

De-confinement: Rethinking Screen-time in a post-COVID-19 context

 comminit.com/policy-blogs/content/de-confinement-rethinking-screen-time-post-covid-19-context



Author: Jacques Brodeur, June 26 2020 - At the time of this writing, many countries are still struggling to survive a deadly pandemic that traveled across the world. With the exception of workers in sectors deemed "essential", many of our fellow citizens have stayed at home hoping to avoid damage to 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, and maybe later re-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 in March, up from just 2.1 million times in January." [From the World Economic Forum, March 31 2020]

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 during de-confinement. A QMI Press Agency survey of 1,408 Quebec [Canada] adults, conducted

between April 12-20th and released on the 22nd, found that among the psychological and emotional impacts of confinement, loneliness was the greatest, as confirmed by 42% of parents. Mood, frustration, worry, and insecurity were the four sentiments that deteriorated the most: 48% of respondents saw their child's behavior degrading since the beginning of pandemic, and 35% found their children to be 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, it is not particularly collective in nature. Researcher Linda Pagani from the University of Montréal "encourages parents to limit how often their kids are in front of the television or on their smartphone. Ideally, she said, preschool children shouldn't spend more than one hour a day looking at screens and children aged six and over no more than two hours a day. 'This does not include time on the iPad for learning or writing', Pagani added....Isolated people 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." [From [udemnouvelles](#), April 14 2020]

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 was launched by the Campaign for a Commercial-free Childhood (CCFC) in April 2018. It 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](#) [DWD] 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, collaborates to enhance human relationships through the intentional use and development of technology.

4. Screen-free activities

In response to research recommending no screen time for kids under the age of 6, and only an hour a day maximum 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 podcast listening, or keeping kids busy with cooking, plasticine [modelling clay], dancing, drawing, reading, and gardening (indoor or outdoor). 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. Schoolwide program to prevent damage linked to screen entertainment

A few organizations in Canada, France, and the U.S. [United States] 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. Take the Challenge Now was created in Michigan [U.S.], and benefits were confirmed by researchers from Harvard. It is a preschool through high-school program designed to reduce screen-time entertainment. It includes activities aligned to reading, writing, math, science, and technology standards. Material for all grades can be purchased and downloaded online, including teacher manual, student materials, parent letters, newsletters, and other support materials. Screen-Free Week and Screen-Free Challenge have proven to be easy and pleasant ways for students to evaluate the border line between technology that serves and technology that dis-serves. Kids and teens rediscover activities they used to enjoy. After the COVID-19 lockdown, CCFC introduced Screen-Free Saturdays [SFS] 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 are an opportunity for families to take a break from the seemingly endless noise of quarantine life and recharge for the coming week...and they are great for our mental and physical health, to boot! Readers and families are welcome to register online.

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 re-confine. 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 people's 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.

Author Jacques Brodeur is the founder of Edupax, a not-for-profit organization based in Québec City, dedicated to critical media education and ending violence among children and adolescents. After teaching physical education for 30 years, Brodeur began serving on the board of the Action Coalition for Media Education in 2002.

As with all of the blogs posted on our website, the content above does not imply the endorsement of The CI or its Partners and is from the perspective of the writer alone. We do not check facts and strive to retain the writer's voice, as is detailed in our Editorial Policy.

