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Less Screen Time Improves Social Skills Among Preteens

by Erik Sass (/publications/author/1080/erik-sass/), August 22, 2014, 1:00 PM

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While we call it social media, ironically it may be quite the opposite: a new study suggests that screen time (including social media as well as texting, games, video, and so on) is correlated with decreased basic social skills in preteens. The good news is that the damage appears to be reversible, as reducing screen time seems to bring those skills back.

The study, titled "Five days at outdoor education camp without screens improves preteen skills with nonverbal emotion cues" and published in *Computers and Human Behavior*, analyzed the ability of 51 sixth-graders who spent five days at a wilderness camp with no access to mobile devices, computers, or TVs — forcing them to (horror of horrors) actually, like, talk to each other, like, face to face, and stuff?

At the beginning of the camp, the kids took two tests that assessed their ability to assess "nonverbal" social cues — meaning the ability to interpret how other people are feeling based on things like facial expression, eye contact, and body language. One test

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had them try to guess the emotional state of people making different faces, and another required them to guess the emotional state of a person in a video with no sound.

The kids took the same test at the end of their five-day camp, during which they had “opportunities for face-to-face social interaction [including] living together in cabins, going on hikes together, and working as a team to build emergency shelters.” Researchers then analyzed the data to see if there was any impact on their emotional acuity.

On average, the researchers found that whereas the campers made an average of 14.02 mistakes when guessing emotions based on pictures at the beginning of camp, that figure fell to 9.41 errors after five days away from digital media. Similarly, when asked to guess the emotional state of a person in a video with the sound muted, their accuracy increased from 26% before camp to 31% afterwards. By contrast a control group of 54 preteens, who continued to use media devices as usual while attending school with a typical week of instruction, showed much less improvement over the same five-day period. Similar results were seen in the photo test (but not the video test) when the same experiment was conducted with fifth-graders.

The authors conclude: “The results of this study should introduce a much-needed societal conversation about the costs and benefits of the enormous amount of time children spend with screens, both inside and outside the classroom. Given that a pre-requisite for effective socialization is learning and practicing how to communicate with others in person ... face-to-face experiences must be emphasized in the socialization process.”

However, the study did not address the issue of potential long-term psychological trauma resulting from having to interact with other human beings in the real world.

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