

Where You Are

S6 Episode 3 – Work in Progress: Building Healthy Tech Use Habits With Your Kids

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Char Black: This is Where You Are, a podcast that helps families and their children promote their mental health and wellness. I'm Char Black.

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Michelle Horn: And I'm Michelle Horn. You may remember me as the previous host of Where You Are for seasons one to three. While I have moved on to a new role with BC Children's Hospital, I still listen to all of the episodes and I'm so excited to be back co-hosting with Char. Especially for a topic that I know a lot of families have questions about, including my own.

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Char Black: That's awesome, Michelle. I'm so excited to have you co-host today. What does tech use look like in your family? I know for me, it's always a bit of a struggle because I don't actually know what the right thing to do is. Sometimes I think, when do we use cell phones, how long can they watch TV? And so I find it difficult to know as a parent how to set rules and how to set the structure, and I'm constantly questioning myself and wondering what will work best for us and for my kids as well.

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Michelle Horn: Yeah, no, I feel totally the same way. I have two kids, eight and 10. I feel like it's always a balance, trying to find that balance between giving your kids access to tech so they can use it to connect with friends, versus making sure that they're being safe, that they're using tech appropriately. And technology is really just all around us. Our kids are surrounded by it at home, through their social circles, as they get older for school, and that can bring a lot of really exciting opportunities, but it can also bring some challenges. So in today's episode we'll explore the connection between tech use and brain development, ways that technology can help with learning and have other benefits. Also the key challenges families are facing and how you can help promote a healthier relationship with technology for your family. So let's begin that conversation. So our first guest today on the podcast is Dr. Shimi Kang, an award-winning medical doctor and researcher known around the world for her research and expertise in technology use and kids. She's also a bestselling author of *The Dolphin Parent* and *the Tech*

Solution. You might remember her from a previous Where You Are episode, in season two, where she shared helpful ways to promote healthy tech habits at home. Welcome back to Where You Are, Shimi.

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Dr. Shimi Kang: Thank you so much. I'm so grateful to be here, and for all the wonderful work that you do.

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Michelle Horn: Oh, thank you so much. We're so lucky to have you on the podcast today. So we know there's a lot going on for children and youth in terms of brain development as they grow. Shimi, from a brain science perspective, can you start us off by telling us what is the connection between tech use and brain development?

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Dr. Shimi Kang: Yeah, so we're still learning. I mean, the brain is the most complex thing in the known universe, with 100 billion interconnected neurons. And so we were always learning about the human brain. The human brain goes under rapid development, prior to the age of 25, definitely in adolescence as the hormones and body changes, so does the brain. That happens to be the time when tech is really being used more and more, especially young people in their teens years having their own cell phones more independence. Then when we look at content, we know that technology use is linked, not causative, but definitely linked to anxiety, depression, body image disturbance, increase in social skills deficits, including the most basic of empathy. We know that it's linked to sleep deprivation and sleep problems.

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Char Black: Shimi, that's so interesting to hear about those links to mental health, especially in the teen years. Can you also speak a little bit more about some of the research on tech use and brain development for younger kids?

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Dr. Shimi Kang: So in my book, The Tech Solution, I talked about a study that showed myelin, which is kind of the insulation of the brain's neurons, and MRI scans of very young children under the age of five, actually showed deficits in that myelin. And it was such an important study, because we don't see structural changes in the brain, even in very serious... concussion, schizophrenia, even sometimes strokes. So that was really concerning and we don't know, is it the blue light? Having said that, we wouldn't be here without tech and there's lots and lots of benefits, but to answer your question, it has a significant impact on the brain. I'm really hopeful with more education, we will use tech to serve us to improve our health and wellbeing, and our learning and not the other way around, which is a little bit of what happened when it was first introduced, because we didn't have this information.

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Char Black: Thanks Shimi. As a mom of two kids that are age five and eight, I'm always interested in the research that's coming out, and I know other parents that are listening will be interested as well, as well as some of the other positives that come with tech use in our lives. I also want to bring into the conversation Shimi's daughter, Gia. Gia is 14 years old and she uses tech as a tool to help with dyslexia. And she believes that her dyslexia is a gift that gives her the ability to see the world in a different, exciting, and refreshing way. Welcome Gia.

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Gia: Hi. Thank you so much for having me, and I'm so excited to be here.

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Char Black: Gia, can you tell us about what tech use looks like for you on a typical day?

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Gia: So obviously tech is a big part of all of our lives, but for me mostly tech is revolved with school. So we use our computer a lot, writing essays, stuff like that, as well as in my downtime after school, watching TV or drawing on my iPad, or something like that, as well as with communicating with others, being able to have that social interaction on iMessage and stuff like that.

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Char Black: And Gia, are there ways in which technology helps you learn? You said you did use it at school, but specifically supporting your dyslexia.

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Gia: Yeah, so there are a lot of different tools that I do use for dyslexia. A big one being dyslexia font, which is on my computer. So I get my Bs and Ds mixed up quite a bit. So the dyslexia font will bold the end of the B or bold, the end of the D, which makes it a lot easier for me to read. As well as Google Read& Write when I'm writing my essays for English, I can just speak into the mic and it'll translate it all for me, which is very, very helpful with spelling and grammar issues.

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Char Black: Thanks Gia. And earlier in this conversation, Michelle and I were both talking about trying to figure out how to best balance tech use for our young kids. So I'd love to know in your life, how do you balance technology use with your schoolwork and other activities? How do you manage how much you're using tech, and for what?

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Gia: So in my household our Wi-Fi shuts off at 8: 00 PM. So that really helps with me being on tech two hours before I go to bed, just to really calm my mind. I feel like that's very helpful, as well as in school our phones are banned, bell to bell. So no phones in school, which I think really balances. Like, no social media during school, which helps during school as well.

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Michelle Horn: Earlier in the conversation, Shimi, you mentioned a few of the challenges that come along with tech use and some of the potential negative outcomes, including anxiety and depression, body image. Can you speak to some of the key challenges parents and caregivers of younger kids, so toddler and elementary aged children are facing when it comes to technology?

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Dr. Shimi Kang: What we're seeing is younger and younger exposure to tech and also younger and younger marketing. Really important to underline that tech is designed to be addictive, including for young children. The industry is not trying to destroy brains, they're just trying to make money, their businesses, and often it's a side effect they don't know about, or maybe they know about it and they're not really wanting to face it. So I'll give some examples. So when Gia was little, somehow she found YouTube videos, and it was just some teenage kids who would open up those bags and there'd be a gift, and it seems like no big deal. However, even that whole concept has a gambling component to it, which can prime the brain for expectation and reward. So that's from a content point of view, and then young children need eye contact, we need face-to-face. Now it's really easy to hand that baby a phone, they'll be engaged, even if it's photos, let's say of themselves. It still separates all of those really good nourishing moments for that young brain.

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Michelle Horn: Thank you. And can you outline for older children or teenagers, what are particular challenges that come for parents with older kids and teens, with technology?

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Dr. Shimi Kang: Yeah, so the more they're on it, the more they're going to be exposed to the addictive platforms, and social media is a huge one. Also online shopping, video gaming, and then the gaming now, you're often being sold things. We have to keep in mind that addictive nature and also that list of mental health correlations. Also all of the social media platforms will have AI bots embedded in it. The industry, initially the competition was the race to the bottom of the brain stem to get people kind of glued. Now it's called the race towards intimacy. And what they're talking about is, let's say Gia had Snapchat, that bot could talk to her about volleyball, her music choices, and often it's more easy to talk to that bot than a real friend or real person. So that is something to look out for. And really with young people, it's not about tech being good or bad, but educating and teaching them and showing them through role modeling, that the tech you consume is healthy, that is serving your health, your benefit, and you're using that junk tech in limitations, and you're avoiding that toxic tech.

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Michelle Horn: How do you have that conversation with your kids, knowing that there can be these beneficial or healthier use of tech, but then also some technology is not healthy or it could even be risky? So how do you talk to your kids about that and have that conversation in a way that's understandable for them?

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Dr. Shimi Kang: So my first book was called *The Dolphin Parent*, and it set out this parenting style, and really the idea there is first of all, you're having the conversation. You're not what's called a jellyfish parent, which is like, "Oh my god, all the kids are on their phones, what can you do about it?" So you firm up a bit, you're not a permissive parent, a jellyfish parent, and you say, "I am the parent, my job is to raise a healthy, happy child, and I'm seeing problems here." But you also don't want to be a shark, which is like, "Okay, you're 15 and you've been playing video games for two years, and all of a sudden I'm going to just cancel it or come across with overly restrictive, aggressive or micromanaging techniques." That's the shark. What you want is what we call authoritative parenting, or I call it the dolphin style. Your firm in your conversation, in your stance, of what your family values are, yet you are flexible in that as well. So my own example would be, I have three kids, they all have different personalities, they're all different ages. So we're firm, that we generally want to consume healthy tech. We will consume tech that lifts us up or might improve my health. So I use mindfulness apps, music, community building, and creativity, but I have to be flexible with their individual ages, their interests, if their traveling with their sports team, sleepovers. So there's that adaptable style. And when we come with that approach, and with empathy and collaboration, we're set up for great conversations.

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Michelle Horn: That's so helpful. Something I often hear from my 10-year-old, is if there's a certain video game that I feel is inappropriate, what I hear is, "But all my friends are playing it, why can't I?" And I expect I'm going to hear more of that in the years to come. And I hear from a lot of other parents that that's something that they struggle with. Any advice on that?

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Dr. Shimi Kang: Yeah, so the tool is called *The Keys*, and you can see it in the show notes, but the K stands for kill the jellyfish and shark. Okay? Be that dolphin parent, be it centered, be calm, take a breath and say, "Okay, I'm going to have this conversation." The E is for empathy, so make a statement of empathy. "You know what? I can see you love this game. I really can feel you don't want to be excluded. That would feel really hard. I don't want you to be excluded." Put yourself in their shoes and make those statements of empathy. And then the Y is your goals. So make a statement where you're saying "Your goal is to have really good success in school and in your friends, and in your soccer. And part of that is going to bed on time or keeping up with your homework or seeing your friends in real life," or whatever have you. You have to tie it to their goals. So the Y is a statement saying, "Your goal is..." whatever their passions and interests are and how tech may interfere with that. And then the S is for success. Always end with optimism. "I'm sure we can figure this out. I'm with you. We'll find a way that works for everyone." So it's really based on the science of motivation. And so when you hear it you might be like, "Oh, that sounds too easy." But these components, empathy, autonomy, and optimism are what has been proven to move the needle in tough situations.

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Char Black: You are listening to *Where You Are*. I'm Char Black. To learn more about tech use, including resources that can be helpful to parents and caregivers, visit our website at

keltymentalhealth.ca/techincheck. You can also find our webinar recording on navigating tech use at keltymentalhealth.ca/events.

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Michelle Horn: Are you busy and overwhelmed supporting your child's mental health and wellness? And could you use someone to talk you who can really relate? Contact a trained Kelty Family peer support worker who can offer a non-judgmental listening ear and connect you to mental health resources in your community. Connect by phone, email, or zoom. Find out more at eltymentalhealth.ca/contact-us.

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Char Black: So Gia, with everything that we've just been talking about, are there any challenges related to tech use that you see coming up among your friends or your classmates?

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Gia: I definitely see a lot of social challenges, like we are losing some of our community at school due to social media. And prior to that, kids at my school are sitting in the back of their classrooms, on their computer, watching social media, or online shopping, when they're really supposed to be listening. And I also see this as even at the end of my school day when the bell rings, all the phones come out, which is really hard to watch. But for me, I don't use social media. Even though I am probably the only one in my grade that doesn't use social media, I still feel very happy and confident. Even though sometimes there are challenges, sometimes I do feel left out. But I know in myself that this is a benefit for me in the long run. How I treat myself is very important, self-love is very important.

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Char Black: Thanks Gia, for sharing that. Gia, given what you just said in terms of the second the bell rings, everyone's pulling out their cell phones, do you feel peer pressure to use social media or use more tech? And how do you respond to your peers?

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Gia: So I have actually been experiencing that recently. There is a lot of pressure to have social media like, "Hey Gia, download it, it's fun. See this?" But I just know myself that social media isn't maybe not the best for me, and that's just not something that I want to spend my time on. I'd rather something I really love. But yeah, social media is beneficial though. If they are asking me to download it, it could be for a good reason. Like, "Hey Gia, see this new drawing app on Snapchat," or something like that.

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Char Black: And Shimi, how can parents talk to their children if they're facing peer pressure to get a phone, to get social media, to join a gaming community, or whatever else is available?

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Dr. Shimi Kang: Yeah, I'll go back to the keys and give you the same, because it's really the same principle. So be like, "All right, I need to find a time to address it." Often eye-eye, direct eye contact isn't great for young people. Go for a walk with them, or you're driving, or shooting basketball hoops or what have you. So make the intention to be that collaborative parent. Make a statement of empathy and say, "Look, I can't imagine what it's like to be the only one or one of the few. It must be hard to feel the pressure or to feel left out." So really start with that. And then again, your goal, if we're just talking in this situation with Gia, I'd be like, "Your goal..." she loves her sports, "... is to play volleyball and basketball, and soccer. And if you want to do all those things, then it really is a question about how are you going to manage it." And so I'd end with her goals and then end with success. It's like, when you're ready or when you want to talk about this, I'm sure we can find a way. I'm here for you, I'll help guide you. So it's the same concepts, is the empathy, the autonomy, always bringing it back to them. Their goals, their health, their wellbeing. I mean there's so much that social media is connected to that's not that hard to show how it might interfere with their goals. And then ending with that sense of support and success.

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Char Black: Thanks, Shimi. And so, given all the challenges we just covered, we know there are a lot of things to be concerned or at least cautious about in terms of using tech. How can parents monitor what their child is doing online while still wanting to respect their privacy?

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Dr. Shimi Kang: Right, yeah. I'm going to back up a little bit, and I always say, don't give your child a phone. Let them borrow yours first. And that way you are keeping control. And it's a bit of a contract. Just like you don't want to give your child a car, you want them to show that they have safety and we guide them on the roads with a driver's license and all of that. And tech is super powerful, so start with that. And so you're establishing things upfront. Same with the iPad, same with their own laptop. And part of that, giving it or letting them borrow your family one, is that there's going to be some expectations in roles, which means I'm going to check screen time, we're going to put controls in for content, Wi-Fi is going to shut off at this time. However you want to monitor it is really good to have it upfront. If you haven't done that, it's not too late. You can say, "Hey, I listened to this podcast, and I realized that wasn't part of what we decided, but from this point forward, if I'm paying your phone bill or managing this..." It's a little bit tough, but it is possible to do that, and reset some of those habits. Coming from a place, again, of love and support as opposed to punishment.

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Michelle Horn: Awesome. Thanks Shimi. A follow-up question on that option, I hear parents talk about, "Well, what is the right age that my kid can start using social media, or the right age that they can have their own phone, or get an iPad?" And do you provide guidance to parents and caregivers that is age-based, or is it more on your kid's personality and where they're at developmentally? Or how do parents know when it's the right time or when their kid's ready to have different types of tech?

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Dr. Shimi Kang: Yeah, ideally it would be developmentally, but that nicely kind of correlates with a rough age range. So in general, I say you want your child to have three major skills before you introduce tech. So one is real life time management skills, they know how to move from task to task, they can manage their schedule, they can kind of go to bed on time without it being this big thing in the house. They've kind of developed some time management skills, they've developed some real life social skills, the ability to speak and communicate with people in real life. That is actually getting harder and harder and we're seeing this more of an issue. And then real life coping skills, so that they can manage stress and anger and disappointment, before you give them the phone. Because otherwise they will turn to the phone every time they're angry or sad, and start scrolling or getting that dopamine hit. So those are the three key life skills, time management, social skills, and coping skills. You hope those are developed, and there's some campaigns that say, wait until grade eight, no screens until teens. I like that one, the second one, because it keeps it more open. However, I would say some kids don't really want it. Depending on their digital literacy and education, they might have strong feelings about it either way.

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Michelle Horn: That's really helpful to keep those in mind, because I think that that's always a hard one to know when is the right time. So we've talked a lot about a lot of the challenges that come with technology. We mentioned a few benefits. So Gia you mentioned technology supporting learning, just to balance things a bit are there any other benefits of tech use that you'd like to for parents and caregivers?

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Dr. Shimi Kang: Yeah, so in the tech solution, I say the three Cs of Healthy Tech is any tech that leads to self-care. So your sleep apps, your glucose monitoring, your mindfulness, your journaling. There's so much self-care online. Connection, any tech that builds meaningful connections, FaceTiming your grandparents or friends, community activism, community building with your sports teams. And then the creativity is the last C. So tech that helps you build your own photographs and videos, let's say, rather than just mindlessly scrolling others and learning. So those are all aspects of healthy tech, and a really nice example I like to give my patients, is I ask them to create a playlist in those three things. So pick a playlist that is for your self-care that relaxes you, that just kind of brings you down from stress. Pick a playlist that helps you feel connected to the world or people when you're feeling lonely or sad. And then pick a playlist that kind of pumps you up, gets your creative juices going maybe before a project or a game. And music is medicine, it's fantastic. So there's an example that anyone can use. And when you ask them, they're like, "Wow, you actually want me to use tech?" So it's really important that we don't kind of polarize this issue, and really be together on it.

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Michelle Horn: Shimi or Gia, are there any resources that you would recommend to parents and caregivers who are trying to navigate their child's tech use?

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Gia: Yeah, so I work for an organization called Stigma Free Society, and it's all virtual. So basically in my school day I will Zoom in to schools around Canada and give them a speech about my dyslexia and my story around it. And it's a great example of healthy tech and communicating through tech. And honestly, it's a really great organization and I've been doing it since I was 11.

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MMichelle Horn: That's amazing. That's so wonderful that you're going and doing that, Gia.

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Dr. Shimi Kang: Yeah, Stigma Free is excellent, it's free support for students, not just dyslexia, so really check them out. So when it comes to resources, Common Sense Media is a go-to one to really look at content, apps, movies, video games. So it's commonsensemedia.org. Another one that I really like is the Center for Humane Technology, they have some great resources for schools, and they're really up to date, especially on the issue of AI, which is going to supercharge everything that we talked about. With the Center of Humane Technology, they have a really good podcast called Your Undivided Attention, which covers a lot of these topics for sure.

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Char Black: So we like to end our episodes by asking guests for any words of wisdom they would like to share with our listeners. So Gia, do you want to share any words of wisdom?

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Gia: Yeah, I think my biggest one is just to be grateful. So I work for a business called Future Ready Minds, and even then we get the kids to write in their gratitude journals. They have to write three things they're grateful for day. And I feel like it's so important and it's so easy to forget to do it, but to realize how grateful we should be.

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Char Black: Well, that's great, Gia. I love to do that too. And Shimi, do you want to share any words of wisdom for our listeners?

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Dr. Shimi Kang: Yeah, I think it's kind of like what I started with. Your brain is incredible, it is your most powerful resource and asset. Take really good care of it. Whether it's the food you eat or the tech you consume, consume healthy tech, limit that junk tech, wear your helmet, get enough sleep, sunlight, exercise. And really important, stay connected, with a healthy social group. All of those things are really good for your brain. And play. If we can add more play, ideally off screens, all of those things help our brain. So take care of your wonderful human brain.

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Char Black: So thanks so much, Shimi and Gia for joining us today.

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Dr. Shimi Kang: Thank you for bringing light to this important topic.

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Gia: Thank you.

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Michelle Horn: Thanks to our Where You Are listeners for tuning in today. We're grateful to have you join us each episode.

00:24:51

Char Black: If you enjoyed the conversation today, please leave us a rating wherever you might be listening now. This episode of Where You Are is brought to you by BC Children's Kelty Mental Health Resource Centre. Our show is produced and edited by Jenny Cunningham, with audio engineering by Ryan Clarke. Audio production by JAR Audio.

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