

Adolescents – Short attention spans

Is the presence of competing Media in the lives of adolescents really to be blamed for their short attention span or could there be any other causes?

The Media is defined as mass communication tools that include television, Internet and land and mobile phone. Though the Media is one of the contributing factors of distraction for adolescents, there are many other factors to consider.

At this point of time in their lives, there are many changes that are occurring. For instance, they are physically developing and discovering that they have interest in the opposite sex. This often is a new and exciting experience. Another factor to consider is that in Singapore, adolescents are going through the secondary schools' education system and they have to grapple with a sudden increase of subjects. As for the older adolescents, they have to cope with the changes in the tertiary education, National Services and universities.

One more possible factor is attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). ADHD is a disorder which is caused by chemical deficiency in the brain and short attention span is one of the symptoms. Should you have any concerns or inquiries, The Therapy Room, headed by Geraldine Tan, the principal psychologist, and run by a team of experienced psychologists, does diagnostic assessments and consultation. Please feel free to click [here](#) to contact us and find out more.

Therefore, while Media does contribute to the short attention span of adolescents by giving them avenues to distract or connect them with other interesting areas in life – such as friends – there are other contributing factors.

Is the Media forcing adolescents to multi-task or is multi-tasking innate?

Multi-tasking is the ability to perform several different tasks at the same time with or without comprising the quality of the outcome.

The adolescents that we see frequently are using I-Pod, watching television and using their phones. This may seem like multi-tasking but they are actually using different parts of the brain. Listening to music using I-Pod utilises the auditory function, watching television stimulates the visual senses and texting makes use of the executive functioning.

On the other hand, a student who is supposed to listen to a lecture or class but is talking to a friend would not effectively process and absorb both as both are auditory input. In the end, the student may only pay attention to the more interesting and more stimulating of the two inputs. However, this would not impede the student's ability to copy notes while talking to the friend as it employs another area of the brain's function.

Should parents worry that their Media-indulgent child/adolescents might actually grow to develop medical conditions such as attention deficit hyper disorder (ADHD) without careful parental supervision?

ADHD is a medical condition which includes symptoms such as the lack of ability to focus in tasks, being inattentive, being disorganised, having impulsive nature and having hyperactivity where there is excessive running and climbing in situations that are inappropriate

However, parents should be more worry about the over stimulation that Media gives. The over stimulation may cause the child to lose interest in black-and-white text that may seem mundane to them. In contrast to the colours and the fast action of the television, the textbook would seem unappealing and students would rather focus on an available medium which stimulates their auditory and sight senses. Therefore, the children would prefer the Media to the textbook and look as if they cannot concentrate on their work when they run off to do other things to avoid their work. This is different from inattention. The symptoms of ADHD has to be prevalent across different types of tasks and impairs the child's functioning.

Parents can consider supervising the length of time that these children are exposed to the Media. Some parents have experienced the problem of children using the Media as a bargaining tool. For instance, a child could say "Get me a PlayStation 2 then I will study and get good grades". Media should be encouraged and used as a tool to study, for positive family time and relaxation instead of a method of distraction. If Media is used as a form of reward, it is encouraged for parents to give other forms of rewards too. It is important to note that the more parents try to restrict the usage of the Media, it makes Media more tempting to achieve for the adolescents and children.

Is an adolescent who multi-task ill-disciplined? Does multi-tasking allows one to be organised by compartmentalising tasks?

Ill-disciplined speaks of a situation where the child tends not to follow societal norms and rules. The parent is not able to discipline the child in terms of following the "rules" at home and the school would complain that the child does not adhere to school rules. Punishment may have been carried out but have not deterred the child from breaking the rules again and again.

If the adolescent is enticed by the Internet, I-Pod, text and television (this is not really multi-tasking. Please refer to the second question), the adolescent is not disciplined in the sense that he has placed priorities on areas that may not be related to academic studies. Nevertheless, it is important to note that the adolescents is deemed as rebellious or not able to concentrate because academic studies is the main concern for parents.

However, there may be concern for addiction when the child is consistently on the Media and that is intruding on his daily functioning and activities. In addition, there is also a marked change in his behaviour and agitation when the child is not allowed to have the Media. The child may also not go out with friends and family and starts to withdraw from people. These cases require professional help.

Here at The Therapy Room, the team of psychologists, led by Geraldine Tan, the principal psychologist, have ample experiences helping these cases through therapeutic interventions. Should you have any concerns or further inquiries, please click [here](#) to contact us and find out more.

Why are adolescents able to “multi-task” but not let it affect their grades? Is it because adolescents are smarter nowadays compared to the past as shown in studies?

Children in this generation are more exposed to medium of communication at an early age compared to the past generations; children learn to use the computer, mobile phones and other equipment at a young age. They learn to adapt to multi-tasking more than the past generations. As a result, when children multi-task, their learning capabilities are not affected and the grades in school would not be affected.

What are some of the long-term typical effects that you can expect to see in adolescents if they continue to “multi-task” extensively? Could there be negative or positive consequences to long-term “multi-tasking”?

Having more exposure to the different media and engaging in them would help the adolescent learn to utilise different parts of the brain. However, this may affect the quality of the performance of tasks they are doing as their attention are stretched thinly over different resources.

Students in the future would require more and more stimulating environment to learn. Information passed on from one person to another is getting faster and via different mediums in a more detailed manner; even currently, there is a switch from SMS to MMS to video conferencing at a personal level. These would be more intriguing than the typical classroom interaction of teacher-lecture-student-listen method. The school and the teachers would face the challenge of finding new methods to deliver the lessons such that the student would not be bored with the class. Furthermore, the new generation would face social concerns because they may lose the social skills to interact face-to-face.

In the long run, the adolescents would be adept at using multimedia. On the flip side, they may lose touch with using paper and pen. Even now, some of the polytechnic/university students have atrocious handwriting and they attribute it to using the computer to type for extended period of time. As such, teachers have trouble

reading some of the adolescents' handwriting in their handwritten paper. Aside from this, there are also the established detrimental consequences such as excessive use of texting increases risk of trigger finger and the television and computers are not good for the eyes. In a nutshell, the Media provides information in a different way and brings about the aforementioned negative consequences but does not affect the intelligence of a child.