Viewpoint

PARENTING IN THE DIGITAL ERA

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ABSTRACT

Parenting is one of the significant challenges that every human being faces in their lifetime. There have been several fundamental changes in the lifestyle of children and adolescents in the twenty-first century compared to those of a previous generation. In today's digital era, everything has become super fast to such an extent that you need to click your mobile a couple of times to get a sure ticket for a movie or to order your choicest delicacy, which would invariably be delivered straight to your doorstep. The time gap between the genesis of a desire and its realisation has dwindled to a few minutes or even a few seconds. The parent needs to be mindful of their children's digital behavior and ensure that they can guide them about healthy and unhealthy choices in digital encounters. Parents should be well-versed in the online friends of their children and the nature and quality of the interactions their children are having with them. Ensuring healthy screen time, which is age-appropriate, is another vital issue that should be considered seriously. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation, children under 2 years of age should not have any screen time. Children between 3 and 5 years old may be permitted one hour of screen time daily, which can be divided into multiple sessions. Parents should ensure that this screen time does not consist exclusively of cartoons or fast-moving visuals. The parent should understand that it is more important to allow the child to play and explore novel aspects of their life rather than restricting their freedom within the four walls of tuition centres, thereby ruining any chance for psychosocial development. Studies from various parts of the world have shown that physical inactivity, apart from increasing the chance for metabolic lifestyle-induced disorders, also paves the way for behavioral addiction, including online gaming disorders as well as substance use disorders in the future. As a parent, it is your primary responsibility to listen non-judgmentally to your child's concerns. Most importantly, it is not about moral policing a child, but about empowering them to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy choices in life, which defines a parent.

Keywords: Digital Era, Parenting, Mental Health, Child development, Behavioural addiction

INTRODUCTION

Parenting is one of the major challenges that any human being has to undertake in their lifetime. It is a process that empowers the most helpless infant on the surface of the earth to become the most powerful living entity. Parental behaviour during childhood may have a long-lasting impact on the personality and overall development of the person.[1]

There have been several fundamental changes in the lifestyle of children and adolescents in the twenty-first century compared to those of a previous generation.[2] Around 3 decades ago, an average child or an adolescent, if they wanted to watch a movie, had to travel all the way from his house to the cinema theatre wait in front of a long queue for a long period of time, perhaps only to realise that he won't get a ticket for that day's show. Since they had anticipated it from the

moment he planned his trip to the theatre, he would logically have had an alternative plan in case his desire was not fulfilled. The time gap between the moment of a desire's genesis and its realisation gives the adolescent brain enough time to contemplate the two contrasting potential outcomes of the desire. This would usually help him to cope with the scenario where his desire is not fulfilled.[3]

But in today's digital era, everything has become super fast to such an extent that you need just to click your mobile a couple of times to get a sure ticket for a movie or to order your choicest delicacy, which would invariably be delivered straight to your doorstep. The time gap between the genesis of a desire and its realisation has dwindled to a few minutes or even a few seconds. Obviously, the brain doesn't get time to process the two possible outcomes of the desire, nor does it have the time to formulate an alternate plan in case the desire is not fulfilled. This has led to a state in which human behaviour has become impulsive and impatient, leading to an automatic pilot kind of knee-jerk reactions quite often.[5, 6]

SOCIAL DISCONNECTION SYNDROME

Imagine the life of a higher secondary school or college student around three decades ago. The obvious method to get happiness for them was definitely to connect with friends in one way or another. Travelling with friends, playing with them, engaging in social organisational activities, or even simple gossiping used to give a great sense of well-being. What about kids of the same age today? They no longer need a human connection to get a sense of well-being. They can get any amount of happiness or pleasure for any amount of time, just by engaging with a digital screen device in the privacy of their room, far from the maddening crowd, in blissful isolation. This has led to an epidemic of a so-called "social disconnection syndrome" becoming alarmingly common among youngsters.[7]

The Harvard Study on Adult development has clearly pointed out that strong positive human relationships are the single most important factor that influences a long and healthy life. The modern trend of social isolation among young people could hence prove detrimental to their personal well-being, health, and longevity.[6-8]

THE ANXIOUS GENERATION

This year's "economic survey," which was tabled in the Indian parliament along with the annual budget, has quoted Jonathan Haidt's book "The anxious generation " to enlighten about the perils of digital overuse among the children and youth of today.[9] The book clearly emphasises that long hours of indulgence in digital devices over the long run can lead to social isolation, sleep deprivation, attention fragmentation, and addiction- all of which need serious consideration and mature intervention. [10]

The tech-savvy group of youngsters is capable of exploring various areas of human knowledge, which their adult parents are often unable to understand or comprehend.[11, 12] A lot of unhealthy information from sources like dark web create a strange sense of empowerment which motivate the youngsters to tread into risky terrains of drug abuse and unhealthy sexual experimentation which could have extremely dangerous consequences [13-15]

RESPONSIBLE PARENTING

It becomes extremely important that parents should take their jobs extremely seriously to ensure that the next generation develops into wholesome human beings who can benefit the entire universe with their wisdom, creativity, and strength of character. [9] The first and foremost thing that parents should take seriously is to become digitally intelligent and tech-savvy. Unless this is accomplished, they may not be able

to connect effectively with the present generation and healthily guide them. Along with digital literacy, mental health literacy, and legal literacy, these are also of extreme significance for the present-day parent in empowering themselves and equipping themselves fully to manage the children of today.[9] The conventional method of authoritarian parenting, where the head of the family can assert his rights and authority over the child, is no longer feasible or appropriate in today's times. A parent should take responsibility for helping their child become a responsible adult, and for that, the child should be provided with guided freedom from a very young age. Ensuring an authoritative parenting strategy where affection and discipline can be used judiciously is the right way ahead. The art of balancing freedom with responsibility is something that parents should ensure while raising their children. Proper role modelling, ensuring non-negotiable rules within the family, and avoiding unhealthy parenting strategies like double bind and switchboard communication are all extremely vital in modern days. Parents need to spend at least an hour a day of quality time with their kids, listening to what their kids have to say. This will not only ensure the development of communication skills in children but also create a healthy home environment where parents will be aware of what is happening in their children's minds from an early stage. The parent needs to be mindful of the digital behaviour of their children, also to ensure that they can guide the children about healthy and unhealthy choices in digital encounters. Parents should be well-versed in the online friends of their kids and the nature and quality of the interaction their kids are having with them.[9]

Another extremely vital aspect that should be ensured in domestic spaces is "digital hygiene", which should not be confined to the child's life, but should be practiced by every member of the family. The quality time when the parent is supposed to interact with the child should be absolutely free of any digital influence. Ensuring healthy screen time, which is age-appropriate, is another vital issue that should be considered seriously. According to the American Academy of Pediatrics' recommendation, children under 2 years of age should not have any screen time.[1] Children between 3 and 5 years may be permitted one hour of screen time daily, which need not be continuous. Parents should ensure that this screen time does not consist exclusively of cartoons or fast-moving visuals. The amount of cartoons or online games that include visuals that change in split seconds can occupy up to 50 percent of daily screen time. Children between 6 and 18 years may be permitted a maximum of 2 hours of screen time per day. It would be highly commendable if the adults could show a role model by restricting their screen time, also so that they will have the moral right to instruct their kids to stay away from excessive screen usage.[4, 13]

The prevalence of metabolic syndrome among adolescents is also on the rise these days. Obesity, Metabolic Syndrome Associated Fatty Liver Disease (MSAFLD), Polycystic ovarian syndrome(PCOS). Vitamin D deficiency, early onset type 2 diabetes mellitus, hypertension, etc. All are on the rise among the adolescent population in our part of the world.[16] Add to this the morbidity created by a variety of substance use disorders and consequent medical and behavioral problems, and we have an epidemic of lifestyle-induced problems that are majorly affecting the lives of our children.[16-18] It becomes the prime responsibility of the parent to modify the lifestyle of their kids in a healthy way so that they may not fall prey to the above-mentioned health problems. The art of empowering a child to develop healthy lifestyle, exercise, and eating habits, as well as a proper sleep-wake cycle and stress management strategies. There is a responsibility that every parent should take to heart and implement judiciously. The studies indicate that investing time and effort in this endeavor will yield significant benefits in the

future.[8] And parents will be able to see firsthand their child blossoming into a happy, healthy, and productive adult.

PLAY FOR LIFE SKILLS EDUCATION

Celebrated psychologists who have worked with children and tried to understand the psychology of a child, including Jean Piaget, Sigmund Freud, and Vygotsky, have all agreed upon one fact: that, apart from being a physical exercise, play is an important tool for developing life skills among children.[19-21] Unfortunately, the fiercely competitive academic environment in the education sector in our country has created a situation where children don't have time to play and parents don't emphasise the need to play. An unhealthy sense of academic competition has literally deprived our children of their rightful childhood. Studies from various parts of the world have shown that physical inactivity, apart from increasing the chance for metabolic lifestyle-induced disorders, also paves the way for behavioral addiction, including online gaming disorders as well as substance use disorders in the future. [22-24]

Experiences from various parts of the world, including Wales, Taiwan, and the Scandinavian countries, have demonstrated that reintroducing play into children's lives is crucial for their overall development. [25] The parent should understand that it is more important to allow the child to play and explore novel aspects of their life rather than restricting their freedom within the four walls of tuition centres, thereby ruining any chance for psychosocial development.[5] Although it is essential to ensure that your child is exposed to the latest digital technology as it evolves, it is also prudent to educate them about the potential pitfalls and unhealthy aspects associated with digital usage.[26]

Empowering the child to strike a balance between healthy and harmful use of digital devices is what parents are expected to do in modern times.

Artificial intelligence may have revolutionized the lives of human beings in an unparalleled manner, but the emotional warmth and empathy that a human being can provide remain an unattainable dream for these digital technologies.[8] Encouraging children to plant saplings, water them, and watch them grow, or engaging them in rearing pet animals are all activities that can help enhance empathy in the minds of today's children.

LISTEN, LEARN, AND GROW TOGETHER

Parents have a primary responsibility to listen non-judgmentally to their child's concerns. It is even more important to be empathetic when the child comes forward with a problem they have encountered while engaging with digital devices. A strong sense of security, which a parent can instill in their child about their presence in their life, is probably the biggest asset they can give to their child. Most importantly, it is not about moral policing a child, but about empowering them to differentiate between healthy and unhealthy choices in life, which defines anyone as a parent.

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