

How much time should a child spend on a smartphone? M S Krishnan Kutty on parenting in a post-COVID world

edexlive.com/careers/2020/jul/14/how-much-time-should-a-child-spend-on-a-smartphone-m-s-krishnan-kutty-on-parenting-in-a-post-covid-13172.html



M S Krishnan Kutty

It's a confusing world. First, they tell you that smartphones are banned in school and college. And then, precisely one pandemic later, they tell you that school and college will be entirely done through that very same smartphone. If you're a parent who is trying to make sense of the new normal that has been brought about by the infamous Coronavirus, then perhaps it might help to tune into what **Professor M S Krishnan Kutty, Chairman of Career Competency Development at Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham** has to say. Excerpts from a long and jocular chat with a man whose pioneering work in Parenting 4.0 and getting kids to the careers they love has kept a lot of families on track.

There are a hundred digital conferencing and learning apps out there right now. Is your child actually learning something that is even remotely equivalent to what they would learn in a classroom?

I don't think so. I think if you really compare online learning and classroom learning, there is a vast difference. Whatever religion one practises — whether you are a Hindu, Christian, Muslim or Sikh — every house will have a prayer room. We all pray there every day. But when the real pain comes, you go to a temple, church, gurudwara or to a mosque. That's the difference. Every school is a temple of learning. There is no comparison

absolutely whatsoever between an online learning at home and a classroom learning it is totally different. From getting up, riding the bus, comradeship, lunch, class — that's a total experience.

Lots of parents are worried about sending their kids to school because they're afraid of the COVID-19 virus. What is your advice?

I always tell the parents not to panic. I have seen in most of the cases that the parents panic and pass on the worry to their children. I would like to tell all the parents that it's a virus and it's not going to vanish. If you look go back to the Spanish Flu of 1918, it took about two years for that pandemic to recede. Let's build up the confidence in our children by preparing them to face this virus for the next four to five years. The question then is: How do I transform my child to welcome this virus so that the virus doesn't attack him or her? You've heard of IQ and EQ, but we need to give them an Adversity Quotient. How does your child react to this adversity? Life is not going to be the same.

There's obviously a lot of dos and don'ts from medical experts. What are your key takeaways here?

You have to make your child physically and mentally fit. You know, if you look at the history of this particular pandemic, why did so many people die in the UK, Italy, USA? It's because their body was not immune to it. But if you look at an Indian child, he/she can survive any adversity because they are not as soft-natured as children abroad. My advice is, please feed them large lots of vegetables, get them to exercise every day for at least one hour. If you are not able to move out if you are in an apartment, make them climb the stairs. Let them dance for half an hour to 45 minutes. The physical fitness is what makes a child immune to any sort of virus. For mental fitness, play a game of chess with them, give them a mathematical problem and make them solve it.

Should parents reevaluate the career choices that kids may have made because of the churn in the economy or the impact of the pandemic, in general?

Everything is uncertain. We are only looking at predictions now, but every prediction could be uncertain. But I would say that even before this pandemic, the Indian economy was going through a sort of a depression. It is time for us to think about what the future of our children is going to be. We must be able to find out the strengths of our children and relate it to the career that they are going to choose when they complete their degree. So whether you decide a career based on today's demand, such as healthcare, which is going to boom for the next couple of years, or anything else, there will always be scope. Don't think airlines, hospitality and travel are down now so I will dissuade my child from wanting to become a pilot. Check out mychoicemyfuture.com/amrita. It's a psychometric test that can help you decide which areas your child is strong in.

Do you think that parents have learnt to listen to their kids or understand them better having been stuck at home with them for months on end?

I think as you rightly said it's a blessing in disguise that the parents are able to spend so much time with their children. In fact, you learn a lot by watching their children 24 hours. So, you know, there is a lot of learning from the children to the parent and from the parent to the children. Every parent needs to watch what the child is doing. What time he is getting up, how much time they spend on a laptop or even a smartphone and on the internet.

Is there an ideal age or time that you recommend for giving a child a smartphone? These days, we see infants playing with smartphones.

It is not advisable for a child to look at a small screen for more than 20 to 40 minutes, maximum of an hour. You're asking a child to look at a small screen for 3-4 hours and that would probably damage the eyesight and the brain cells. The radiation from the smartphone is also dangerous. As you get older your neurons get detached from each other and cause a host of neurological conditions. So, a parent cannot let a child watch a screen from morning till evening and to make that happen, the parents should not be on WhatsApp all day long.

Today, we see a lot of parents just giving their children their phones, putting on some cartoons on YouTube or just giving them a game to play because it's the easiest way to keep them occupied and keep them quiet — because very often they find that they need a little bit of relief here and there. And honestly, nobody can fault them for it. It's a dangerous thing. In fact, one of my friends who is a doctor and a child specialist said that a child under three years must not even look at a screen, let alone television. This is the time when the child's brain starts slowly developing. So there must not be any distraction by looking at a particular focus that's on the screen.

But the new normal is all about online classes. How does one strike a balance?

For the next five to ten years, since we are going to have home-schooling and online lessons in addition to studying at school, we need to limit the watching on the small screen into forty minute periods. Each house must have a huge screen and the process of learning must move from a smaller smartphone to a larger TV if you can afford it.

There's also this worry that kids aren't watching suitable content. There's so much pornography and dangerous stuff online these days. How can parents stay ahead here?

Are they watching the right thing on the screen, is a big question today. Today, there are so many sad things happening. You can go to YouTube and see whatever you're not supposed to see. How does a parent combat this? A parent must know what apps are available on a smartphone. They must be smarter. They must be able to operate this apps better than the children. They will listen to you if the mom knows better than the son and the daughter. No child is going to listen to the parents if they think their parents don't know how to operate a phone except how to pick up a call. If your child knows your

ignorance with the smartphone as well as on the laptop, they will take advantage. I have seen a lot of children getting spoiled because the mom and dad do not know what exactly is being watched by a child. Monitor them on a periodical basis. Don't start policing them, but spend time with them when they watch something.

How can a student be self-disciplined during online classes? Is there something that parents can do to help?

In terms of online teaching, it's a learning process for both the teacher as well as the students. A couple of months back no one knew what Zoom was, but now more than 70% of the people know what it is. It is not easy for a teacher to transition from a classroom setting with 40 students to conducting a class in front of a camera. It's easy to tease and make fun of our teachers, but it is not right, I have seen a lot of teachers whose knowledge is beyond any imagination, who fumble when it comes to teaching online. So you must give some time for our teachers to get themselves used to it.

How can teachers engage students during online classes? Many people complain that students zone out within ten minutes and start browsing something else and that teachers are lost.

The teacher has to engage with students. She could call out students' names and take the attendance. She should interact with the students e parent allow the child to go out? I think, first of all, parents must stop talking about the teacher who is for the first time making an attempt to teach online and encourage the teachers rather than discourage them. I think the discipline part must be there from both the teacher as well as students.

With social distancing and new norms all around, students will miss out on friendship and fun. Will their social learning and skills be affected?

As people grow up, friendship is what they're really missing from the school and college days. You have to say goodbye to this type of gathering for the next couple of years. It's certainly a sad thing to even imagine that our children are not allowed to be in a group. It's going to put our children in a depressed situation and the parents have a big role to play to get them out. You can safely support a child with positivity. If they enjoy spending some time on Zoom with their friends, please allow that. You must be a little more flexible in giving some allowance to your child to do what they want, with some monitoring, of course.

What is more important is spending time with them. Spending time with a child is doing what they want to do, not what you want to do. You need to have a timetable and discipline your child. When you don't plan the day for your child and the child plans the day for himself or herself, then the question of the wrong thoughts coming into their minds arises.

Depression is a huge issue during the lockdown. What are some of the biggest signs that a child is depressed in some measure? Signs that parents can spot, especially?

The biggest problem parents face today is distraction. This distraction leads to lack of concentration. The maximum concentration a child can be for maybe about 40 minutes to 45 minutes. Not more than that. So, as a parent, when you find the level of concentration is diminishing, there is a problem. This can be noticed by a parent through your child's gestures, facial expressions, hand movements, the way you sit and so on. A parent is the best judge as to whether a child is able to concentrate. I think that the moment your child turns around because of a sound, the problem starts here. This is a sign that your child needs something else to bring him/her back to online learning.

Careers After Corona is a series that has been curated and produced by EdexLive in partnership with Amrita Vishwa Vidyapeetham and Amrita School of Engineering