

# Children consumed by unreal world of continual visions

By Andrew Stevenson

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Australians have adopted smartphones and tablet computers as the standard operating platform for their lives - at work, at home and at play.

But it is not just adults who are on the way to permanent connection. As parents readily testify, many children don't just use the new devices, they are consumed by them.

"These devices have an almost obsessive pull toward them," says Larry Rosen, professor of psychology at California State University and author of *iDisorder: Understanding Our Obsession With Technology and Overcoming its Hold On Us*.

"How can you expect the world to compete with something like an iPad 3 with a high definition screen, clear video and lots of interactivity: how can anything compete with that?"

Once upon a time it was just television use that parents worried about. Now screen use by school students may begin at home in the morning with television, continue with interactive whiteboards, laptops and computers in class, smartphones at lunch and on the bus and then continue long into the evening with some combination of TV, computer, phone and tablet.

According to Wayne Warburton, a psychologist at Macquarie University, US studies show that, beyond the school gates, teenagers are using screens or listening to music for more than 7½ hours a day; in Australia it is more than five hours and rising.

Authoritative standards on appropriate use levels are limited. The American Academy of Pediatrics has recommended parents discourage television for children under two and to limit screen time for older children to less than two hours a day of quality programming.

The guidelines, says Professor Rosen, are "ludicrous". He said parents should have weekly meetings with their children from the time they pick up their first device "listening for signs of kids showing obsession, addiction and lack of attention".

Dr Warburton, author of a new book on media use, *Growing Up Fast and Furious*, says evidence is emerging to link screen use with disrupted sleep patterns and growing attention deficit problems. "Parents say to me they would love to put some limits on their kids' media use but that it is so much a part of their identity - playing the same games as their friends, being involved with the same media - that they feel they would be losing friends, losing identity and having problems if they didn't have access."

Dr Warburton says parents really struggle to cut the access back.

And, increasingly, so do children. Among video game players aged 8-18, research shows that typically "8 per cent find it is impacting negatively on their life", he said. Gemma Ackroyd,

the principal at Lane Cove Public school, is also concerned about the "amount of visual stimulus" children are receiving and worries they increasingly require it to engage in learning.

"I'm worried about a loss of time spent thinking creatively and thinking imaginatively, because all the time there has to be visual stimulus otherwise [they say] 'I'm bored'," she said.