

Take a look, it's in a book

An OSF pediatrics expert is reminding people, especially kids, about the benefits of reading for fun, not just when it's required

As a pediatrics expert and mother of an eight-year-old, Emily Isom has seen the screen time debate firsthand.

"Kids are being introduced to technology early," says Isom, a certified medical assistant in pediatrics at OSF HealthCare. "COVID was one of the reasons. Kids did schoolwork on their devices. That turns into using technology throughout the day. They get attached and addicted to scrolling and swiping. It's glued to their hands."

One way to break the cycle? Good old-fashioned ink and paper. Isom is reminding people, young and old, about the pitfalls of excessive screen time and the benefits of reading for fun, not just when you have to.

The concerns

Isom says constant screen time can weaken kids' memory and concentration.

"It's hard for a kid to focus on a reading assignment in school because they are so used to quick swipes on their device," Isom says. Long term, Isom says this can lead to poor grades, missed academic opportunities and even a diagnosis of a learning disorder.

"Anxiety is also a big concern. I see this in older kids," Isom adds. "Bullying online causes a lot of anxiety. There's social pressure. They want to be not left out. Who's texting me? What's going on online? Am I going to miss this party? Is there something going on I should be involved in? They focus on this instead of schoolwork." Isom also says kids are exposed online to traumatic news stories and adult content, leading to confusion about the world, stress and other mental health concerns.

The benefits

"If kids read on a regular basis, it's going to sharpen their mind. It's going to help them excel in academics. It's going to give them a more open mind to the world. It's going to help with memory," Isom says. They'll be more curious, she adds, not just about the book but about the world. This can pay off when they're exposed to other cultures in college and the workplace. Books can also be an escape from everyday stress.

"Reading for fun [not just when it's required for school] helps you find things you're interested in," Isom adds. "You might find a book you had no idea about. You open the book and realize 'I like reading. I like this genre. This is different and cool.' Then you keep reading. You want to learn more. It's like being on the edge of your seat with a movie you can't stop watching. It brings happiness. It's almost magical."

Tips for adults

How can parents and teachers get young ones to rediscover their love for reading?

- Let your child pick the book, but give them options that are fun and light. Save the books on heavier topics for when they get older.
- Make books available throughout your home. Place books on shelves or nightstands in bedrooms, living rooms and playrooms.
- Let kids see you read.

"If they see you read, they're going to read," Isom says.

- Read with your child.

"I can't stress that enough. Reading with your child is going to get them to read more," Isom says. "When you're with them, showing them words and interacting with them, you're challenging their brain. Kids love that. They say, 'Hey mom, can we read this book tonight?' Next thing you know, it becomes a habit. It's a nightly thing."

- Create a reward system for reading. For example, put a sticker on a posterboard for every book read. At 10 stickers, the child gets a reward like a toy or special meal. Isom says after a while, the child might forget about the rewards because they've developed a love for reading.

Traditional or tech?

We live in a digital world where some people read on electronic devices like a Kindle. Is that OK, or should you stick to paper books?

Isom says e-readers are fine since it's not a constant scroll like social media.

Learn more

Read more about keeping your child healthy on the [OSF HealthCare website](#). Pediatric care at OSF includes [local clinics](#) like the one Isom works at and [OSF HealthCare Children's Hospital of Illinois](#) in Peoria.

OSF also offers [resources](#) if your child's screen time requires a visit to a mental health provider. Some resources are available even if you are not an OSF patient.