Principal’s Post – 9 March 2017

Over the past year, many people have shared these stories with me:

“I am at my grandchild’s swimming lesson and every single parent/carer is immersed in their phone. Or I’ll be in a restaurant and often see a young couple out to dinner ‘together’ both sitting there silently staring at their own screens.”

“I travel on the bus and about 90% of the passengers are in rapt attention on their phones and are not even looking at the passing scenery.”

“Parents are waiting for their older child to come out of class and are sitting with a toddler. Often both the parent and the toddler are on separate devices instead of talking to each other.”

“Where has it been announced that every spare moment of a child's life must be filled with a touch screen or that even a short ride to the shops requires a DVD player in the car to be activated? Children jump into the car and begin staring at the screen instead of sharing their day with Mum or Dad.”

“I work part time as a taxi driver and I have really noticed the decline in conversation over the past few years. I would think about 80% of people spend their trip with me on their phones. Sometimes it is a good thing not to have to put up with their ramblings; other times it can be nice to have a chat! It is a real change in how we communicate.”

“I’ve noticed that younger people these days seem to have great difficulty in using their mouth to form words. The failure to move their upper lip when talking distorts words to such a point, that if you don’t know the context, you’re lost. Is this because they have lost the power to hold a simple conversation?”

These are worrying trends however there will be folk who contend that people today have never been more connected due to the ease of communicating via social networks. Certainly there were prophets of doom around even in my childhood who bemoaned television coming into our lives and said that the art of family conversation would be lost. In fact great television programs can be enjoyed together and lead to a shared interest. I am thinking of the wonderful documentaries on dinosaurs or the David Attenborough natural world shows.

These quality viewing experiences often created bonds of shared interest between children and parents. However, screen time in front of a TV has now been multiplied by children being constantly exposed to screens in so many different ways.

What is Screen Time?

First, let’s define the term. Screen time refers to any time that your child spends with a screen in front of his face (one that’s turned on, anyway). That includes a television, movie theatre screen, smart phone, tablet, computer, hand-held video game device, DVD player in the car, or anything else with a screen and moving pictures. It doesn’t matter if your child is watching an educational video or playing a game, screen time is screen time.

How Does Screen Time Take Away from Language Development Time?

Children learn to talk and communicate through interactions with other people. That’s the way it has always been and that’s the way it will continue to be, despite any new technology that comes our way. The first several years of life are crucial for your child’s language development. It is when their brain is the most receptive to learning new language and is building communication pathways that will be with them for the rest of their lives.
Once that window closes, it is much more difficult for someone to learn and develop language skills. That’s why it’s harder for you to learn a foreign language as an adult and those rare children who were raised by wolves in the woods have a hard time learning to communicate efficiently.

Every minute that your child spends in front of a screen is one fewer minute that she could spend learning from your interactions with her or practising her interactions with you. Screen time takes away from time that could (and should) be spent on person-to-person interactions. The use of electronic gadgets and watching TV needs to be cut back to a minimum, and curfews instated, such as during meal times or before school to ensure that your child’s language is developed appropriately and that excess screen time does not adversely affect their concentration levels.

Helen O'Toole
Principal