

Children, Schools and Excessive Screen Time: An Emerging Public Health Crisis
Professor Gaia Bernstein

Seton Hall University School of Law

(derived from my forthcoming book *The Over-Users: Technology Addiction and the Illusion of Control*)

In 2019, kids were already spending over five hours a day on their phone alone. About half of teens reported being “almost constantly online.” Through the pandemic, children’s time online went through the roof. We felt powerless to limit screen time. Significant evidence already points to a public health crisis. Studies reveal increased levels of anxiety, depression, attention deficits, as well as difficulties relating in person, lack of empathy, decreased creativity, lack of sleep and obesity. New major studies reveal brain scans showing impairments in children’s brains in areas crucial to development. So far, the American Academy of Pediatrics and the World Health Organization have issued recommendations to limit screen time for kids. But not much else has happened.

As adults we are torn about technology and kids. We believe our kids need technological skills to get ahead in life. But should we now leave our kids to their devices and assume they are fine and content? I suggest that although self-help measures have largely not worked, we can start collective action by focusing on use of technology in the classroom. In the last decade government policy and funding prioritized integrating technology into schools. We just lived through the era of “The more the better!” and “an iPad for every child.” Although studies reported mixed results on whether technology is effective in the classroom, the trajectory continued undisturbed. Then came the pandemic and accelerated this course. Students spend all day on their screens with mostly unlimited access to the Internet. Teachers desperate to keep

their students engaged incorporated the technology industry's most addictive products: social networks and games into their classes.

We have let the fox into the chicken coop. It will not leave on its own. I propose advocating to change government education priorities to limit screen time in schools and restrict the use of addictive products. Screen time adds up exponentially. What happens in school does not stay in school. It filters into the home through online school assignments and by signaling institutional approval. U.S. education laws and policy address equality and privacy when implementing technology in the classroom. The impact of excessive screen time is sorely missing.