



## FEATURED EXPERT

### An Interview with Andrew Rosen, PhD, ABPP, FAACP & Ryan Seidman, PsyD



**Q. There is new information and data regarding a rise in psychiatric problems in children and adolescents, especially anxiety issues. Why is there such an increase in the last 10 years?**

**A:** Several issues have impacted children's mental health over the last decade. While Covid has been linked to the rise in anxiety and depression in kids, other societal issues, including increased screen time and social media, academic pressure and success, changes in family dynamics and the social stigma related to mental health, have also contributed to what many call a mental health crisis in our youth.

**Q. Can we tie this growing anxiety back to Covid and the resulting effects of not being in school?**

**A:** Covid has changed the learning and social paradigm for children because it was sudden and drastic and long term. It was also associated with danger and death. So, anxiety was injected into everyone and especially children. It made the unthinkable very possible and took away the feeling of safety in our children. In addition, the lack of face-to-face socialization changed the scope of how our youth interact and communicate with one another. Upon returning to an in-person learning environment, anxiety around peer socialization and communication significantly increased.

**Q. Would you say that screens are addicting?**

**A:** Screens are clearly addicting. Just look at the stats and you can see an exponential increase in the number of hours that children spend on screens. No other activity triggers such compulsive behavior. In addition, there is ample evidence that the game makers and social media developers have inserted ways to make continuation of screen time almost impossible to stop. Screens have also provided an environment where those with social anxiety no longer need to communicate face to face.

**Q. What is the cause of this reliance on electronics instead of human interaction?**

**A:** Reliance on electronics is easy, readily available, and less complicated than the challenges that can come with face-to-face human interaction. Rejection, embarrassment, and social humiliation can be avoided when communicating behind a screen rather than in person. The challenge becomes that children then lack the appropriate social skills taught through real-life interaction with peers and caregivers. The ability to understand and read non-verbal cues such as body language and facial expressions has become significantly reduced as a result of the reliance on technology.

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**Q: *What can we do about the growing addiction to screens?***

**A:** It will be necessary for parents of children of all ages to set firm limits on the number of hours spent as well as the types of screens that are accessible. Children are not capable of exerting self-control and cannot be blamed for their addiction. Caregivers need to better understand the consequences of screens and electronics. In addition, education around ways to safeguard our technology for our children is key. Access needs to be limited in terms of what they are able to view and who they are able to interact with while using their devices.

**Q: *What is the parents' responsibility in this rise of anxiety?***

**A:** Parents need to examine their own usage of electronics and confront their own denial about it. It has been all too easy to encourage children to use electronics to babysit them. The lack of real family interaction as well as peer interaction has led to an actual defect in children's capacity to tolerate various aspects of life. As a result, anxiety becomes a symptom. Adults and caregivers now spend so much of their lives, both personal and professional, utilizing technology and screens. Modeling realistic ways to use technology for our youth is key. Setting up "screen free" times throughout the day, setting time limits on usage, and promoting social opportunities outside of the home are important ways for caregivers to support a decrease in anxiety related to technology.

**Q: *Are kids safer being at home (and therefore with potentially more access to electronics)?***

**A:** The paradox is that parents have mistakenly thought that if children are home they are safer. However, they may be safer in terms of reality dangers, but the dangers of virtual reality are much greater and much more common and likely.

**Q: *Is it okay to have kids look at a screen while in a restaurant?***

**A:** It is really not okay. Children need this time to be with their parents and siblings even if they resist interaction or seem bored. Modeling appropriate conversation, practicing social skills and communication, and picking up on nonverbal cues, are extremely important elements that children can practice when in a restaurant. If parents feel they need to use technology as a babysitter when out then children are better off staying home.

**Q: *How can parents better strategize and control screentime?***

**A:** Depending on the age, screen time should be dependent on completion of other activities beforehand. School work, family time, exercise, meals, and hygiene have to occur first. Electronics should not be available after bedtime either. Using electronics as an incentive for completing necessary tasks throughout the day is often helpful. Creating a schedule of when electronics can be used and for how long is key.