

Main take aways of the conference delivered by Dr Dechêne, youth psychiatrist, on 16/05/2024 and organised by APEEE EEB1

(Nota bene from the authors:

-The information below has been drafted by parents of the APEEE on the basis of their understanding of the conference delivered in French. While utmost care was taken in drafting the main take-away messages, it may differ from the delivery.

-*In the text below, the word “screens” covers the recreative/leisure screen time: smartphones, tablets or computers, television, playing videogames, scrolling on social networks, watching series/movies, etc.)*

Dr Dechêne has more than 20 years of experience and practice in the field of children and teens’ mental health. The conference dealt mainly with European and American peer-reviewed and published post-COVID studies (since 2020), which she evaluated, summarised (see slides) and presented.

1/Current parents of children/teens are the first generation of parents of “digital” children and as such we are a little lost, but we have no time to lose, we cannot wait for legislation.

2/Studies show that many false ideas are circulating among parents:

- The idea that children are ‘digital natives’ and that they need to have access to screens is false: it is scientifically demonstrated that children using screens learn less and worse than those without screens (this does not mean that they do not need to learn to use IT);
- The use of screens by children and adolescents is 90 % recreational, not educational.
- Access to screens before doing homework worsens concentration and similarly, if it is used after studying, it weakens the fixing of the lessons learned;

3/The ‘digital superiority’ of minors does not exist – excessive use of screens causes hypertrophy of the reward mechanism in the brain (dopamine), which creates an ‘addict brain’ that is linked to impulsivity. With youngsters of below 25 year old, it is potentially reversible, but from 15 it becomes more difficult to return to a reasonable use.

4/Anxiety from being far from one’s smartphone is already scientifically described and referred to as ‘nomophobia’. Dr Dechêne deals with many cases, and the intensity of the withdrawal effect of not having the mobile phone is very worrying (“harder than heroin”).

Other negative effects of the excessive use of screens by children and young people:

- Wasted time (comparison of screen hours vs practice hours of e.g. a musical instrument and the “benefits” of each activity)
- In terms of emotional well-being, there is a direct correlation between screen use (including TV) and less tolerance to frustration. The experience shows that children and adolescents do not know how to face their emotions without screens or music – which leads to significant emotional and social relations’ problems. Social media are not “socialising” – they do not allow for a full social experience (many children and young people are not able to recognise basic emotions on the faces of their interlocutors).
- Drastic and irrecoverable loss of vocabulary (see Collectif CoSE studies): currently children’s books are more and more written in plain language to be understandable because screens reduce the acquisition of vocabulary. The explosion of cases of “dys”

troubles can be directly related to exposure to screens. For example, 50 minutes of screen time per day for a child under the age of 2 is equivalent to exposure to 3 million words less (a young child learns a word by listening to it 3 times live from an adult, but after hearing it 80 times in cartoons, he's not able to retain it).

- Poorer academic performance (by less time investment and lower concentration)
- Worse quality of sleep – which has important effects on brain development
- Worse family relationships (screens between parents and children – children's or parents' screens).
- Exposure to harmful content (BIG concern, example of certain video games): violence, pornography, etc. that profoundly mark children from a very early age and cause them serious problems.
- Sedentarism and poorer physical condition.
- Self-image problems, depression, anxiety...

5/Parents must put clear limits/set rules to the use of smartphone for recreational use and ensure children/teens respect them. Giving advice is not enough, notably in the field of screens. It is important that both parents and children/teens understand that the use is damaging the brain development and school performance. For teens, she recommended 2 hours per week of screens (all types of recreational uses of all types of connected devices with a screen) and maximum 2 hours during week-end, and to organise a family screen-free day per week (for all the members of the family). She advises no use of smartphone in the morning at the very start of the day and no use in the evening. In no case, the devices should be used or stay in the bedrooms.

6/Besides specific needs of children, full digitalisation of school learning is already proven scientifically as a worse option than traditional, pen-and-paper education:

- typing does not fix words or verbal structures in the brain – handwriting does
- understanding and memorisation of texts is poorer and of lower quality on the screen than on paper
- having a smartphone or tablet nearby (ONLY having them, without using them) worsens concentration and mental performance.

7/With regard to mobile phones at school, Dr Dechêne mentioned cases of schools that have banned them and talked about an indisputable improvement in terms of academic performance, social relations and general well-being.

8/Dr Dechêne advises that children should not have smartphone or other type of connected screens freely used for recreational activities until the age of 15-16 (depending also on maturity).