



Teaching Changing Children in the Changing Times



Pasi Sahlberg and Amy Graham, Gonski Institute, UNSW, Sydney share the findings of their research entitled 'Growing Up Digital Australia'. They explain some of the perceptions of teachers and parents about the consequences that an increase in the use of digital devices and digital learning has had on young people. They suggest some approaches for teachers to help their students thrive in an increasingly technological world. . .

Children are not who they used to be. This has become evident during the COVID-19 pandemic when many parents have spent more time with their children at home. One common notion has been how quickly children learn to navigate in the world of media and technology to find their way forward. Another thing that has become clear is how many children have become dependent on their gadgets. They walk, talk, and often also sleep, with their smartphones to keep up with what is happening around them.

Teachers have also realised that students have changed. Students find information, share it with others and present their ideas fluently using digital devices at school. But there is also the darker side of this change. More often than before, children come to school tired, struggling with emotional and social challenges, and not ready to learn. The question is: *How do these changes affect students' learning at school?*

These are some of the findings in the new research at the UNSW's Gonski Institute for Education. Our study, *Growing Up Digital Australia* (Gonski Institute for Education, 2020), explores teachers' and parents' perceptions of young people: how they are growing up, learning and how they use digital media and technology in their lives. In this article we share some initial findings and explain what you can do to help students navigate their digital childhoods.

Technology is a good servant, but a poor master

Childhood is a time for preparing young people to be kind, independent, responsible and balanced in their interests. It is a time of innocence and a time for shaping habits, expectations and choices. Now, more than ever, we are seeing childhood changing. A 2017 study by The Royal Children's Hospital Melbourne (Rhodes, 2017) found that young people, aged 13 to 18, spend on average, over 43 hours per week, on screens at home (6.2 hours a day). The vast majority of Australian teenagers, aged 13 to 18, were reported to own a smartphone or other digital gadget, while two thirds of primary school children, and one third of pre-schoolers, own their own mobile screen-based device. One could reasonably assume that these numbers have only increased since this collection of data, especially at a time when education has moved online and children are using screens for education more than ever, as well as for entertainment.

So, we know that most young people now have constant access to digital media and screen-based devices. We also know that for some children, they are using technology in ways that are harming childhoods and changing their potential for the future. The literature and media are replete with examples of the risks and pitfalls of digital media and screens for young people, so we need not repeat this argument. However, this does remind us that these issues will not resolve themselves or go away. We must act now and mindfully teach children how to grow up digitally.

The increased reliance on digital technologies in teaching and the consumption of media, during this time of disrupted schooling, makes it critically important to address this issue with children. Our young people have had to learn remotely from home and stare at screens more than ever before. When this

digital learning time is piled on top of the entertainment and social purposes for which children are using digital media, the consequences could be dire and lifelong. The increasing use of digital media to ‘connect’ with others has done just the opposite for many young people. They, instead, feel more isolated and disconnected, as Sherry Turkle (2011), Jean Twenge (2017) and others have shown. It is important that parents and teachers help children to learn to find a healthy balance in consuming media and using digital tools in and out of school.

Growing Up Digital Australia: Teachers’ perspectives

In the first phase of *Growing Up Digital Australia*, in late 2019, we surveyed almost two thousand teachers and principals from across the country about the wellbeing and teachability of their students, as well as their views on media and digital technologies for students (Gonski Institute for Education, 2020). This study is being done in collaboration with Harvard University’s Medical School and Alberta Teachers Association. It was carried out for the first time in Alberta in 2016.

So, what did we learn? Firstly, young people are using screen-based technologies for everything: both in and out of the school. Educationally, teachers understand the possibilities of technology and the opportunities of using digital devices to enrich teaching and learning. But, they also recognise definite risks that come with the increased digital presence. As can be seen in Figure 1, the vast majority of teachers see digital technologies and media as growing distractions in the learning environment. The vast majority of teachers believe that, compared to 3 – 5 years ago, more students find it difficult to focus on learning tasks. Perhaps the most worrying message from teachers is that three out of five think that their students’ overall readiness to learn has declined. Almost all teachers thought that the number of children with cognitive challenges in their school has increased. If this is true, then it is no wonder that their learning outcomes are not improving.

Secondly, the teachers we worked with are particularly concerned with the declining social, behavioural and emotional wellbeing of their students (that is illustrated in Figure 1). This decline leads to classrooms being harder to manage than before.



Figure 1: Key findings from the Gonski Institute’s *Growing Up Digital Australia* study.



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Finally, the dangers of technology are not experienced equally. One-third of teachers believe that students from disadvantaged backgrounds have unequal access to digital media and technology and that poverty stops them from getting what they need to learn in an increasingly digital world. Perhaps this is unsurprising, given that national statistics in Australia have clearly documented inequalities in connecting to digital services and the internet, and the lessons we have learnt from the emergency, remote teaching during the COVID-19 pandemic (Graham & Sahlberg 2020). Some teachers, our study reveals, believe students living in poverty are also more at risk of the harmful consequences, such as overuse of these devices, bullying and harassment and access to inappropriate content. These findings are very similar to those in *Growing Up Digital Alberta* from a few years earlier (ATA, 2016).

Australian children spend about one thousand hours each year at school. Teachers, as a result, often better than others, see how children are changing. The purpose of the *Growing Up Digital* project is not to point out problems and present more bad news about the state of our children. The main aim is to offer better evidence about the current situation so that teachers, parents and children can have more informed conversations to find out together what to do from here.

Four things schools can do

Teachers have an important role in helping all children to grow up healthy, safely and responsibly as they navigate in an increasingly technological world. But teachers can't and shouldn't do that alone. Parents and young people themselves should engage in these efforts from early on. Here are some strategies anyone can do.

1. Engage parents in conversations about safer living with digital technologies

Our research offers one perspective to understand the changing nature of children today. This dynamic issue, of living with media and digital technologies, must be better understood by parents, teachers and young people themselves. This can be achieved by opening up the conversation and discussing these issues, even when it is not simple. Talk about the potential risks to students. Talk about how parents mitigate these risks and how to do that more effectively. Most importantly, encourage young people to talk about their own experiences and problems that they are having with their gadgets. Where possible, seek to empower families and young people with information and resources, such as those developed by the eSafety Commissioner (Australian Government, 2015).

2. It is not about screen time, but what we do with it

Not all time children spend on screens is necessarily problematic. Reading about history, exploring data for science project, or composing music can be extremely beneficial. Yet, the only guidelines provided to young people are often specifically about time spent on digital screens. Earlier, when the Australian guidelines around screen time were developed, it was at a time when screen-based technology had not yet exploded and landed in the hands of almost every teenager and in every home. Now, much of a child's school day is delivered through different digital screens, yet, within the current guidelines, there is no discrimination between educational and entertainment purposes and the idea of 'screen time' obscures that richness.



Teaching Changing Children in the Changing Times



In your work with students, on how to live safely and responsibly with digital technologies, include conversations, drama and play about forming healthy media habits and about the quality of the screen-time. An hour watching randomly appearing YouTube videos, on a smartphone, isn't the same as an hour spent on coding a robot with a friend. Teach young people to be mindful of what they are doing with their screens, and for what purpose, not just about how long they are on them for.

3. Teach the notion of moderation

All of us, especially young people, need to learn how to exercise moderation in the things we spend time on. Technology is fun and allows young people to stay connected to their friends and family, to play games and to learn about the world around them: all of which are important. However, so too is playing outside, reading books, playing musical instruments, eating well and, especially, having enough high-quality sleep. All of these are going to add value to their social, emotional, physical, and academic wellbeing. So, encourage students to learn to self-regulate their behaviours, to strive for a daily balance between digital exposure and plenty of play and movement and rest and down time, too.

4. Strive to engage students in learning off their screens

In *Growing Up Digital Australia*, teachers said that students often find non-technology related tasks at school “irrelevant” or even “boring”. Many teachers also talked about students’ lack of interest in applying themselves to learning basic skills like handwriting or doing mathematical calculations or computations by hand. What can we learn from this? Rather than simplistically thinking that we need to teach using mediums like iPads or computer games that children relate to, maybe we need to look at what makes digital media platforms exciting to children and how we can replicate these same attractions away from a screen. For example, sometimes designing teaching mathematics and science activities so that students can learn through play, active engagement in collaborative activities, or learning concepts through real problem solving can become equally interesting than studying these same things through digital screens in the classroom.

Use your experience and professional wisdom to reflect on your practice and the broader implications of showing children that a smartphone is a tool, not a treat. It is incredibly important to teach this distinction to children, both at school and at home, in order to shape their habits with digital technologies from an early age. In your students, encourage and value their self-directedness, creativity, divergent and flexible thinking, curiosity, collaboration and resilience. Because that is where the magic happens, and what is often missing when young people sit on digital screens and devices.

New games and social media platforms will replace the old. Apps will change. Devices break. Technology becomes obsolete. But one thing will stay: your teaching can change a young person’s life forever.

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Teaching Changing Children in the Changing Times



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Pasi Sahlberg has been a schoolteacher, teacher educator, policy advisor and director general at the Ministry of Education in Finland. He has held senior expert posts in World Bank (Washington, DC) and European Commission (Torino, Italy) analysing and helping education systems around the world to improve. He has served as an advisor to a number of other governments; currently he is an international education advisor to the First Minister Nicola Sturgeon and her government in Scotland.

Currently Pasi leads research on learning through play, growing up digital, and equity in education. His latest book is "Let the Children Play: How more play will save our schools and help children thrive" with William Doyle (Oxford University Press, 2019) and forthcoming book with Tim Walker is titled "In Teachers We Trust: The Finnish way to world class schools" (Norton, 2020). Pasi is Professor of Education Policy at the University of New South Wales (UNSW) and Research Director at the Gonski Institute for Education. He lives with his wife and two sons in Sydney, Australia.

Amy Graham is an experienced mixed-methods researcher in education and has researched widely in the areas of children's use of digital media and the use of technology in distance education, perfectionism, parental engagement, school readiness, and play in the school day. In all of her research, she strives to have a socially just focus, and believes that everyone must play a role in ensuring children reach their full potential.

Her PhD thesis was entitled "Getting ready to succeed at school: Investigating the role of parents" and this was completed in 2019. Prior to this, Amy has held a range of research roles and has previously worked as a Ministerial Adviser to the South Australian Minister for Education. Amy has also been a Policy Adviser in education in the government and non-government education and disability sectors, and a classroom teacher.

Since 2019, Amy has worked at the Gonski Institute for Education as a Research Fellow and enjoys seeing the research she does being translated into solutions for educators, policy architects and parents. Amy holds a position on the editorial board of AEL, and offers specialty research to the Parenting Research Centre.