



Does our modern lifestyle help or hinder children's mental health?

There are some people that believe it definitely hinders and can actually affect brain development. So it is true that children's mental health is failing in today's society, especially when they have so much more to hand than previous generations?

I remember being told to eat my dinner because 'there were starving children in Africa'. When my sister had her own children, however, she would cook three different meals as none of them would eat the same thing. Talking about eating dinner, we all sat around the table with the TV switched off. Compare that to these days where children eat with snacks balanced on the arm of a sofa and their smartphone clutched in the other.

So why are children failing in today's society?

Here are five reasons why children's mental health is suffering:

1. Children get what they want when they want it

Parents have become too busy to say 'no' to their children because it is easier to give in to their requests. It takes resilience and determination to stick to your guns and wait out a tantrum, especially in a public place.

But making children wait is an essential part of growing up. Delaying gratification is a huge part of learning to be an adult. You have to be able to wait and tolerate a little bit of stress in order to be happy in the long run. You might be making them happy in the short term, but when they get older, they won't be able to deal with even a minor setback. This will make them look immature.

If a child has never heard the word no before and suddenly hears it for the first time as an adult, they are not going to be able to deal with it in a mature manner. So teach them how to cope with no at an early age. You're not doing them any favours by giving them what they want all the time. Quite the opposite, in fact.

2. Children make all the rules

When I was a child, my parents told me what time to go to bed, what to eat for meals, when to play and where I could go. I speak to parents with children that tell me their child won't eat certain foods, has never gone to bed before a certain time, refuses to get dressed on their own and screams if they don't get their parents iPad to play on.

Since when do children tell parents what is allowed and what isn't? It is the parent's job to parent these children, not the other way around. Parents know what is best for their own children. They know a child has to eat properly, get a good night's rest, not spend hours on smart devices and learn to dress by themselves.

Letting children rule the house is sending the wrong message and will turn out selfish and narcissistic adults.

3. Too much technology

Can there ever be too much technology? Evidently, yes. When you use technology from smart devices as a babysitting service, in place of human interaction then you are depriving your child. The virtual world is over-stimulating, with bright and loud graphics combined with special effects that real life simply can't compare with.

Add to that storylines full of drama and mystery and you are onto a losing battle. Then you expect your children to go into a classroom and sit patiently listening to a teacher explain algebra or Shakespeare? Your child's brain has already gotten used to imputing high levels of stimulation from smartphones or video games. This means their brain will find it increasingly challenging to process less stimulating levels of information, such as school work.

4. A world with no boredom

I remember once saying to my parents that 'I was bored' in the summer holidays. I never said it again after my mother gave me a list of chores to complete that week.

Children these days have a multitude of avenues to explore before they even have the right to say that they are bored. They have smartphones, iPads, iPods, laptops, PCs, video games, smart TVs, electronic games, so much more than I had when I was a child.

Yet, parents these days seem to be afraid of their children being bored. Being bored, however, can be a good thing for children's mental health as it encourages them to use their imagination like I did with my siblings when I was a child. My parents weren't there to entertain me every minute of the day. If I was ever bored I knew I had to help with the housework so I made sure I was occupied.

Why are children these days let off the chores? Getting involved in the day-to-day running of the house is a good life lesson for the future.

5. Less social interaction

A recent study found that most children and teenagers spend about 75% of their waking hours looking at a screen. The same study found that when these students unplugged their devices for a period of one hour, they felt extremely lonely. This might sound like a contradiction in terms to older people, but social media is a way of life to youngsters.

There is a problem concerning social media, however. It is true that younger people can instantly keep track of their friends, by messaging and reading about what they are up to. But human interaction is more than verbal communication; it is also about the non-verbal signs like body language, tones in speech.

A person might have a couple of thousand friends on Facebook but still feel terribly lonely. Conversing online does not equip a young person with the basic social skills required in life as an adult.

Overuse of social media is also linked to **laziness and obesity**.

So what, if anything, can be done to help with children's mental health?

- Limit use of technology
- Eat family dinners together
- Play board games
- Go outdoors as a family
- Avoid technology in restaurants and cars
- Make children wait and don't be afraid to say 'no'
- Keep to a schedule when it comes to bedtime and meals
- Don't make different meals for different children
- Get children involved in household chores
- Teach them social skills like sharing, saying *Please* and *Thank You*
- Make sure they clear up after themselves

Parenting is difficult but can be very rewarding. You can help your children's mental health by **setting boundaries and being clear on what you expect from them**. They will thank you when they are older, I promise!