

Navigating Digital Challenges Safeguarding Children's Social-Emotional Well-being in the Digital Age

Biju Dharmapalan

In conversation with Dr Suja K Kunnath,
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and Hearing (NISH), Thiruvananthapuram, Kerala.

IN today's rapidly evolving digital world, children are increasingly exposed to screens, leading to significant challenges for their mental health and overall development. Dr Suja K Kunnath, Executive Director of the National Institute of Speech and Hearing (NISH) in Thiruvananthapuram, sheds light on the impact of digital exposure on children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth. In this exclusive interview with Dr Biju Dharmapalan, Dr Kunnath emphasises the importance of regulating screen time, encouraging interactive digital activities, and the critical roles of parents and educators in cultivating a healthier digital environment for children.

Biju Dharmapalan: Could you describe the general mental health status of children today?

Dr Suja K Kunnath: We are seeing an increasing number of social-emotional problems in children, such as poor social communication, social anxiety, attention difficulties, and behavioural issues. The fast-paced, digital-first environment is a major contributing factor, as children struggle with overstimulation and limited in-person social interactions. These issues affect emotional regulation, cognitive development, and social skills, all crucial for healthy mental growth. There is a growing need for support systems at home and in schools to address these concerns promptly and proactively.

Biju Dharmapalan: What are the early signs of social-emotional issues in children, and how can parents or educators identify them?

Dr Suja K Kunnath: Early signs can vary but often include behavioural changes, emotional disturbances, or social withdrawal. Parents and educators should be mindful of prolonged irritability, trouble concentrating, shifts in sleep patterns, or a drop in academic performance. Physical symptoms like frequent headaches or stomachaches may also signal stress or anxiety. It's important to maintain open communication, encouraging children to talk about their feelings. If these signs persist or worsen, professional support should be sought to prevent more serious issues.

Biju Dharmapalan: How do you define social and emotional well-being in the context of children growing up in the digital age?

Dr Suja K Kunnath: In the digital age, mental health involves mitigating the negative effects of excessive screen time on

children's cognitive, social, and emotional development. It's essential to promote interactive digital activities that foster healthy development and prevent delays in areas like speech, attention, and social interaction.

Biju Dharmapalan: Is there any scientific evidence linking prolonged digital exposure of mothers during pregnancy to the mental health of their children?

Dr Suja K Kunnath: While the research is still emerging, there is growing evidence that excessive screen time during pregnancy can indirectly affect fetal development. Factors like poor posture, sleep disturbances, and stress in mothers can impact fetal health. However, more focused studies are needed to draw a direct connection between maternal digital exposure and specific mental health outcomes in children.

Biju Dharmapalan: What social-emotional challenges do you commonly observe in children due to digital exposure?

Dr Suja K Kunnath: Common challenges include speech and language delays, attention problems, and reduced social interaction. Excessive screen time has also been linked to obesity, sleep disorders, and cognitive delays.

Biju Dharmapalan: What are the psychological effects of children consuming violent or inappropriate content online?

Dr Suja K Kunnath: Exposure to violent or inappropriate content can cause significant psychological harm, leading to anxiety, aggression, and desensitisation to violence. It can also lead to fear, confusion, and emotional distress, disrupting the child's sense of security and well-being. Prolonged exposure may result in mood swings, sleep disturbances, and even trauma-like symptoms. Parents must monitor online activity, use parental controls, and engage in open discussions to help children navigate the digital world safely.

Biju Dharmapalan: What advice would you give parents on managing their children's screen time for positive mental health?

Dr Suja K Kunnath: Parents should limit screen time, engage in co-viewing, and encourage interactive content. Prioritising physical activities and face-to-face interactions is crucial for the child's overall well-being.