Why Access to Screens Is Lowering Kids’ Social Skills

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![Image](https://via.placeholder.com/150)

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**Kids read emotions better after being deprived of electronic media**

People have long suspected that there’s a cost to all this digital data all the time, right at our fingertips. Now there’s a study out of UCLA that might prove those digital skeptics right. In the study, kids who were deprived of screens for five days got much better at reading people’s emotions than kids who continued their normal screen-filled lives.

The California research team’s findings, published in the journal *Computers in Human Behavior* this month tries to analyze the impact digital media has on humans’ ability to communicate face-to-face.

As an experiment, 51 sixth graders from a public school in Southern California were sent to outdoor education camp, spending five whole days completely deprived of TV, phone and
Internet. Contrary to the kids’ expectations, they survived just fine and actually had genuine fun.

The first pool of kids was then compared to another group of 54 sixth graders from the same school who had not yet attended the camp, but had spent the previous five days with their normal amount of screen time.

Both sets of students were given photos of people expressing emotions—sadness, anger, joy, anxiety and so on, before the camp and after the camp. Both sets of students were also shown video of people interacting and displaying emotions. The students who had been to camp got much better at discerning how the people in the photos and the videos were feeling after that five day period. They scored much higher at recognizing non-verbal emotional cues (facial expressions, body language, gestures) than they had before the camp, while the scores of the students who had not been deprived of screens did not change at all.

With online training courses being used for almost everything now, this new study may give teachers, parents and administrators pause on such widespread use of digital media in education. "Many people are looking at the benefits of digital media in education, and not many are looking at the costs," said Patricia M. Greenfield, a distinguished professor of psychology at UCLA and senior author of the study. "Decreased sensitivity to emotional cues is one of the costs—understanding the emotions of other people. The displacement of in-person social interaction by screen interaction seems to be reducing social skills."

Lead author Yalda T. Uhls, a senior researcher with the Children’s Digital Media Center, said she hopes that people won’t merely take away the idea that all screens are bad, but that face-to-face time for young people is an important part of the socialization process.

According to a survey given to the study’s participants, the kids spent an average of four-and-a-half hours texting, watching television and playing video games during a single typical school day. According to Uhls, this is on the low end—many children and teenagers spend more than seven-and-a-half-hours a day interacting with a screen of some sort. And when interacting with a screen, they aren’t interacting with a human.

“You can’t learn non-verbal emotional cues from a screen in the way you can learn it from face-to-face communication,” Uhls said.