

Youth Voices Consultation

Youth & Digital Technology: Growing Up Online Toolkit

In 2018, Alberta Health Services, Provincial Addiction and Mental Health, Child, Youth, and Family Initiatives (CYFI) facilitated a consultation with 11 youth, aged 13 to 22. Participants included members of the Alberta Children's Hospital Child and Youth Advisory Council (CAYAC) and youth recruited by CYFI from across Alberta. The goal was to incorporate youth perspectives into the development of this toolkit.

Due to organizational transitions, including the establishment of Recovery Alberta, the new provincial health agency responsible for mental health, addiction, and correctional health services, this consultation has not been updated since 2018. However, the insights gathered continue to offer valuable perspectives on how youth experience and interact with digital technology.

Participants identified both the benefits and challenges associated with digital technology use:

Benefits:

- Facilitates communication and connection with others
- Provides support with school assignments
- Enables access to information
- Offers entertainment and leisure opportunities
- Allows for anonymous support when needed

Challenges:

- Raises concerns about privacy and safety
- Reduces opportunities for in-person interaction
- Negatively influences self-image through social media
- Occupies significant time, disrupting daily routines

Below are some of their stories.

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Updated: June 2025

<https://www.albertahealthservices.ca/info/Page17564.aspx>



"Gaming and social media are built to be eye-catching, attracting and addicting. Now, in Grade 7, everyone is on their phones. No more time for "fun and play." Believe it or not, I didn't get my first phone until the start of this school year. Most of my friends had phones at the age of eight and nine".

– Anonymous youth, age 13

"We have become consumed by technology. The amount of time I waste on social media is disgusting. It is an "unstated" rule for my generation to have social media, everyone has it. With every post I see my life is affected. Whether we realize it or not, the impact of a single image is tremendous".

– Anonymous youth, age 16

"Remember that digital technology isn't always bad – it can be quite good and helpful in many ways. Also, encourage healthy / beneficial uses of screen technology when recommending reduction of negative ways to use it. Social media, along with video games are created and designed to attract and keep the attention of people. I don't know how many times I have stayed up past one or two a.m., gaming or watching videos. It is often difficult to remember to stop and pull the plug. Technology has affected me in many different ways. It has connected me to the world, and to others around me, yet remains a challenge that I have to deal with every day".

– Anonymous youth, age 16

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“Addiction / misuse of technology may be due to external factor such as stress or frustration.

Developing a sense of self control, knowing when to stop should be the goal of service providers. Just taking away the object of addiction may be more detrimental to stopping the addiction to social media and gaming”.

“I think service providers need to dig deeper into why this specific person is either addicted or not including limits. They should also try to encourage them to replace it with another activity or hobby. (Example, reading, sports and learning about things they are interested in”.

“Technology is both good and bad. It helps immensely with schoolwork, it makes it easy to access information quickly, and best of all it allows me to keep in contact with friends and family that are far away. However, it can also be distracting, take away from “real-life” experiences, and it is time consuming. It can also easily impact sleep”.

“One of the things that I really feel is lacking is education for children and youth about what is healthy when it comes to technology and when it is too much or unhealthy. No one has ever taught me how much too much time to spend on my phone is. More importantly, no one has ever taught me ways to reduce technology usage – for example, using an app [application] that tracks how much time you spend on your phone, or that you should keep your phone outside of your bedroom. We learn lots about drugs and alcohol and sexual health, but there was never a speaker at my high school that talked about technology. I also think that it is really important that role models show positive behaviours for youth – including parents and teachers and health care providers – and that includes with the usage of technology. I also think that adults need to be realistic with their recommendations, and realistic from a youth perspective – no one will stop using social media or technology, so you will get a much better response if you suggest reducing time instead”.

– Anonymous youth, age 20

“Be realistic with your recommendations and expectations! Youth will respond better to realistic suggestions. I think service providers need to dig deeper into why this specific person is either addicted or not including limits.

They should also try to encourage them to replace it with another activity or hobby. Example: reading, sports, and learning about things they are interested in”.

– Anonymous youth, age, 14



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“I believe that when technology is used positively, its effect is largely more positive than negative. I have used it to reach out for support, and I received what I asked for. At the same time, I have found the opposite of support online. The largest or most important benefit for me is the resources it provides me to help me cope with anxiety. I receive hourly reminders to ground myself and take a breath. In another way, it’s become a contributor to my anxiety... when it’s important for me to... have the least amount of stimulus as possible”.

– Anonymous youth, age 13

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“I think that technology is great, but it can also be used as a weapon. I believe that sometimes, for social media, you compromise your privacy.

At my birthday party, I was just hanging with some of my friends at my house. I was on my social media platforms, and I got a text from one of my guy friends. We were kidding around about how he should come over. But I said that he shouldn't because he dumped my best friend the day before. Ten minutes later he texted me that he was on his way. I wasn't worried because he didn't know where I lived. But then, five minutes later, I got another message to say he was at my house. After a dramatic argument, he ended up leaving. But the reason he found my house was because one of my friends had their location services on. This concerns me because if my close friend can find my house, most likely so can a stranger”.

– Anonymous youth, age 16

“It's important for providers to know why the youth might have a problem with their technology use, what's driving it. Helping a family is your job. Not to judge a family. Help not judge! No matter the issue, remember to have an open mind”.

– Anonymous youth, age 13

“Be realistic with your recommendations and expectations! Youth will respond better to realistic suggestions”.

“They probably don't know any different. If a child is addicted to their device, they probably don't realize it is an issue. Taking away a device will not teach a child proper behaviour, it will only make them more hostile to the situation”.

– Anonymous youth, age 20



“Technology has many positive aspects, but I’ve noticed that I spent a lot of time on technology and social media in my teens and this sometimes took away from developing relationships with the people around me in person. I actually decided to go off of social media a few months ago, aside from my email, and focused more on spending quality time with friends, family and my colleagues. I realized I had more time and started doing more activities (going outdoors, having coffee with a friend, etc.), and I feel like my relationships are more satisfying as a result. Technology is fantastic but I think taking breaks from it or using it in moderation is healthy and necessary”.

“It can be scary to have to admit that help is needed because it’s something important for youth and we still hold a great value to the positives while there are negatives. Youth and parents often have disagreements on the topic of technology so it’s important that there’s a consensus in care and information”. “Focus on rehabilitation, not punishment. Incorporate positive reinforcement”.

– Anonymous youth

Summary

Through the consultation with children and youth from CAYAC, CYFI gained valuable perspectives for developing a digital technology toolkit for service providers. Youth shared important insights on the role of digital technology in their daily lives, as well as its perceived benefits and challenges. Input regarding the title of the toolkit was also provided by the youth during this consultation. Additionally, they shared personal stories and offered recommendations for service providers working with children, youth, and families who face challenges with problematic digital technology use. While this consultation has not been revisited since 2018, the perspectives gathered continue to inform strategies for supporting youth in navigating the digital world.

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