

Help youth navigate through the digital world

One in every ten children between the ages of five and 17 suffers from a psychiatric disorder, with these illnesses likely to persist into adulthood, Children's Mental Health Week from 3 to 9 February 2020 calls on parents and teachers to help children to identify the causes and manage these illnesses. However, many parents and teachers, even doctors and psychologists are feeling lost at sea by the technological divide.



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Dean McCoubrey, founder of MySocialLife, a South African in-school digital life skills program teaching digital life skills program for schools, says that young South Africans are particularly vulnerable to mental health issues caused by the country's complex socio-economic environment, but there are a number of reasons why mental health can be impacted by online activity and social media usage.

As if the instability and risk in the country isn't enough to manage in traditional media, it is amplified by social feeds and instant messages – the always-on nature of phones and virality of social networks places this exposure in the paths of teens and pre-teens through a diversity of devices - phones, tablets, computers, consoles.

"Although smartphones are relatively recent developments, there is already research linking social media use in children to depression, and there are a number of ways smart devices and social media can affect children and adults," McCoubrey says.

" This includes obsessive overuse, disconnection from real-world relationships, anxiety about what we have seen or experienced online, self-esteem and body issues from overexposure and comparison. "

The most common mental illnesses found among tweens and teens include depression, generalised anxiety disorder, self-harm, post-traumatic stress disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, and eating disorders. These can be triggered by a variety of causes, including long-term illness, a parent with mental illness or alcoholism, being bullied or sexually harassed, being close to death or divorce in the family, or bearing the responsibility of care for family members.

McCoubrey adds that targeting of our youth by technology companies is akin to a 'perfect storm' - tech companies have designed and built the various platforms, and promote them relentlessly via advertising, and this intersects with the under-developed neurobiology and physiology of our children," he says.

"The impact of social media on their brain/body connection has a magnetic effect that pulls them in deeper into digital environments that may impact negatively on their mental health."

It's not uncommon for teens to be online for hours. And in that time, they are consuming hundreds of images, videos, text from the news or social feeds, trapped in a cyberbullying attack, talking to strangers in chat forums, or comparing themselves to other teens, often damaging their self-esteem.

While it's natural for tweens and teens to experience some anxiety, the incidence of mental health issues among young people has increased in tandem with the adoption of smartphones since 2007, and parents and teachers should take steps to help young people navigate this new territory in these ways:

Adults can help – parents, teachers and mental health professionals:

- Pay attention to marked changes in their behaviour – mood swings, sleep, attention and aggression.
- Ask questions about what is happening in their life online and talk to your children about what they're feeling. While many do not open-up, their response may indicate something is happening that is troubling the child.
- Share your view of what is acceptable online, and create firm boundaries of what you will tolerate with the consequence of limiting access to Wi-Fi, data or even the device. Make an agreement and put it up in your home where it can be seen.
- Encourage self-care by suggesting a break from the social platforms and lead the way by how much you are using your phone in the home and do things together in real life, to reconnect and to get active.
- Explain that images online don't tell the real story or share the true background of what's happening in a person's life.
- If your child's interactions with online platforms impact their health and wellbeing negatively on an ongoing basis, get help from a counsellor or psychologist, to prevent it escalating. SADAG are an excellent guide.

"It's vital to teach young people how to be good digital citizens, equipping them with the skills they need to make smart decisions about their online lives," McCoubrey says.

"Once they have those foundations, they will be able to make good decisions for the benefit of their mental health on their own, and their ability to do so will stand them in good stead in the employment world of the future."

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