

inspired approaches to cope with challenging emotions and create reassuring structures. The webinar also promoted Digital Wellness Day on May 1st to empower individuals, organizations, and communities to be change agents toward a culture of flourishing, both online and offline. The DWD Collective, a global association of experts and organizations, collaborate to enhance human relationships through the intentional use and development of technology.

4. Off-screen activities

In response to research recommending no screen time for kids under the age of 6, and only a maximum of an hour a day for older children, some parents have chosen to keep their kids away from screens altogether, but that can be easier in theory than in practice. Some parents have had good luck replacing screen viewing with podcasts, or keeping kids busy with cooking, plasticine, dancing, drawing, reading, and indoor or outdoor gardening. Other parents have instead focused on the content of the screen time, limiting choices to educational programs and watching and discussing them as a family.

5. Screen time reduction, at home and in school

A few organizations in Canada, France, and the U.S. have transformed screen time reduction (STR) into educational school-wide programs. **Screen-Free Week** was created in the U.S. back in 1994, and has expanded to Canada. Screen-Free Week and Screen-Free Challenge have proven to be easy and pleasant ways for students to evaluate the borderline between technology that serves and technology that dis-serves, and rediscover activities they used to enjoy. After the COVID-19 lockdown, CCFC introduced Screen-Free Saturdays in recognition that families across the globe have had to loosen their screen time rules just to get through the week while juggling work, remote learning, keeping in touch with loved ones, and following the latest developments. SFS is an opportunity for families to take a break from the seemingly endless noise of quarantine life and recharge for the coming week...and it’s great for our mental and physical health to boot! Canadian readers and families can register online: <https://www.screenfree.org/saturdays/>

De-confinement is unlikely to be smooth: jurisdictions will pursue reopening at different speeds, and as the risk of exposure increases with contact we may have to reconfine. The risks are even greater for populations whose health is more vulnerable — people who are immune-compromised cannot consider increased contact without a vaccine. The impact of the lockdown, including reduced broader social connection, on peoples’ emotional and mental health cannot be underestimated. Governments are also remaking and updating income supports, workplace protections and social programs, in the broader context of growing recognition of how we are all much more connected than we realize. The role of the school and the people who work there, as a site where all of these concerns and connections are so apparent, requires careful consideration to ensure workers, children and families receive the care and support they require as we de-confine and resume more of our lives off-line. ●

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