

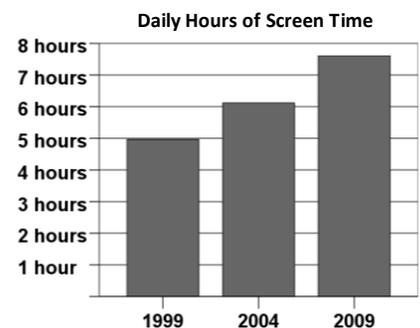
Student Voices: America's Problem with Screens

By Andre Vetchkin

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1 A new phrase is appearing in the news these days: *screen time*. It refers to the number of hours each day a person spends consuming entertainment media such as television, internet, and video games. Screen time is on the rise, and many experts are concerned. There is scientific evidence that too much screen time is causing both physical and mental health problems. Young people like you and me need to be aware of these health risks. It is time for us to change our habits and spread the word about screen time.

2 Scientists have been tracking the rise in screen time for over a decade. The Kaiser Family Foundation has interviewed thousands of people between the ages of 8 and 18 about the time they spend in front of screens each day. The most recent data shows that the screen time of the typical young person in America was over seven hours a day in 2009. As you can see in the graph to the right, that's an increase of more than two hours since 1999. Today the number is probably even larger.



3 A lot of research has been done on the health effects of screen time. Not surprisingly, the research has shown that as a person's screen time increases, so does the amount of time they spend sedentary (sitting still). Spending hours a day in front of a screen leaves little time for exercise or an active lifestyle. In addition, the research has shown that people who spend more time in front of screens consume more high-calorie foods, such as candy and soda. This makes sense. More screen time means less time to prepare healthy foods. This is a dangerous combination. Numerous studies have shown that a sedentary lifestyle along with a diet full of high-calorie foods are strong causes of obesity (having dangerous amounts of body fat). Therefore, reducing screen time should be a key part of fighting obesity.

4 There is also evidence that screen time harms our mental health. Psychologist Dr. Aric Sigman researches the impact of screen time on *attention span*—the length of time we can concentrate on challenging tasks without becoming distracted. Success in school and work requires us to pay attention to many things that are less entertaining than video games or television. Dr. Sigman's research shows that screen time can make it harder for us to do this. The reason is that screen time causes our brains to release large amounts of *dopamine*—a chemical produced in everyone's brain. When dopamine is released, we experience a good,



energetic feeling. One of the reasons we enjoy screen time so much is because of the release of dopamine. But when a person's brain becomes used to *very high* levels of dopamine, they may begin to have trouble focusing on less entertaining activities, like school work. This finding is not surprising to teachers. The Pew Research Center recently interviewed teachers across America on the topic of screen time. 87 percent of teachers say they are worried that too much screen time is reducing their students' attention spans.

5 All the evidence shows that screen time is a major health problem. We can't just wait for adults to tell us what to do about it. Only *we* can change our habits. It is best to start with a small goal and build to larger ones. Choose one healthy activity—for example, a sport, a musical instrument, or studying. Spend one extra hour on this activity each week. After a while, try two hours a week. You will feel better, and you will set a good example for people who are younger than you. By setting small goals and working on them one-by-one, we can reduce screen time and improve our health.

Letter from a reader:***A Response to Andre Vetchkin on Screen Time***

by Emma Ross-Hart

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Dear Young Health,

1 Recently you printed an article by Andre Vetchkin about how young people are spending more time than ever in front of screens. In the article Andre argued that we have to reduce screen time to prevent problems like obesity and shorter attention spans. While I like his challenge to young people to reduce their screen time, Andre also needs to be realistic. Screens are here to stay. Instead of focusing on *reducing* screen time, we should focus on *increasing* healthy activities.

2 Screens and healthy activities can actually go together. For example, I see many people using their mobile phones to watch videos while working out at the gym. This is a good way to make exercise more fun. And the most important thing is getting more exercise—not fewer screens. If we tell people that screens and healthy activities never go together, they may simply choose the screens and give up on healthy living.

3 As for the issue of attention span, I think more research needs to be done to fully understand the role that screen time plays. If screen time harms our attention span, how much screen time is too much? I can admit that I spend a lot of time in front of screens. Sometimes I play video games for hours. But the fact is that when I have to I also study for hours. I get good grades, and I also dance and play on my school's basketball team. I do not think that screen time has affected my ability to concentrate.

4 So, by all means, young people should discuss screen time and try to lead healthier, more active lives. But let's also be realistic. Screens are here to stay, and we have to learn how to live *with* them. Instead of warning people about screens, we should put the focus on helping people be more active.

—Emma Ross-Hart