

You've heard it all before. Too much media use is making our kids violent, giving them ADHD, and worse, making them stupid. But some academics are raising the alarm and saying that these widely held claims are often not based on a fair scientific appraisal of the evidence. Vaughan Bell, senior clinical lecturer at the Faculty of Brain Sciences, University College London and two colleagues expressed concern in a recent edition of the British Medical Journal (BMJ). They argued that claims that your child's i-Pad use is responsible for his intellectual and moral(!) decline often confuse correlation for causation, give undue weight to anecdotes and poor quality studies, and are misleading to parents and the public at large. They reviewed meta-analytic studies, studies that summarise the findings of many studies in a particular area, and some of the popular myths they hope to put to rest are discussed below.

Popular Criticism 1: Social media reduces empathy and social skills in teenagers. Used in excess, it results in autism-like traits.

Researchers found that adolescents' use of social networking sites enhances the quality of their existing relationships. Those who use social networks to avoid social difficulties have poorer wellbeing, while teenagers who use social networks to deal with social challenges have better personal and social outcomes. As for autism, Bell and his colleagues remind us that autism is a neurodevelopmental disorder, which means you are either born with it or not!

Popular Criticism 2: Videogames reduce the attention span of children, increase their impulsiveness and promote aggression.

Instead of reducing concentration, researchers have found small improvements in the neuropsychological performance (measured in terms of their auditory processing, executive functioning including attention, motor skills, spatial imagery, and visual processing) of teens who play video games. As for aggression, the evidence is mixed, and it appears that content matters above all. Aggressive thoughts and behaviours may increase in the short term after teens play violent games, but the evidence is not substantial. Instead of aggressive games, multiplayer cooperative games, which might lead to an increase in socially beneficial thoughts and behaviour, are increasingly popular. Overall, there is currently no evidence from neuroscience studies that typical internet use harms the adolescent brain. But it's not time to throw away the media restrictions altogether :What the authors did express concern over was online safety in areas such as online bullying and the non-consensual sharing of sexual pictures.

Another reason perhaps to keep media use to sane levels is that online time may be taking children and teens away from other useful activities. They point out that while video games and social media use may not be harmful in themselves (as long as the content is positive), it's important to consider what children are not doing in the time they spend playing. While there is little evidence that videogames will "fry" a child's brain, playing them when he should be studying will bring down his grades; the same goes for obesity. If your kids are glued to the X-box, they might not be playing as much outside and both their health and motor coordination may suffer as a result.

In my next article, I'll talk about sensible steps we can take to keep kids safe on the internet and while playing video games. Send your questions or concerns to amritk@gmail.com