

# Help kids to kick social media addiction

Tech entrepreneurs are tough when it comes to limiting their children's time online so let's set our own an example

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**W**hen I interviewed Matt Hancock last week the minister in charge of digital strategy revealed

that he did not allow his three children a smartphone or to play on the computer. What's more, he leaves his own phone at the door when he comes home. One of the most ambitious men in cabinet, and the only one with his own app, is nevertheless happy to cut himself off from social media for hours at a time. "I can ring people back," he says.

The philanthropist Melinda Gates told me the same. Her children don't have smartphones and only use a computer in the kitchen. Her husband Bill, the Microsoft co-founder, spends hours in his office reading books while everyone else is refreshing their homepage. The most sought-after private school in Silicon Valley, the Waldorf School of the Peninsula, bans technical devices for

the under-11s and teaches the children of eBay, Apple, Uber and Google staff to make go-karts, knit and cook. Facebook's Mark Zuckerberg wants his daughters to read Dr Seuss books and play outside rather than use Messenger Kids. Steve Jobs's children had strict limits on how much technology they used at home.

It's astonishing if you think about it: the more money you make out of the tech industry, the more you appear to shield your family from its effects. What do they know that we don't? Since they're the experts, shouldn't the rest of us be worried? If Michael Gove had announced, on becoming environment secretary,

The more money you make out of tech, the less you let kids use it

that he would never let his children eat meat again, I would have thought twice about letting my children eat a hamburger. And yet they all have iPhones and laptops.

What about those smartphone games that help with times tables, grammar and problem solving? They're a waste of time, according to a report by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development. It found that schools that invested heavily in computers showed "no noticeable improvement" in their international ranking in reading, maths and English. At best, they merely help research and revision at home.

Facebook and Snapchat are even harder to justify. Sean Parker, the former president of Facebook, admitted last year that "God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains", and said he now felt "something of a conscientious objector" because social media was deliberately designed to keep people hooked. Tristan Harris, 33, a former design ethicist at Google who studied behavioural psychology, now warns that tech companies use the same tactics as the gambling industry, and last month co-founded the Center for Humane Technology to help children navigate the online world.

Facebook, Instagram and Tinder, he says, give "intermittent rewards", meaning that every time users open them there is a chance they will get a "like", a message or a date, but nothing that increases their real friendship group. Nor will they get anything real from the next series on Netflix or the latest Twitter storm.

Instagram and Snapchat in particular are said to increase teenagers' sense of anxiety and depression.

We're reaching a tipping point at which social media is bringing out the worst in human nature more often than it encourages our better selves. This week Sadiq Khan read out the racist tweets he received on becoming mayor of London in 2016, which no one has dared say to his face. Yesterday Facebook was accused of becoming a "beast", used to incite hatred and violence against Rohingya Muslims in Burma by two United Nations

A psychologist says we should check email just three times a day

human rights experts.

Even when trying to be positive, adults are often the worst addicts, tweeting endlessly about their children rather than engaging with them, and choreographing their lives on Instagram rather than living them. I'm not on Facebook or Instagram but when the family tracked who spent most time on their phone it was still me.

James Hewitt, a psychologist, says our phones increasingly block creativity. He identifies three types of attention: low, when we are relaxed and most imaginative; high, when we are focussed and achieving; and where most people now spend

their time, semi-focused and multi-screening, in the middle. He advises checking emails only three times a day.

Britain can't, like President Macron in France, simply ban phones from schools. Tech giants can be bullied to a certain extent into limiting children's access to material as Mr Hancock suggests, but ultimately we need to regulate ourselves.

No one should need to go to the lengths of Erik Hagerman, the former Nike executive who shut himself off from every news source on a pig farm in Idaho after the election of Donald Trump. But we do need to start mimicking the tech entrepreneurs and learn to use the internet cleverly rather than being exploited by it. Head teachers should expect pupils to check in their phones when they arrive at school. Parents need to set tough guidelines for children, and set an example themselves. Let kids bake cakes rather than watch YouTube and they're more likely to be stimulated and become future tech tycoons. It doesn't cost anything to act like Gates, whose reading habit is not expensive even if his private plane is. If he can run an empire without constantly checking his phone, we can organise our lives to use, rather than feel abused, by social media.