



# TORONTO HIGH SCHOOL

Field Avenue TORONTO NSW 2283  
PO Box 180 TORONTO NSW 2283  
toronto-h.school@det.nsw.edu.au  
02 4959 1788

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## **Technology and the Impact on Young People, Families and Education**

Dear Parents,

I'm writing to the school community to highlight the increasing concerns I have regarding technology and the impact it is having on young people, families and education, and to provide parents with strategies to support their children in developing healthy technology usage.

These concerns come from my daily experiences working with over 1000 students and their families. These observations won't necessarily apply to all students and families, but as there has been an increase in technological interference with students' wellbeing and education, it is an important message for everyone.

This is not a Toronto High School issue, these are societal issues that are occurring everywhere, every day.

Toronto High School will soon be conducting family/community cyber safety sessions. These will be advertised via our website and Facebook page. Families and communities are requiring assistance and support as this is a completely new phenomenon to understand and navigate. By working with the community, we will hopefully be able to reinforce and support parental actions by providing consistent messaging and strategies across our community. I aim to make the Toronto community one of the most technologically savvy and safe in the nation.

The explosion of knowledge and the advancement of society due to technology is unprecedented and has led to remarkable developments in our community. Consider one area such as health and medicine and the advancements made over the last 20 years; it is truly amazing. Technology adds so much to our society, it isn't all bad. Social media, in particular, has revolutionised the way that society interacts and communicates.

We need to teach about, and with, technology in education. It is a part of everyday life and is important for our students to be prepared to participate in a digital world.

However, technology may also impact negatively on our young people and families. Some students are spending excessive hours on their devices engaging with social media, gaming and the internet. Some of the negative impacts that I have observed may include:

### **Addiction to technology.**

This is becoming a significant issue whereby some students cannot cope if they are separated from their devices and cannot access technology. For some students, this could be a mental health issue. Some young people may experience genuine distress and anxiety when separated from their device.

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### **Isolation from families.**

Students may arrive home and lock themselves in their rooms for hours with little to no interaction with their family. There could be situations where everybody in the family goes to their own space to engage in social media/gaming without interacting with the other people in the same house. This behaviour could have a significant impact on the fabric of our society and the cohesion of family groups.

### **Engaging in 'surface thinking'.**

Due to the number of notifications and constant interruptions on their phones, some students are not able to deeply engage with thinking. This has an impact on students' educational outcomes. Sustained concentration is required to understand challenging and complex concepts and problems.

### **Decrease in creativity.**

Students are constantly engaged with technology, so they have few moments of boredom. Boredom plays an important role in creativity, problem solving and self-reflection. It is only in those moments of boredom that you have time to reflect on your thoughts and feelings, to solve problems and be creative. Great ideas come, in part, from being bored and having the time to think.

### **An increase in online harassment impacting on young people's wellbeing.**

Most cyber harassment occurs outside of school hours. In a 2016 letter to parents I wrote "*... My main concerns are with the impact of social networking sites,...the texting of inappropriate messages and images and the misuse of technology to invade the privacy of others... this can lead to the proliferation and acceptance of gossip that becomes increasingly more malicious, insidious and widespread creating serious harm to those that these comments are directed towards...*".

### **Exposure to inappropriate age related content and 'sexting' or 'Imaged Based Abuse'.**

There are many sites on the internet which are not developmentally appropriate for young people to be accessing during adolescence. Some students are engaging in 'sexting' behaviour or image based abuse by sending explicit images of themselves to others or others forwarding images that they have been sent. These images are of young people, which is, from a legal perspective, electronic transmission of child pornography.

### **Future consequences.**

Employers are utilising technology to conduct background checks on potential employees. Every message and image that is posted, shared and emailed is available for someone else to view in the future. Employers may make judgements and decisions about people based on their digital footprint.

Following are some suggested strategies to support families to ensure that young people are safe online and develop healthy technology usage habits:

- Discuss with your children appropriate behaviour on the internet and what to do if they are subject to harassment or other inappropriate behaviour. Educating and developing personal skills are crucial.
- Discuss 'sexting' and the consequences of sending explicit images to others.
- Seek support from your local GP to complete a mental health assessment if you believe your child is demonstrating symptoms of technological addiction. This should be treated and supported in the same manner as any other form of addiction.
- Supervise internet usage. Vigilance is the key to safe online behaviour. Only allow access to technology in open family spaces whereby your child's online behaviour can be supervised or moderated and there is the increased opportunity for interaction with others.
- Become familiar with the websites and applications your child is using. If you do not understand how they work, it is difficult to monitor online behaviour. Use technology to become familiar with technology. There are many sites you can google that will assist in your understanding of the apps and sites children are using. Googling 'hidden apps' will assist in understanding where children might be hiding inappropriate content on their phones.

- Conduct spot checks of your child's device use. Monitor sites they have been accessing. Have the passcodes/passwords of your children's devices, or have an agreement that passwords are provided immediately when requested along with their device.
- Lock devices away when not in use or during the night when your child should be sleeping.
- Restrict device access when completing school work or studying, unless technology is required to complete the work. All notifications and non-educational apps and sites should be turned off.
- Be mindful of your own technology usage as a parent or carer and make a point of planning technology-free time with your family.
- Encourage your child to take part in activities that foster creative thinking and do not rely on technology e.g. sport, dance, art, outdoor activities.
- Utilise Apple's Screen Time function (Google has similar for Android users). This provides users with information on how much time a person spends on their phone, how many notifications they receive and how often they use their phone. This can be an effective way to set time limits and restrictions as well as allowing young people to realise how much time they are actually spending on their phone.
- There is additional support information on a wide range of digital/technology issues at <https://www.digitalcitizenship.nsw.edu.au/> and <https://www.esafety.gov.au/>
- You can report any significant cyber concerns to Toronto High School, the local police or make a report at <https://www.esafety.gov.au/>. Please take screen shots, copy URLs or web addresses, scanned printouts of any messages or photos and videos as evidence of inappropriate/concerning behaviour.

Toronto High School is extremely proactive with cyber safety education. Students are exposed to multiple holistic, group and individual interventions to support them in making better decisions with their technology usage. We will continue to educate our students. We will also continue our strict policy on appropriate device use in class and zero tolerance to cyber harassment.

If families require immediate support, we are able to provide a range of options including counselling and wellbeing support. Another option that has been well received by multiple families, is the removal of technology/devices from the home and placing the equipment in the Toronto High School vault for short or long term storage. This provides a strategy to overcome the constant arguing and pressuring by children of their parents for the technology/devices to be returned. We have found that it has made a difference to those students (and families) who require an extended and enforced break from technology. Please contact Mrs Lauren Anderson (Head Teacher Wellbeing) if you would like to access additional support from the school.

Technology is a wonderful tool if used responsibly and appropriately. We all need to participate in the digital world. I would ask that you spend time with your children discussing appropriate behaviour on the internet and develop family guidelines for safe and appropriate technological use at home.

Yours sincerely,



Mark McConville  
Principal