Parents' Guide to Technology

2026

ADOBE STOCK | JACOB LUND

plugged in
BY FOCUS ON THE FAMILY

Contents

A Letter from the Director

Dear Moms and Dads,

Welcome to the 2026 edition of *Plugged In's* Parents' Guide to Technology.

In this guide, we'll give you a look at today's ever-changing technological landscape. We'll explain how technology is changing us, too—how we work, how we play and how we interact with the world at large. And we'll pay special attention to how technology and social media can impact your kids—in both good ways and bad.

But I think of this as more than just a guide: It's a toolbox. We'll do more than point out the problems; we'll propose solutions on how to fix them, too—at least in your own home.

We'll offer tips on how to rein in your children's screen time (and we might gently suggest that yours could use a little curbing, too). We'll advise you on how to navigate the bewildering world of social media—and how to protect your sons and daughters from the dangers therein. We'll even give you a little advice on how to talk about these ticklish topics with your kids. Listen, we know how hard it can be to tell a teenager to put down her phone. But we have a few thoughts on how to make those hard conversations a little easier.

We're pretty proud of the work we've done here. We think this toolbox, if used wisely, can fix many a tech-related breakdown in your family.

But I have a bit of a caveat—and it goes back to what I wrote at the outset: our *ever-changing* technological landscape. Social media platforms come and go. The influence of artificial intelligence is growing exponentially. Shiny new phones can feel old and outdated in a few months. And we know, as well as anyone, that this guide will have an expiration date, too.

Which is why we're committed to offering you an updated (and *free*) guide every year, giving you fresh information and new tools. And, of course, we always offer up-to-date information and advice at Pluggedin.com.

And here's the really good news: Some things never change. God's love for us. Your love for your family. And *Plugged In's* desire to help you on every step of your parenting journey.

Hope you enjoy this guide, and best to you.

Paul Asay | Director of Plugged In

SECTION 1

Screentime Overload

The Average Teen Spends More Than Half Their Day on Screens

I know what many of you are probably thinking: "Wait, that can't be right, can it?"

Sadly, studies say that this is true. According to a census conducted by Common Sense Media in 2021, teens spend an average of eight hours and 39 minutes using their screens for entertainment purposes. Other sources throughout the last several years have confirmed that teens are indeed spending an inordinate amount of time glued to their screens. And nearly half of all teenagers admit that they are online "almost constantly."

So, if we assume that teenagers are getting at least eight hours of sleep each night (although screens are often stealing away that sleep time, too), that means they're spending more than half of their 16 waking hours in front of a screen—and that doesn't even account for time spent doing schoolwork.

But what's causing teens to spend so much time on screens?

Ease of access is certainly one cause: In 2024, Pew Research Center found that 95% of teens had access to a smartphone at home. However, there's more to it than that. After all, if having access was the only thing holding back kids, then there'd probably be a lot more adolescents reading their Bibles nonstop. (Man, wouldn't that be an incredible thing to behold?)

Rather, research is finding other culprits in the screentime battle, such as a lack of screentime regulation, the addictive nature of screens themselves and the perceived benefits—such as speed and simplicity—that screens provide. In the next couple of articles, we'll unpack each of these three topics, helping you to understand where these problems originate and (hopefully) providing you with answers for how to address them.

Regulating Screen Time

By Adam Holz

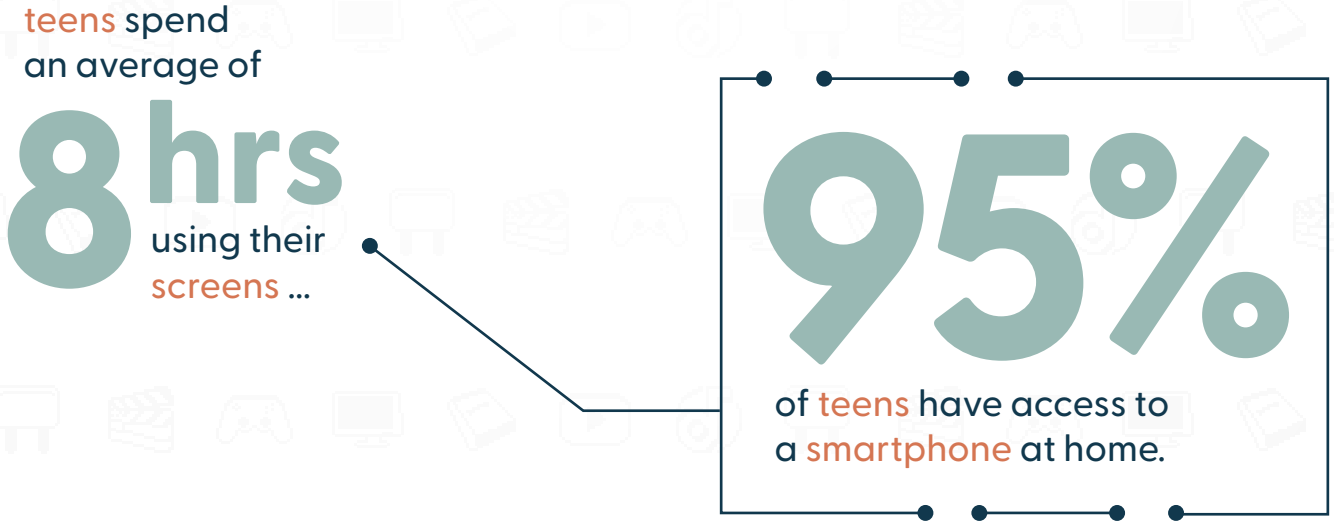
Sometimes as parents, we can look at something and say, "Um, yeah. That's a bad idea." Like, say, teens car surfing on the hood of a moving vehicle. It's immediately obvious that something could go wrong and that the consequences could be severe.

Other times, we have a nagging sense that maybe something isn't the *best* idea, but we're not as immediately sure why. Like, say, kids having screens in the bedroom at night.

"But, Mom, why can't I have my phone with me in the bedroom?" our daughter whines.

"Because ... because I said so!" we manage to stammer out.

Turns out that impulse is the right one. There are many good reasons why kids having phones in their rooms at night really isn't a good idea. So, let's look at a couple of those reasons, then talk about setting boundaries in this area for your family.



The Problems With Screens in the Bedroom

It doesn't take a massive leap of the imagination to identify several reasons why kids with screens in their bedrooms is potentially problematic:

Too much screen time. At the most basic level, phones in bedrooms—especially if doors are shut—eliminate almost any accountability with regard to how much time kids are spending on their phones. And for many teens, that might mean an hour or two or *more* of mindless scrolling before bed, which eats into the total amount of sleep they get.

Blue-light induced insomnia. And it's not just the *amount* of time they spend on screens, but *how* that exposure right before bed interrupts natural sleep patterns. The blue, ultraviolet light emitted by screens of any kind essentially tells our brains, "It's daytime!" That biological reaction can lead to screen-induced insomnia. And what's one of the easiest things to do when you can't sleep? Look at your phone, of course, further reinforcing the problem.

Content concerns. Then, of course, there's the question of *what* our kids are looking at online. If they're tempted by illicit content of any kind, the lack of relational presence in the bedroom simply creates an environment with zero accountability and plenty of opportunity to indulge in whatever problematic material they're drawn to. Internet filters may partially address that concern. However, the more unmonitored screen time your kids have, the easier it might become to circumvent those barriers.

Sexting. This, of course, is the practice of sending and/or receiving visually and/or verbally explicit texts and/or images. If you have a teen who's tempted to send or receive sexually explicit content, a private bedroom paired with a closed door and unlimited access to a phone is a dangerous combination.

Middle-of-the-night texts. Sometimes, it's not even *our* kids who make unhealthy choices: It's their friends. Our children might be sound asleep … until that text-alert vibration awakens them at 3:32 a.m. Between curiosity and the desire many adolescents have to respond quickly, getting up to check their phones may be a nearly impossible urge for them to resist.

Establishing Healthy Screen Boundaries

To address the screens-in-the-bedroom issues listed above (and perhaps others you've come across in your parenting journey), we have to set healthy boundaries as parents. Boundaries, of course, help define when, where, why, what and how we engage in—or disengage from—certain behaviors. Here are a few to consider:

Set a healthy example. It's easy to talk about too much screen time or phones in the bedroom as if it were primarily a problem with "the kids." But in reality, if our kids are on their phones too much, we as parents probably are, as well. To change their habits, we'll most likely need to start with our own—which means setting an example and removing phones from our bedrooms before bed, too. Kids naturally do what they see their parents doing. So if you feel like your family's habits are unhealthy in this area, you'll probably need to start with a self-assessment, changing some of your own habits, patterns and boundaries *first*.

Turn screens off 30 to 60 minutes before bed. Remember how I talked about the way ultraviolet light wakes up our brains if we're looking at screens at night? That's true for both kids *and* adults. Experts suggest a 30- to 60-minute screen-free period before turning in for the night, to allow our brains time to "unplug" from the insomnia-inducing influence of blue light.

Leave screens in their own "beds" for the night. One way we can begin to cultivate screen-free bedrooms at night is by putting our phones "to bed" as well. Some families have a basket or box where phones get "checked in" together for the evening when it's time to wind down. And the practice of physically relinquishing our phones together, as a family, can help your teens see that it's not just about them. Rather it's a habit everyone in the household is developing.

Encourage non-screen-based activities, such as reading or personal devotional time. Sometimes we can see establishing new boundaries such as these primarily in terms of loss, of what we're giving up. But freeing up time before bed also creates an opportunity to focus on other things. A short list of suggestions could include reading books (which can help you fall asleep faster), spending some time in personal devotions or just journaling about the events of the day.

Consider going "back to the future." Many of us use our phones as alarm clocks, which is no surprise given how convenient they are. But perhaps we should turn back the clock and consider the alarm clocks of yesteryear. These can be a great "analog" way to reclaim space that phones have quietly usurped. Think about it: When you use your phone as an alarm clock, it's the last thing you handle at night and the first thing you touch in the morning. So consider locating a physical alarm clock to cover this function. You might have one buried in storage somewhere. Thrift stores may also have some cheap options. Or if you're feeling indulgent, you can even buy a new "old" alarm clock online.

Cultivating a screenless culture in your family. Finally, putting boundaries around the when and where of screens in the evening sends another important message to our teens: There's more to life than what we see online. Our phones don't have to have the last word at the end of the day—or the first word of a new day, for that matter.

Making these changes, like trying to form or redirect any habit, won't necessarily feel easy or natural. But in time, they can pay healthy dividends for our families. As the author of Hebrews noted:

> *"For the moment all discipline seems painful rather than pleasant, but later it yields the peaceful fruit of righteousness to those who have been trained by it."*
>
> - HEBREWS 12:11

The Addictive Nature of Screens

By Kennedy Unthank

"The kids these days are always on their phones," the grumpy old man might pout. But when you look at the statistics, it's hard to blame him for it.

As it turns out, the battle against rising amounts of screen time may have been easier for older generations. After all, *their* favorite shows were regulated to certain times of the day, and instant access to their favorite content wasn't a mere click away on a pocket-sized computer.

But for those growing up today, they face an entirely different world—one in which that very click can bring them, instantly, to content they love. And if not, the algorithm will figure out their preferences and deliver it to them. When engaging content is served up on a silver platter, it's hard *not* to become entranced.

There's even more to it than that: We'll highlight the biological circumstances that make teens prime targets for screen addiction, as well as how the design of social media user interfaces encourages them to continue clicking and scrolling. Then, we'll give you a few tips to start counteracting these biological and technological impulses.

The Biological Side

Adolescents—whose brains are still developing at a fast pace—fight a tougher battle than adults when it comes to screen time. The Adolescent Brain Cognitive Development (ABCD) Study revealed that a variety of brain structures are affected by excessive screen usage, including those that govern impulse control, decision-making skills, reward processing and habit formation.

49%

of teens displayed “high-addictive use of mobile phones ...”

Their screen time shapes their brains in areas related to self-control, impulse control and habit formation.

In short, excessive screen usage can impair a child's ability to self-regulate the amount of time he spends online simply because the structures which would help him do so are still underdeveloped. This, in turn, can result in an ever-growing, self-gratifying addictive cycle. Now, these changes are not exclusive to children or teens: Given enough time, adults face similar changes to their brains. However, the teenage brain isn't fully developed. Though they can often make healthy decisions, teens still have a harder time regulating self-control than adults.

Furthermore, the teenage brain is far more plastic than the adult brain. In other words, it is more susceptible to change, which makes it easier for a bad habit to form. If a bad habit takes root throughout the teen's years of cognitive development, the addiction becomes tougher to break.

To understand this further, imagine a teenager's brain to be like freshly poured concrete: While it's fresh, anything in the mixture can be plucked out with relative ease. But allow that concrete to harden, and it may just require a jackhammer to retrieve anything stuck underneath.

The Design Side

Screen addiction isn't solely the fault of immature brains being handed an advertisement-covered Pandora's Box full of unlimited entertainment. The designs of the apps themselves are also to blame.

According to Dr. Jenny Radesky, a collegiate and associate professor of pediatrics at the University of Michigan, kids are more susceptible to the positive reinforcement that comes with in-game rewards and social media engagement. This becomes a bigger problem as we grapple with apps intentionally designed to keep users on for as long as possible.

One former Facebook employee told the BBC that quitting social media was exactly like trying to quit an addiction: "Social media is very similar to a slot machine. It literally felt like I was quitting cigarettes."

We see this addiction stoked by social media algorithms, which cater to the user's desires: *Like this content creator? You'll also like that one!* When the algorithm notices you spent five seconds longer on short-form content about puppies, you can be sure it'll send more puppy videos your way. And before users know it, their feeds are an endless scroll of videos, opinions and niche topics that keep their eyes glued to the screen.

We also see addiction taking root in gaming. *Plugged In* has written before on the addictive nature of video game loot boxes, which effectively function as gambling slot machines for children. These loot boxes have cost many unwitting parents hundreds and thousands of dollars. And in a review published in the *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* in 2011, researchers found that video game addiction goes beyond merely playing the game: Addiction seeds itself in the *planning* of gameplay. In other words, even when not gaming, the addict's mind remains seated at the controller.

"With regards to excessive online gamers, both individual accounts of behaviors as well as empirical quantitative findings show that as their addiction develops, online gaming addicts spend increasing amounts of time *preparing for*, organizing and actually gaming," the review reads.

Such design features only exacerbate the aforementioned issues from the biological side.

Breaking the Cycle

With this in mind, we see how teens might become stuck in a vicious feedback loop: Their screen time shapes their brains in areas related to self-control, impulse control and habit formation. The positive reinforcement from screens encourages them to return to their screens more often. This in turn shapes their brains to further desire screen time, starting the addictive cycle all over again.

This cycle might explain why studies are finding that Gen Z adults (the first to have grown up immersed in this technological world) have a bad habit of reaching for their phones during in-person conversations; why Gen Z was projected to spend 112 days on their phones in 2024; and why 49% of those in a study on addictive screen usage displayed "high-addictive use of mobile phones, causing interference with daily life."

The good news in all of this, however, is found in the child's still-developing brain. As I mentioned before, the plasticity of the adolescent brain does make kids more susceptible to form bad habits. But that same plasticity also makes it easier for them to break away from those habits—so long as they are addressed in a timely manner.

According to Focus on the Family, here are a few examples of addictive screentime habits to be on the watch for:

- Repeated requests for extended screen time
- Failed attempts to stop screen-based playtime
- Interference with family time
- Sneaking around and/or lying about screen time
- Loss of interest in hobbies or sports
- Declining grades
- Frequent arguments about screen time

Parents who recognize these screentime habits forming in their children can work to provide a better path for their kids to follow, stepping into the midst of that addictive cycle before it becomes self-sustaining.

And in fostering good habits over bad ones, over time, those beneficial traits will take root instead. Some of those good habits might include:

- **Screentime limits.** This ultimately begins in infancy—teaching kids from their earliest days that screen time is something to moderate, whether on the TV or on a smartphone.
- **Filling free time with non-screen family activities.** Parents should foster an environment that provides entertaining non-screen alternatives, too. It's not enough to eliminate screens if the alternative is muted boredom because there's nothing else to do.
- **Digital detoxes to help your kids reset and refocus.** Help your child to recognize when a game, show or social media platform is starting to become addictive. A digital detox can also help your child to stop justifying his endless consumption with "just one more video."

If you teach your kids that fun doesn't have to be limited to a screen, then in time, those screenless activities will trigger the same habit-forming reward centers of the brain that screens once did—ultimately making your kids more likely to want to pursue those activities themselves.

How Do Your Kids Get Their Information?

By Bret Eckelberry

Quick question: Do you "search" for something online, or do you "Google it"?

In the time since search engines arrived on the scene in the 1990s, these digital librarians have become practically synonymous with finding information on the World Wide Web.

But for younger generations, that seems to be changing. Two technological titans are altering how your kids get their information: artificial intelligence and social media.

These tools come with their own benefits, including speed, simplicity and the ability to connect with others. However, those perceived benefits might not outweigh the potential problems of using them, especially as it pertains to increased screen time.

We'll outline some of the reasons why AI and social media have become such popular search engines, but we'll also advise you on some ways, as parents, that you can help curb an overreliance on these emerging technologies.

AI Search: Speed & Summary

Artificial intelligence is making a dent in the web search space. According to a survey published by Adobe in July 2025, 77% of people in the U.S. who use ChatGPT use the popular chatbot as a search engine. And 24% of American internet users go to ChatGPT *first*, a statistic that rises to 28% for Gen Z users.

So, why are younger generations moving toward AI-driven search?


77%
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So, why are younger generations
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One reason is speed. Although typing a question into a Google search bar doesn't take up a lot of time, sifting through the endless pages of results can. AI chatbots like ChatGPT collect and summarize what they believe to be the most relevant information to answer a user's query, making the search process simpler and more efficient.

Another reason younger generations are drawn to chatbots is a growing desire for conversational answers. ChatGPT and other tools like it are designed to emulate human conversations by referencing a user's preferences and prior conversations. When used for research, these models can provide a sense of personalization that many people find appealing.

But there are drawbacks to using AI as a search tool. The user is at the mercy of whatever algorithmic model they happen to use. Even the most advanced AI tools are far from perfect; *Plugged In* has had its own run-in with AI inaccuracy before. So if your child is limiting their search solely to ChatGPT (or something similar), they might be getting inaccurate information.

Social Media Search: Connection

ChatGPT isn't the only thing eating into Google's overwhelming online-search market share. Certain social media apps have become a viable option for seeking information, as well. Instagram and TikTok have even surpassed Google in search preference among users 18 to 24.

That's likely because social media platforms such as Instagram and TikTok are designed to be more *personally* relevant than the average search engine. This is not surprising—the goal of social media is to keep you on your screen, after all. But the social media format also gives the impression of authenticity, which is reportedly a big deal for younger generations.

Social media as a search engine also achieves something akin to AI's conversational search. However, instead of an algorithm attempting to sound like a human, social media allows its users to hear from actual humans. Humans who, when they gain enough popularity, become influencers.

"Influencer" can be a bit of a hot-button term, but there is value in actual human experience. Which do you think would give you a more accurate view of a new restaurant: a slick advertisement from said restaurant or a trusted friend who ate there last week? You'd listen to the *person* you trust.

Therein lies the appeal of influencers. While these social media personalities are not your teen's actual friends (nor should they be, given the potential dangers of parasocial relationships), your teenager likely still views them as trusted voices.

But while influencers can certainly provide reliable information, research has shown that a disconcerting majority aren't as concerned with fact-checking their material as they should be. Even when the information is true, an overreliance on influencer opinions can hamper your child's critical-thinking skills. And there's no guarantee that the perspective provided by these influencers will come from a Christian standpoint.

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How Should Parents Respond?

So, as a parent, what can you do to safeguard your kids against the dangers presented by these new informational avenues?

First, foster good lines of communication in your home. Let it be a safe space to discuss all manner of topics your teen might encounter. The more open and honest your family can be, the more likely your children will feel that they can share their thoughts with you.

But that doesn't mean you have to be a passive parent! Ask your kids questions. If they're old enough to be online, ask them how they like to search for information, and why. Do they use AI? Are there influencers they feel are trustworthy?

Next, look out for ways to encourage critical thinking in your child. Ask your teenager to show you how she searches for answers. If she seems to be accepting any information without a second thought, encourage her to seek out additional resources. Together, explore some of the claims made by AI chatbots or popular influencers, whether true or false. Show your kids how to research these claims and critically form their own opinions while incorporating a biblical worldview.

Finally, examine your own information-gathering process. Are you thinking critically or simply accepting the information you are given through your own preferred outlets? Give your child a living example of careful examination and Christian discernment.

If you're living out the life you preach, your kids will be more likely to do the same. In doing so, they will be better equipped to view information through a critical, biblical lens, regardless of where they get their information.

SECTION 2

Screens and Mental Health

Three visits a day to social media predicted poor mental health in teens.

Be honest with yourself: How many times a day do you pick up your phone? And how many of those times are you opening a social media app?

Most of us probably don't know—not unless you're utilizing an app that tracks that sort of activity. Sometimes it's not even intentional: We whip out our phones to pass the time while waiting for the doctor, while waiting in the school pickup line, while waiting for the movie to start.

Even if you're limiting yourself to short bursts of social media, that time adds up. And unfortunately, research has found that the more time you spend on social media, the more likely you are to have poor mental health. That seems to be especially true for teens. In fact, studies say it takes just three hours a day on social media to increase a teenager's risk for poor mental health. (And further research found that the average teen is already spending more than that.)

According to a warning published by the U.S. surgeon general in 2023, teens may be more sensitive to social rewards and punishments (due to their still-developing brains), thereby eliciting a greater emotional response to the "communicative and interactive nature of social media." The warning also stated that adolescent social media use can be "predictive of a subsequent decrease in life satisfaction."

So what's the solution here? Do we just set time limits on all social media apps and call it good? Or is this a more nuanced topic?

In the next few articles, we'll talk about why it's so hard for teens to get off social media—even when they know it might be good for them. We'll discuss some ways to decrease the frequency with which teenagers use social media. And we'll dive into some specific social media trends that may be impacting your child's mental, physical and even spiritual health.

Social Media's Physical Impact on the Brain

By Bob Hoose

You've heard it over and over—perhaps already in this Tech Guide: *Don't let kids take their phones into their bedrooms at night!* And let's face it, that little gem of advice makes total sense.

Phone notifications that come pinging through at O-dark-thirty are sure to rouse sleeping teens and send them searching for a screen.

I mean, did you know that Devon liked Cheryl's post? Everybody's talking about it.

Not only that, but many studies show that the blue light from a screen at night can suppress the body's production of melatonin, a vital hormone that it uses to regulate sleep. So by staying up and scanning for news, posts and videos, teens are not only keeping their sleep-deprived neurons buzzing, but they're actually chemically programming their systems to sleep less (and more erratically).

That fact, however, raises a much bigger question.

Since screens can impact the brain's chemical systems, can regular social media use actually change our brains, too? Besides jumbled sleep patterns, are there other physical effects that take place when we scroll through various social channels for hours upon hours?

When social media first came into being back in the late '90s and early 2000s, that sort of idea would have seemed like a crazy, extremist notion. However, in the years since, many studies have shown that, *yes indeed*, social media is physically changing you.

Developing a Dopamine Dependency

The first thing that we should consider is our constant need to always, always, *always* check our phones for anything that might have happened in the last 30 seconds or so. That's an acutely powerful urge for the teen brain.

Sure, you can blame that on a fear of missing out on something cool or important (FOMO). Another reason—which we outlined in the earlier article, "The Addictive Nature of Screens"—is that social media companies have *designed* their products to keep us locked in. But the desire to never be more than a swipe away from the latest news, videos or updates on "Cheryl" is due to a little neurotransmitter called *dopamine*.

Dopamine is a substance that makes your mental reward centers say, *Ooh, that feels good. Give me more of that!* According to research published in JAMA Pediatrics, frequent social media checking is linked to increased electrical activity in brain areas associated with reward and punishment.

So when you're following social media's siren call, special neurons in your brain actually reward that process by sending you a zap of dopamine. And the next thing you know, your brain starts working differently, particularly in areas that regulate your impulse controls and emotions.

Here's another thing to take note of: The pleasure wanes. After a while, your brain begins to build a tolerance to that dopamine hit and it demands more and more social media use to generate the same level of high it's craving. So, if you stay *away* from chemically stoking those pleasure circuits, your dopamine-deprived brain will make you feel *unhappy* about doing so. Therefore, simply putting the phone down for dinner can feel like agony.

... Or should I say *withdrawal*?

3hrs

a day on social media deteriorates mental health.

Three visits a day to social media predicted poor mental health in teens.

Gray Matter, Brain Functions and Long-Term Consequences

Oh, but that's only the beginning of what social media is getting up to in our brains. According to studies reported by the American Journal of Neuroradiology and Amen Clinics, a social media addiction can open the door to a number of other unexpected changes as well.

For one thing, heavy use of social media can lead to a physical reduction of the gray matter in your brain. That reduction takes place in the anterior cingulate cortex and the prefrontal cortex, areas that control our cognitive-emotion regulation and impulsiveness.

Now, that may all sound like scientific jargon that only a brain surgeon would understand, but it's particularly important when considering adolescents with growing brains. Social media use for them can result in prioritization of instant gratification, while also creating a reduced attention span. And it makes it harder for them to handle their flaring emotions, too. (Even if you're not 13 years old, by the way, those emotional and cognitive impacts are a part of your own ongoing mental equation.)

On top of all that, studies have also discovered that social media addiction impacts serotonin levels—a neurotransmitter associated with mood regulation—triggering feelings of anxiety, depression and low self-esteem. That's especially true for users who don't receive the expected feedback to their posts.

Now, granted, all these things will not *instantly* barrage anyone who signs on to social media and starts watching cat videos. Severe negative impacts and biological changes generally take time. For that matter, not all brains are the same. Some may be more sensitive to adverse, addiction-like effects than others. But recognizing that social media is designed to draw, engage and manipulate *everyone* is wise.

Not only that, but we should realize that like any addiction or nasty habit, the bad effects associated with social media addiction rarely remain the same if you do nothing to curb them. Those negative effects generally get worse the longer you wait. Studies have discovered users who have been left with long-term brain-atrophy deficits to their planning, organization, problem-solving and decision-making abilities—all attributed to social media use.

So, how do we help our kids who might have already begun to exhibit some of these adverse effects? And how do we teach them good, preventative habits so they won't fall victim in the future?

Choices Going Forward

If you're a parent reading this, you might be thinking, *OK, we're quitting this social media nonsense now!* But even you may have a hard time putting down that screen cold turkey.

The reality is that most social media users aren't going to permanently change their habits simply because they *hear* that it's bad for them. But the truth can become clear, and good choices can be made. It just requires a little openness, communication and determination.

What Do You See Me Do?

A good starting point may be to sit down with your family and ask everyone to report on what they've observed about one another when it comes to their social media and phone use. An earnest discussion about *your* habits and what your family has seen *you* do may motivate them, in turn, to be open to hearing about their own habits. Everyone might be surprised by what everyone else has seen. That could lead to the possibility of discussing the stats and studies mentioned in this guide. But most importantly, it should get your family talking and thinking.

The 0 to 10 Rating System

One therapist challenged her patients to honestly rate their emotions on a scale from 0-10, with 10 being the most intense, before and after using social media at the same time each day for a week. By keeping track of the emotional changes that happen, it can be easier to see what sort of impact social media is having. In fact, if you use multiple social media platforms, this rating system could help pinpoint which one is hurting you the most. From there you could reallocate your time for a better outcome. And that may even lead to pulling back from social media in bigger ways.

Set It Aside

If you can get your teenager to consider the personal ramifications social media has had on him, you could also take the next step and suggest a short break. A recent study asked participants to block the internet on their phones for a short period of time. They could still use laptops and computers. But simply breaking the habit of scrolling on their phones led to significant changes in how they spent their time and how they felt: Their stress and depression levels decreased.

No-Phone Activities

There's also the practice of getting your whole family invested in just putting the phones down long enough to engage in some fun, screenless activities, such as taking a nature hike, reading a book, working on a service project together; playing badminton in the backyard, or working on your teen's first car. Anything that focuses everyone's brains on some fruitful venture will ease that social media grip for a while. And your family might see the difference.

The possibilities to ease away from a social-media stranglehold are many. It just requires some honest communication, a bit of loving understanding and the desire to try. It might not be easy, but it's worth it.

Oh, and don't forget about keeping phones out of the kids' bedrooms.

Gaming Disorder: defined as the inability to put down your game controller and prioritize things ...

ADOBE STOCK | COURTNEY H/PEOPLEIMAGES.COM

Gaming Disorder

There was a time when video game addiction was *all* people could talk about. But is that still a thing?

Oh, yes. In fact, "gaming disorder" is now recognized by the World Health Organization and the **American Psychological Association** as an official mental health condition. It's essentially defined as the inability to put down your game controller and prioritize things such as school, work or even relationships due to excessive gameplay.

It's estimated that 3-4% of all gamers suffer from this condition. No big deal, right? Well … when you consider that there are 2.5 *billion* gamers in the world, it's a pretty big issue.

What do you need to know?

While some say the average gamer is actually a woman in her 30s, it's guys who tend to be more susceptible to gaming disorder because of the aggressive games they choose, their competitive style of play and their brain activities *during* play. Studies have shown that college students are more at risk, too.

People who blur that line between passion and addiction can also suffer some withdrawal symptoms, such as headaches, depression, mood swings, heightened anxiety and the inability to sleep if they do try to put on the gaming brakes. If you think you (or someone you care about) may be slipping into this area of gaming trouble, help is out there. There are gaming therapists, support groups and online sites designed to help overzealous gamers ease away from the captivating grip of virtual worlds and back into the joys of reality.

Multitasking and Social Media

By Sarah Rasmussen

When I was in college, some friends and I went to the movie theater. You'd think the $12.99 tickets or the fact that the movie was less than two hours long would be reason enough to devote our full attention to the film. Instead, I recall something different happening: My two friends opened their laptops and started working on an academic online quiz *as the movie was rolling*.

Media multitasking—or the phenomenon of interacting with multiple forms of media simultaneously—is extremely prevalent in our culture.

If you're the parent of a tween or teen, you probably know what I'm talking about. Maybe your 12-year-old watches YouTube videos while working on his math homework. Or perhaps your 16-year-old daughter scrolls through Instagram as she chats on the phone. It seems that using multiple forms of social media concurrently—or using social media while completing another task—is second nature for many young people.

Research confirms this trend: According to a 2019 study conducted by Common Sense Media, 45% of teens watch TV and 51% use social media during homework time. Another study discovered that of the time spent using devices, the average adolescent splits his or her attention between multiple types of media 25% of the time.

Clearly, media multitasking is prevalent among children and teenagers. But are these multiscreen behaviors productive or problematic?

Don't We All Multitask?

It's highly probable that your teen is using her computer while sending a Snapchat on her phone while also watching YouTube. But what's the big deal? Don't we all multitask?

Well, research suggests that when teens multitask with media, they become less efficient, less focused and less happy.

In an article published in the National Library of Medicine , researchers reported an association between high levels of media multitasking and worsened performance on responsibilities. They found that media multitaskers display lower accuracy and speed with an increased number of errors. And they even suggested that this digital multitasking can make "smart people underperform."

Additionally, some experts assert that switching between too many media activities can "overload the brain," causing the multitasker to lose focus. Not to mention that the pressure to constantly switch between multiple digital platforms can heighten stress levels and contribute to a negative emotional wellbeing.

But for teenagers, those negative effects can be compounded even further by the habit of carrying on multiple conversations at once—often with the *same person*.

In 2015, researchers studied this behavior across various social media apps, concluding that teens have nuanced views about different communications apps. In a teen's mind, Instagram serves a different communication purpose than Snapchat, which serves a different communication purpose than regular texting. And that means that teens compartmentalize different social media apps for different communication purposes. So a teen might text her friend about a tough situation at school while simultaneously messaging that same friend over Instagram to discuss a funny video.

While this sub-trend might seem like just another bit of Gen-Z behavior, an article in *Discover Magazine* suggests that too many digital conversations—which consequentially result in too many phone notifications—might contribute to increased anxiety and poor perception of passage of time.

How Can Parents Redirect Bad Media Multitasking Habits?

Luckily, myriad research also exists about *why* teens are multitasking so much on their devices. And when parents understand why their teens are using so many apps simultaneously, they'll be better equipped to guide their kids toward healthier choices.

Motivation #1: Teens think media multitasking is efficient and productive. According to a 2021 study published in the Journal of Youth and Adolescence, "people are … drawn to media multitasking because they perceive it as efficient and time-saving." So, teens might be multitasking with their devices because they believe they are saving time or even producing better work.

However, another 2021 study actually found that teens and young adults have an inflated perception of their efficiency while multitasking. In other words, these young people believe they are being *more* productive when multitasking, when in reality, they are being *less* productive.

You can validate your teen's inclination toward media multitasking by acknowledging that most young people feel that it saves time. But then you can redirect this behavior by sharing the research about the detriments of media multitasking.

Try challenging your teen to test himself—keeping track of how long it takes him to complete a math or writing assignment, for instance—and then checking to see how many errors he made with media going on in the background vs. without.

Discuss his results and brainstorm some solutions together to ensure he's able to focus on the task at hand without feeling as though he's missing out on the world around him.

Motivation #2: Teens think media multitasking is the best way to get information.

In one study, researchers found that accessing and controlling information is another main motivation behind media multitasking. The internet contains a vast amount of information, so teens might conclude that media multitasking is the best way to find what they need.

Parents can help teens adjust this mindset by teaching media literacy (which is recommended by the American Psychological Association). Talk to your children about how to determine if an online source is trustworthy. Discuss how to think critically about the information they see online.

As a result, teens might begin to approach their media usage looking for *quality* rather than *quantity*.

Motivation #3: Teens think media multitasking will help prevent the fear of missing out (FOMO).

FOMO is defined as "a pervasive apprehension that others might be having rewarding experiences which one is missing." And according to Frontiers in Psychology, sufferers of FOMO want to constantly be connected.

With that definition in mind, teens understandably might view media multitasking as an effective solution to FOMO. After all, teens can engage in other activities while also checking in on their friends through social media.

For parents, though, media multitasking seems less like a solution to FOMO and more like a recipe for more social stress.

Research says that the "tendency to anxiously engage in excessive activities on social media can cause a decline in the quality of functioning at work or school."

Accordingly, parents can address their teen's chronic media multitasking by first empathizing with their child's FOMO. Such empathy can provide a segue for families to discuss positive ways to find trustworthy friends and build relationships that don't rely on constant connection on social media.

Additionally, scientists suggest that scheduling notifications into batches that arrive only at certain times of the day can be helpful for reducing feelings of FOMO. And research from a 2019 study says that people who batch their notifications in this manner report improved moods and increased productivity.

Motivation #4: Teens think media multitasking helps with boredom. According to a 2013 study, some people multitask simply because they feel bored. Media multitasking helps pass the time by providing easy entertainment. And sometimes, it becomes so rote that it becomes a mindless habit.

Luckily, even this motivation to reach for digital distractions can be redirected.

Experts at Children and Screens encourage parents to teach their teens to embrace "empty" time. They can do this by using unoccupied time to process emotions or cool down from constant stimulation during the rest of the day. (I'd also add that the most effective way my own parents redirected media multitasking was by planning family outings that "forced" me to unplug.)

Practice What You Preach

It's at this point I must confess something: When it comes to media multitasking, I can be a massive hypocrite.

I understand its detrimental effects. In fact, I often preach the harms to my teenage brother and harp on his media multitasking tendencies. But as teenagers often do, my brother called me out with a statement that was both audacious and highly convicting. And his words reframed my approach to media multitasking.

As my brother was trying to tell me a story, purely out of habit I reached for my phone and started scrolling through Instagram. His sarcastic words broke me out of my scrolling stupor:

"Does your mindless scrolling make you feel happy with your life choices, Sarah?" he asked.

Ouch.

But my brother's blunt observation of my media habits taught me something valuable about teaching proper media engagement.

Practical and research-based advice is important. Knowing the facts can help your teen make healthier media decisions. In fact, I hope the strategies highlighted throughout this article will help you and your teen navigate media multitasking more effectively. But sometimes the best way to address concerns about media usage is simply to model the behavior you want to see. Just like my brother, teens notice when you *don't* practice what you preach. But research suggests that they also notice when you *do*.

Ultimately teens look to their parents to see how they ought to behave. When parents and teens work together to curb media multitasking, not only will their overall media usage be healthier, but their families might be stronger, too.

Social Media Trends

Teaching Our Kids to Be Discerning Social Media Users

By Emily Tsiao

A few years ago, I deleted all of my social media accounts. I had done some self-reflecting and realized that I had developed some addictive behaviors. So I said, "*Sayonara*, Instagram! *Hasta la vista*, Facebook!"

It took some adjusting. But within a week, I was already reaping the rewards.

However, the one app I didn't delete was Pinterest. I had only ever used it to save recipes and funny memes. And at the time, I had honestly forgotten it even existed. So it wasn't a problem for me … *at the time*.

See, the thing about social media companies is that they're all trying to copy one another in order to boost the number of users they have and increase the hours those users spend on their platforms. Instagram copied "Stories" from Snapchat. YouTube got the idea for "Shorts" from TikTok. Etc. So, by the time I had decided to start engaging with Pinterest again, it had adopted many of the algorithmic features that made those other channels so problematic for me.

I updated my preferences to tell Pinterest that I was only interested in geeky memes, knitting patterns and cute pictures of puppies. However, I also searched for some recipes and workouts to try. It was just a one-time search inquiry. Unfortunately, that's not how social media works: A one-time search can become a long-time problem.

When we search for something on social media—even if it's just a passing question—that search is incorporated into our feeds. Before I knew it, I was being bombarded with health-and-exercise posts. Luckily, because I'm an adult with experience in combating this particular content, things didn't get too out of hand.

But I still had to go into the settings of my account to remove "fitness" as an interest.

I learned a lesson: Don't search for *anything* unless you want the algorithm to start showing you that stuff *all the time*. But not everyone understands that.

Teaching Media Literacy and Discernment

If you've been reading through this Tech Guide, then you already know that teens are, in fact, using social media as a search engine. You know that teenagers are even more susceptible to becoming addicted to social media than adults. And if parents aren't engaging their kids in conversations about social media use, setting up protective boundaries and teaching media literacy, they'll be all the more vulnerable.

But how do we teach media literacy? What is it, anyway?

Media literacy is the ability to critically analyze stories presented in the mass media (which includes social media) and to determine their accuracy or credibility. In short, we want our teens to recognize a dud when they see one.

So, let's unpack some of the major ways that social media trends impact our kids—and discuss the ways you can teach them media literacy and discernment in those areas.

Dealing With Physical Trends

Countless studies show that teenage girls are negatively impacted by what they see on social media. Although many social media platforms have tried to filter or ban content related to unhealthy exercise habits and eating disorders, teens and influencers have found ways to sneak it through.

Make sure your child understands that she is fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God.

ADOBE STOCK | JACOB LUND

However, girls aren't the only ones whose self-esteem is being influenced by social media. Increasingly, we're seeing content that targets teenage boys. This content may encourage unsafe eating and exercise habits and often directs young men to take testosterone supplements or steroids.

It's not just fitness content either. I've read about tweens obsessing over anti-aging skincare products, teens checking the UV index to pick the best times to go tanning and even kids trying out "oil pulling" (which isn't harmful but isn't really helpful, either).

As parents, it can be really easy to dismiss these trends. Sometimes we know from experience, sometimes we know from common sense. But typically, our kids drift toward these trends because they're trying to fit in with peers or because they're feeling self-conscious, often both. And if you immediately ridicule a trend, it might cause your child to shut down. Which means you'll miss out on the opportunity to reaffirm her self-worth.

Instead, we need to respond with compassion and understanding. Start by getting your child away from the screens for a short while. Perhaps suggest going for a walk together or playing a board game. This will provide both a distraction from the body-image content and an opportunity to talk.

But don't jump right into the self-image discussion either. Let the conversation flow naturally. Ask open-ended questions. And if your child does decide to open up, resist the urge to respond with advice. Instead, focus on being a good listener.

In time, as you build trust with your child, you can share your own teenage experiences. But you can also take the time to walk through some of these social media trends. Ask your child to list any repercussions or long-term effects that a trend may have. Help her to weigh those potential consequences against the potential rewards.

But most importantly, make sure your child understands that she is fearfully and wonderfully made in the image of God. Her value is not based in her appearance or even her achievements. So regardless of what her peers or social media may tell her, it is her character that makes her beautiful.

Dealing With Mental Trends

Many influencers nowadays are attempting to destigmatize the conversation surrounding mental health. We're hearing terms such as "therapy-speak" and "nocebo effect." Some may be trying to make mental healthcare more accessible, and others might be sharing information about specific mental health conditions to encourage teens to seek professional help.

Unfortunately, a ton of bad actors spread false information, too. (And perhaps a few misinformed but good-intentioned influencers.)

As a result, we're seeing an increase in teens who are "self-diagnosing" mental health problems. And experts on the topic are saying that this can actually *increase* the stigma surrounding mental health and the misconceptions that come with it.

So how should you respond if your teenager tells you he thinks he has ADHD (a very common self-diagnosis) or some other mental health problem?

Well, once again, don't immediately dismiss him. Perhaps he has observed patterns in his behavior that you missed. Maybe he's dealing with complex thoughts that he isn't sure how to express. And yeah, it's possible he just wants some attention from you.

ADOBE STOCK | KLEBERPICUI

In any case, listen to your teen. Ask open-ended questions. Be open to the possibility of seeking advice from a professional mental healthcare provider. And ask your teen to keep an open mind, too. Even if he learns that he doesn't have an easily-diagnosed, easily-medicated issue, speaking with a therapist can still be helpful.

The idea is to get him to think critically about the information he's seeing online so as to improve his mental health condition, not worsen it through improper diagnosis and treatment.

Dealing With Spiritual Trends

On the one hand, social media can be a great evangelical tool. However, a post meant to be praiseful can come off as insincere and virtue signaling. And, unfortunately, some influencers might even use their platforms to self-promote or spread a false gospel.

The Bible warns us about false prophets. We're told to constantly be on our guard to avoid spiritual snares. But especially for kids, who might be more easily swayed by an influencer showing off her "Jesus Glow," it's going to be difficult to stand firm in the Truth online.

So when your kids come across trends of a spiritual nature, encourage them to be extra cautious in both their reception and response. Tell them to compare what they're seeing and hearing to what's written in the Bible. Ask them to pray for guidance from the Holy Spirit.

And if they do respond, teach them to *think* before they write a single word. Simply put, social media is probably not the best place to try to prove a point—even one rooted in biblical truths. It's often reactionary and toxic, and that's especially true for spiritual discourse. So rather than trying to debate online, encourage your child to pray for the people involved. If appropriate, she could even privately message the influencer to discuss the issue.

But engaging in volatile discourse online won't lead anyone to Christ. Rather, it will probably leave them with a bad taste in their mouths for anything to do with faith.

A New Trend

If I were to give one last piece of advice, it would be this: Teach your kids to be skeptical of anything and *everything* they hear/read/see online. Challenge them to verify their sources (or the sources of the influencer they're following) and to think critically about what they're consuming. Encourage them to ask questions—especially the hard ones—and form their own opinions.

At the end of the day, you want your kid to feel comfortable in his own skin, to feel safe talking about difficult topics (especially with you) and to feel confident standing firm in his beliefs.

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SECTION 3

Porn and Online Predators

By age 17, 73% of minors have been exposed to pornography.

There are a *lot* of different ways to refer to pornography: porn, smut, erotica, etc. If you're younger, you might not even use words, opting instead for a string of emojis. But no matter what label is used, no matter how the content is consumed (books, movies, magazines, social media, websites), it still comes down to the same thing: Pornography is pervasive. And it damages people of all ages, both male and female.

If your child has access to the internet, he has access to porn. His friends do, too. The sobering truth is this: It's not *if* your child will be exposed to porn, it's *when*.

But that doesn't mean you have to shut down your internet and lock up all your devices. That's probably not realistic. In addition, completely eliminating your child's ability to use the internet could adversely affect his ability to learn to use it responsibly. However, it does mean that we, as parents, need to be prepared.

We won't lie: You're probably going to have some very uncomfortable conversations with your kids about this topic. But by keeping those lines of communication open, you can establish mutual trust. You can ground your kids in biblical truths about sex, rather than the lies culture and pornography tell them.

In the next few articles, we'll discuss how pornography became so ubiquitous in our culture. We'll unpack how it affects adolescents at different stages of their development. And we'll suggest some strategies to protect your kids both from accidental exposure and from the damaging effects of porn. Oh, and we'll examine some related topics, too: Digital relationships (which often correlate with pornography) can have a negative impact on young minds.

And predators frequently use the anonymity of the internet to find new sextortion victims.

If all of that sounds like a *lot*, that's OK. You're not alone in that line of thinking. Take your time in this section to really process and pray.

This isn't a one-off thing. Rather, it's something that will be approached in stages throughout your child's life. So look at it as an opportunity: an opportunity to build a relationship with your child based on mutual trust, an opportunity to provide support and biblical understanding, and an opportunity to demonstrate just how much you love your child.

1 million people

are watching porn online every minute

The Intersection of Technology, Pornography and Culture

By Bob Hoose

It's justifiable to say that we have experienced more technological advances over the last 30 years than in all the rest of history combined. Computers, the Internet, robotics, smartphones, virtual and augmented reality, digital streaming, artificial intelligence—the list of our recent tech advancements stretches on and on.

But what if I were to suggest that it was driven in large part by … *pornography*?

I'm not the first to suggest it. News organizations, universities and studies have said as much. Stanford University even went so far as to declare that "the spread of pornography is inexorably linked to the development of technology." In fact, every single one of the technologies I listed above was encouraged and even *financed* by the porn industry. And porn is currently on the cutting edge of them all.

Why? Because sex sells. It always has. And profligate forms of sex make a *lot* of money.

It's also very easy to see how new technology has opened the sluicegates to two massive sea changes in our culture: The amount of porn we let into our lives has increased exponentially; and our acceptance of it has become nearly ubiquitous.

Rising Statistical Waters

Back when I was a kid, I remember that our local newsstand had a stock of maybe a dozen partially-covered "girly" magazines on display behind the counter. And that was the extent of the porn industry then.

You either had to sneak one of those mags out of the corner store under your coat, slip down a dark alley to a sleazy theater or have something mailed to your home in a brown paper wrapper.

But that was *also* when the porn industry was quietly hitting its stride. In 1970, *Life* magazine estimated the U.S. porn industry's revenue at $1 billion per year. By 1976, *Time* magazine estimated it was $2 billion.

Today, digital technology has torn away every brown paper barrier to producing, disseminating and consuming as much pornography as one can desire. And according to statistics available in studies from Boston University and Columbia University, that desire is quite fervent. There are currently somewhere in the neighborhood of 1.3 million porn websites generating about $13 billion just in the U.S. In 2020 alone, U.S. porn sites received more traffic than X, Instagram, Netflix, Zoom, Pinterest, and LinkedIn *combined*.

And it's not just porn-industry websites cranking out pornographic content. You can find porn through user-generated sites (such as OnlyFans), on social media, in video games and streamed TV shows. Nearly anywhere you turn, some form of lewd content is available, 24/7.

The studies suggest that one-in-five smartphone searches today are porn related; approximately 1 million people are watching porn online every minute; and about 7.7 million Americans struggle with porn addiction. And those numbers don't decrease when it comes to younger users either. In fact, some 93% of boys and 62% of girls report turning to internet pornography before they turn 18.


93%
of boys and
62%
of girls report turning
to internet pornography
before they turn
18
ADOBE STOCK | LOOKER_STUDIO

The Swampy Truth

So, has this expanding and easy-to-access mire of porn had any impact on our society, our culture? Uh, *yes!*

Pornography is a false narrative about sex. It presents a consequence-free picture of carefree and instant gratification between perfectly formed, beautiful people. No responsibility or emotional intimacy is required.

That's a make-believe, impossible image. And if our kids *accept* that false narrative as reality, their expectations of a partner, perceptions of their own body image, concepts of intimacy and even their thoughts about marriage and family will be badly skewed.

Studies show that pornography has distorted most young people's understanding and expectations of any kind of sexual intimacy. Young male porn users are often compelled to see women through an objectifying and dehumanizing lens. Their brains become trained to expect a constant stream of highly stimulating visuals. They tend to be more sexually aggressive and violent. And consuming porn can lead to a general desensitization that makes real-life intimacy far less exciting.

And it's not predominantly a "boy problem" either. According to a study conducted by the addiction recovery website SheRecovery.com, 58.2% of women surveyed said they had sought out porn by the age of 12 and some by age 7. Of those female respondents, some stumbled upon porn by accident, others out of curiosity. But many sought out explicit material to simply figure out the mechanics of sex. So, pornography—with all its false narratives and distorted views of intimacy—became their sex education.

Wrap that all up and you end up with a society packed with unhappy people: A huge number of porn users feel lonely, insecure and dissatisfied with their appearance.

Porn is directly connected to a decrease in commitment and a lower quality of relationships. And divorce rates double for married individuals who watch porn.

Row Against the Current

Now that I have completely depressed you, let me suggest that all is not lost. Technology has indeed opened the door to corrupting forces that have changed our world, one step at a time. But like any other addiction or long-term negative behavior, breaking free from our new cultural normal *is* possible.

We need to see and recognize the problem. Then, pray for the people in our lives. Talk openly about the dangers and destructive nature of pornography with our families. And *then* we can use the wonders of technology to promote *positive* things.

We can opt for inspiring and healthy entertainment and avoid the salacious stuff. We can communicate the joys of a godly marriage and the uplifting nature of having a loving partner by our side.

The world is proclaiming many reasons for why godly virtue is dead, and porn is king. But which throne *we* bow before is still entirely up to us.

Parental Controls

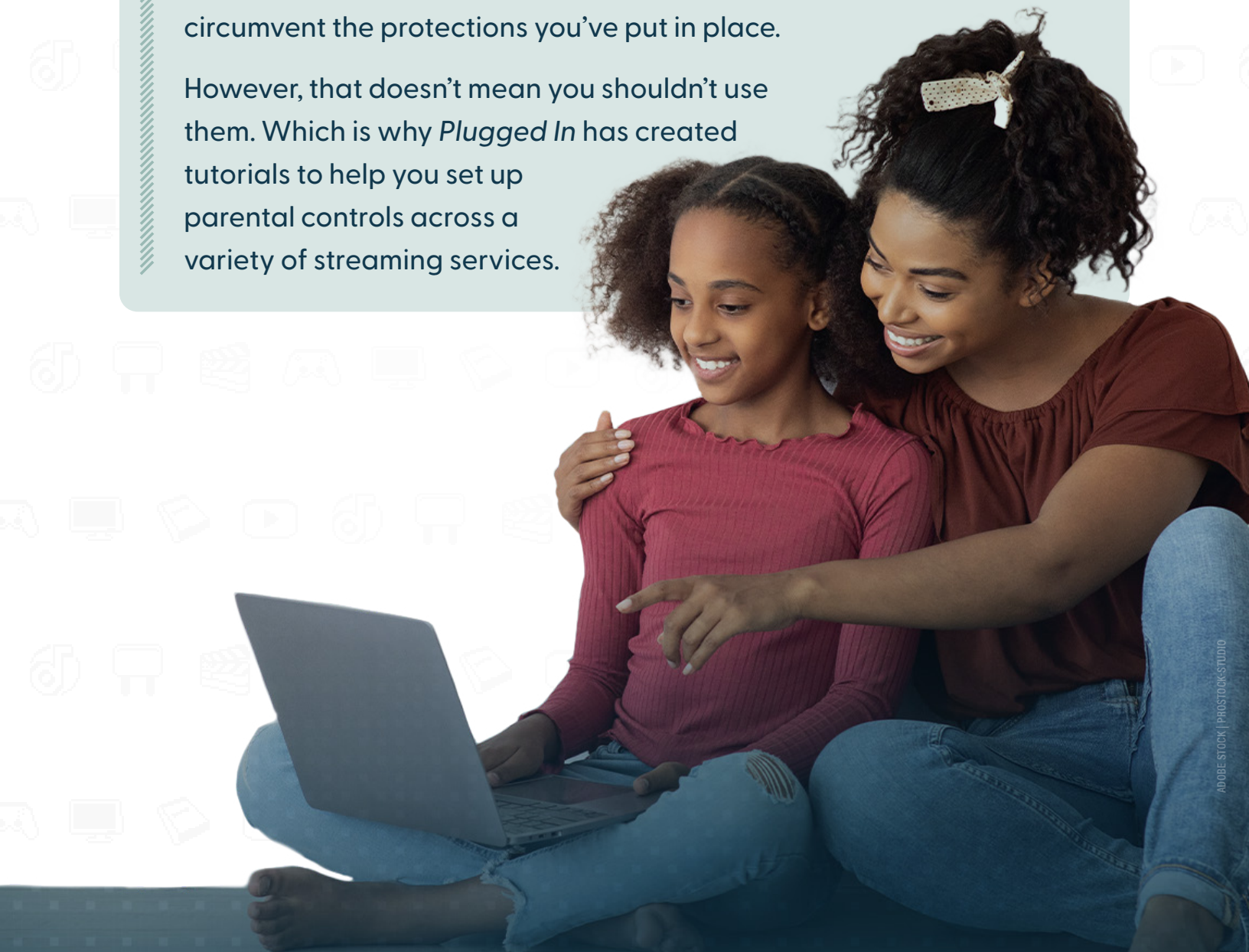
With all this talk about the dangers of pornography, you're probably wondering, "Isn't there a way to *prevent* my kids from seeing harmful sexual content?"

Yes, there is!

But also no, not always.

When your kids are younger—i.e., before they're able to read—you can filter out or block the majority of harmful content through parental controls and monitoring software. As they get older and you allow them more freedom to explore, content filters can become less effective, and some kids might even look for ways to circumvent the protections you've put in place.

However, that doesn't mean you shouldn't use them. Which is why *Plugged In* has created tutorials to help you set up parental controls across a variety of streaming services.



By scanning the **QR code** or clicking the link below, you'll gain access to our full suite of parental control tutorials, including:

- » YouTube
- » Netflix
- » Disney+
- » Prime Video
- » Hulu
- » Peacock
- » Paramount+
- » Apple TV+
- » And *more...*

You can also check out a list of monitoring apps on page 64 .

Kids are naturally curious, so they might ask questions about *why* you've put limits in place. As they get older, they'll probably negotiate to get more freedom—especially if they have friends or peers whose parents haven't created limitations.

Just remember that *you*, as the parent, have the final say in your family's entertainment options.

Plugged In Parental Control Tutorials

Scan QR Code or Click Here

How Porn Affects Kids, Tweens and Teens

By Bret Eckelberry

Porn use has become an epidemic in our modern era, spreading like wildfire across the kindling of a perpetually online world. Access to pornography has never been easier.

Pornography hijacks the brain's dopamine production, sending it into overdrive. This can lead to desensitization and the pursuit of more extreme stimuli as porn users experience diminished arousal. In fact, one study found that, over time, nearly half of its respondents began consuming pornography that they once were disinterested in or even disgusted by. It becomes a bottomless pit of increasingly twisted desires.

And it isn't a problem exclusive to adults.

According to a 2022 study by Common Sense Media, the average age of exposure to pornography is 12 years old. Porn is damaging enough to individuals who have finished developing. But for those who are still in crucial stages of physical and cognitive development, it can lead to serious consequences throughout their lives.

Here's how pornography is affecting kids, tweens and teens today, as well as some safeguards and solutions we can use to protect the children in our lives.

How Porn Affects Kids

The early years are crucial for a child's development. Some studies have indicated that young children may feel confusion and/or guilt over the explicit sexual content they witness. This can then lead to a deep-seated uncertainty as they grow up and consider what their own sexual experiences may look like. Other children may have a sense of curiosity or attraction to such images, even if they're not quite sure why.

In certain cases, problematic sexual behaviors can arise. Kids may process their experiences by mimicking what they have seen in pornography, which can lead to further harm to themselves and others.

How Porn Affects Tweens

The negative effects of pornography are no less serious in tweens. When exposed to pornography, tweens can experience a variety of troubling effects, such as anxiety and a lower sense of self-esteem.

Research indicates that intentional exposure to porn correlates with symptoms of depression in youth. Another study found that tweens experiencing depression and anxiety were more apt to use pornography compulsively.

You can see how a damaging cycle could form in these instances: A young porn user grows more depressed by his use, which leads him back to pornography as a coping mechanism, causing worsening depression, and so on. It's no wonder that frequent use of pornography has been linked to a higher risk of suicide.

How Porn Affects Teens

Though 45% of teens felt that porn gave them "helpful" information about sex, this is far from the truth. Pornography separates sexual intimacy from its God-given marital context, which can lead those suffering from pornography addiction toward risky sexual behaviors and difficulty in future relationships.

Additionally, explicit imagery frequently depicts violent acts in a sexual context. This can lead to the perception that these things are natural and even expected, which can then perpetuate sexual aggression and violence.

How to Combat the Influence of Porn in Your Home

It's important to acknowledge the strong pull that pornography can have. Sexual intimacy is, after all, rooted in a natural desire that God has given us, realized fully and exclusively in marriage. But pornography—and, more broadly, the sin of lust—tells us that our own sexual gratification is the end goal, rather than a good gift that is part of God's greater plan for our lives. As Benjamin Franklin said, "Half a truth is often a great lie."

But we do not fight a losing battle!

There are ways that you can protect your kids from the dangers of porn—even if they, like many of their peers, have already had some exposure.

Keep Communicating

Keep the lines of communication between you and your child open. As a parent, you want to be a safe space for your child to come to with any issues they might have, even uncomfortable and embarrassing ones. So try not to judge, shame or lecture your child if he brings this up. Instead, just *listen*.

If your child has been exposed to pornography, it will make a huge difference if he feels he can come to you immediately rather than struggling with it by himself. And recognize that dealing with the aftermath of such exposure is likely going to require an ongoing conversation, not just a one-time discussion.

Be Aware of Access

Be conscientious about phones and other internet-connected devices in your home. You'll hear various recommendations as to when you should give your kid a phone. A lot of that will depend on your child's personality.

Pornography separates sexual intimacy from its God-given marital context, which can lead those suffering from pornography addiction toward risky sexual behaviors and difficulty in future relationships.

Still, consider the advice of Dr. Danny Huerta, Vice President of Parenting & Youth at Focus on the Family: "When we give our children a portable electronic window into everything the world has to offer, our parenting challenges potentially increase, not decrease."

Set Up Safeguards

Consider some safeguards for the devices you and your family use. There are many different options for monitoring software available (such as the ones listed on the next page) that could prove useful. And, as we've already mentioned in this guide, keeping phones out of the bedroom at night can help limit access to problematic content as well.

Whatever you choose to do for your kids, implement those protections for yourself as well. Few actions will be more impactful for your kids than seeing you hold yourself accountable, too.

Overcoming the Porn Problem

Pornography is a huge problem for both children and adults. And, as we've seen, it comes with a bevy of dangers and detrimental effects. With the rise of new technologies such as artificial intelligence, expect the laundry list of potential dangers to grow.

But it is not insurmountable.

With love, compassion, proactive communication and wise safeguards, families can help their children avoid and overcome the problem of porn, living healthy lives with a proper view of God's design for sexuality.

Accountability Software

Plugged In has talked about the wisdom of incorporating digital safeguards into your family's screen habits, so we've put together a list of some accountability software available now. While this is not an exhaustive list—and we'd strongly encourage you to conduct your own research into these options and others—we hope you find it helpful in getting started.

Covenant Eyes

Covenant Eyes provides a relationship-focused solution to promote screen accountability. Users select accountability partners. Then, if explicit content is accessed, the app sends a private report to those partners, encouraging them to reach out and discuss the issue. The app also blocks explicit websites and offers learning courses and community resources.

Canopy

Canopy is an AI-powered software that filters and monitors harmful and explicit content in real time. The company states, "Beyond simply blocking pornographic sites, our AI instantly detects and filters out harmful content from everyday sites like Instagram and TikTok, so you never have to worry what your child is being exposed to."

Qustodio

Qustodio offers an all-in-one digital safety and wellbeing app. It helps you keep your family safe by setting up web filters, identifying potential risks, blocking apps and games and even offering location tracking. The app also lets you set daily limits for your family's screen time and view your child's online activity.

Net Nanny

Net Nanny also uses AI to block harmful online content before your child can see it. Through Net Nanny, parents can monitor their family's digital habits, limit screen time and filter content in real time to keep your child's web browsing experience safe.

Norton Family

According to Norton Family, their software "provides parents with the information they need to help keep their child safer and focused when online." Parents can monitor for age-appropriate content and set screentime limits. Additionally, Norton Family has tools to help prevent online distractions during the school day.

Talking to Our Kids About Sex and Sexuality in the Culture

By Adam Holz

We've spent a lot of time in this guide talking about the intersection of technology and pornography. It's one of the most important—and difficult—issues that parents face today. However, even though pornography is easier to access than it's ever been before, I suspect it's not the only difficult-to-talk-about topic that families are trying to address.

The broader subject of sexuality is one that our culture is talking about constantly. It's in our music, our movies and more.

If we hope to equip our kids to avoid the pitfalls of porn and to recognize the lies about sex that our mainstream culture feeds us, we've got to be willing to wade into this admittedly difficult issue in our conversations with our kids.

"Let's Talk About Sex, Baby"

In 1991, the pop trio Salt-N-Peppa had a hit with the provocative title, "Let's Talk About Sex." In the wake of the sexual revolution, which began in earnest in the late '60s, that song barely even felt controversial.

The arrival of the birth control pill in the 1960s had already accelerated a countercultural movement to reject traditional sexual mores—as well as the authority in which they were grounded, namely the Judeo-Christian tradition. For the first time in history, the natural outcome of sexual union, pregnancy, could not only be inhibited but essentially treated as an afterthought.

As a culture, we began to move away from thinking about sex as something primarily connected to procreation and marital intimacy. Instead, seeking boundary-free sexual experiences became an end in and of itself. And in the decades that have followed, our culture has

drifted more and more into the notion of sexual identity, the idea that our very sense of self and satisfaction is the most significant component of our lives.

We see this reflected in the entertainment industry. Practically every show, movie and song today focuses on finding transcendent meaning, purpose and identity in sexual experiences. With this near-constant influx of distorted messaging about sexuality (amplified and distorted even further by pornographic imagery), it becomes increasingly difficult and countercultural to instill our kids with the truth about God's intended design for sexuality and the context for which He designed it: a lifelong marriage relationship.

Cultivating the Conversation

Back in the day—however far back that may go—many of us grew up in a world where if our parents had the "The Talk" with us, they probably felt like they were doing a pretty good job. *Here are the facts. Here's the way it is. Good luck*. They wanted to get through it quickly, and frankly, we did too.

But we don't live in a world where one such "Talk" will suffice to equip our children to avoid destructive sexual choices and to understand why they should, especially when many voices around them continually preach a gospel of sex as the path to a meaningful life and pleasurable experiences.

What we need to commit to instead is an ongoing conversation in which we talk frankly, plainly and *regularly* about the subject of sex. And let's face it: Between school, their peers, social media and entertainment, your teens experience no shortage of on-ramps to this topic.


What we need to commit to instead is an ongoing conversation in which we talk frankly, plainly and regularly about the subject of sex.
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Building on a Biblical Worldview

The goal here isn't to preach or even to get our kids to avoid a specific behavior. What I've tried to emphasize with all three of my kids is the contrast between God's intended purposes for sexuality and the ways that the world has distorted those purposes.

In Genesis, we see that God created male and female in His image, and that creation was good! The purpose of sexual expression, as God has designed and intended it, is rooted in the context of a secure, covenantal relationship. In that place, we "know" our mates fully; and the fruit of that "knowing" (as the Hebrew word related to sexuality is translated) is new life.

That knowledge of another person is so significant and profound that outside the protection of marriage, it becomes a source of vulnerability and shame. That shame can then propel people who've been sexually wounded into all sorts of damaging behavior, from a casual attitude about sex to porn use to other compulsive behaviors—all attempts to deal with the ache created by experiencing sexual intimacy outside of God's design.

Though it's not initially a comfortable conversation, I've found in my relationships with all three of my kids that the more we talk about these ideas, the easier it gets. It's no longer a taboo subject, or one that feels weird.

Recently, for example, one of my daughters asked me out of the blue, "Why do guys like porn so much?" That gave me a chance to talk about how, generally speaking, males are more visually engaged when it comes to sexuality, and how pornography can feed that appetite.

Another time, my daughter relayed a concern that a classmate was struggling with sexual decisions after it became public knowledge that her dad had had an affair. That gave me the chance to ask questions like,

“Why do you think she might be making those choices?” “What do you think she’s hoping to find in those experiences?” “What do you think the consequences could be of sharing yourself so significantly with lots of guys as a young teenager?”

Once you’ve broken the ice on this subject, in my experience, it gets a lot easier to talk about, and your kids may even come to you with their own specific questions about sexuality and pornography.

Equipping for the Long Haul

Our goal in navigating this realm is to equip our kids with a biblical worldview even as we have an ongoing and honest conversation about the potentially awkward subject of sexuality. Our culture is so deeply confused about sex, seeking from it transcendent meaning in one breath while in the next proclaiming that sexual experiences don’t mean anything at all.

Nothing can replace the grounding that you have a chance to provide as parents when it comes to laying a foundation of understanding for why God’s design for sexuality is so good … and why it can cause so much hurt when we ignore His intended expression of it.

Parasocial and AI Relationships

By Kennedy Unthank

From the beginning of creation, God saw that it was not good for man to be alone.

In that specific instance, God gave Adam his wife, but it points to a greater truth: We were created to be relational creatures, meant for community, not isolation. But that can feel like a difficult charge; after all, relationships can be hard and awkward.

Despite the difficulty that comes with them, we all want relationships, friendships and community. Most of us, then, push through the awkwardness until our relationships feel natural. But for many, putting in that work can be daunting; finding easier ways to foster a relationship becomes the focus instead.

This isn't a bad desire. The root goal is to find community. But with an overreliance on the internet and screen-to-screen interaction, those well-meaning choices wind up fostering *unauthentic* relationships and harming genuine in-person relationships.

First, we'll look at how screen-to-screen contact makes true connection more difficult. Then, we'll discuss what happens when parasocial and AI relationships enter the fray.

Screen-Based Relationships

Many teens believe that texting their friends is much easier than calling or interacting face-to-face. Notably, texting allows them to take more time to think through each response. For a teenager searching for community, that can feel like the perfect way to avoid any awkward situations. But if it becomes the teen's primary form of communication, it can breed a dependence on screens for every conversation.

Investigations into this dependence have found that, unsurprisingly, screen-to-screen conversations are more prone to misunderstanding. Nonverbal cues—vocal pitch, tone and facial expressions—are often *more* important in communication than the words themselves. Texting eliminates these cues, leaving recipients to parse the intended meaning of each message without the proper context.

Ironically, this self-imposed, screen-centric communicative barrier—originally implemented to mitigate awkwardness—can cause teens to grow *more* awkward. It encourages the child to retreat deeper into his phone, increasing screen time and making social encounters more difficult. Dr. Victoria Dunckley identifies this issue in *Psychology Today*, describing it as a "self-perpetuating cycle."

However, the cycle can be broken. Some studies suggest that screentime intervention may put kids back on track for proper social development. Researchers found that children who were sent to a five-day, screen-free camp significantly improved in their ability to recognize nonverbal emotional cues. Additionally, *JAMA Network* learned that limiting "screen media use" positively affected social interactions among children while "mitigating internalizing behavioral issues."

Of course, these issues merely address children who hide behind their phones to avoid speaking in person. But what happens if those relationships are one-sided?

Parasocial Relationships

A parasocial relationship can be defined as a one-sided emotional connection to someone (fictional or real) who doesn't know who you are. The phenomenon largely occurs online, typically when someone becomes attached to a favorite content creator or celebrity.

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A child engaged in a parasocial relationship will often refer to the influencer as a "friend." He might display emotional attachment to this online personality and mimic that person's behavior. And he'll usually prefer consuming that influencer's content to spending time with real-life friends.

Parasocial relationships most predominantly occur with real people. However, some can occur with fictional characters. These are typically limited to the media made about them, but with the rapid expansion of AI capabilities, they no longer need be (more on that in a moment).

If you recognize that your child is developing a parasocial relationship, you can combat it. Redirect your child away from content consumption to more tangible opportunities, such as sports, clubs or simply spending time with friends and family. Teach him that social media only shows a fragment (usually the good parts) of someone's life. And discourage the use of devices at the dinner table and in the bedroom, prompting your child to engage in face-to-face discussions instead.

While parasocial relationships often stem from feelings of loneliness and a desire to connect, to an adolescent, they can often feel easier than real, genuine connection. And in pursuit of easier relationships, a teen might move from face-to-face interactions or even parasocial relationships to speaking with an affirming AI bot.

AI Relationships

In 2024, TRG Datacenters reported that the term "AI girlfriend" is searched, on average, 1.6 million times each year on Google alone.

AI chatbots remove the biggest limitation preventing most people from acting upon their parasocial relationships: "There's little that a fanatic fan can do to actually make the jump from that parasocial connection to a real relationship with the person they idolize.... With an AI romance, that fundamental limit is eliminated."

Many AI programs offer complete customization. They also engage in AI sycophancy—the tendency for AI personalities to confirm their users' beliefs. And for many users, despite the knowledge that they're speaking to a bot, these relationships feel *real*. In tragic scenarios, these AI bots have allegedly influenced both children and adults alike into taking their own lives or the lives of others.

Parents who have children using AI models should consider educating their kids on the "friendly" nature of chatbots: While an AI might "speak" in friendly sentences, that's because it is programmed to do so. Likewise, AI chatbots simulate relationships by referencing previously inputted data.

Relationships Are Hard and Awkward. That's a Good Thing.

Whether you're dealing with a child hiding behind his screen, idolizing his favorite celebrity or spurning human connection for AI conversations, the theme remains the same: Relationships are hard and awkward—but that's a *good* thing.

If you go to the gym and lift the lightest weights, sure, it'll be easy; but you won't find much fruit in your efforts. Those who want to gain muscle will lift weights that are more challenging. In lifting those, their next encounter with those same weights will become just a little bit easier. And it's the same with building relationships.

When kids forsake genuine connection for easier, online relationships, they may end up more awkward than before. But if they embrace the difficulty, they'll grow—both in their social abilities and as people.

Wanting relationships to be easy isn't a bad thing. But much like lifting weights at the gym, we must teach our kids that persevering through relational discomfort is the only way to *truly* make relationships easier.

Protecting Your Kids From Predatory Behavior

By Paul Asay

Jairo Tinajero was barely an adult himself when he began grooming his underage victims online in 2020. But in 2023, one of his victims (a 14-year-old girl) began to resist. Tinajero demanded more sexually explicit material from her, *or else*. He'd expose her. Kill her family. Murder her.

Later that year, according to the U.S. Department of Justice, Tinajero and a co-conspirator allegedly decided to kill the girl—even bragging in August that he would "live stream it."

The good news: Tinajero was caught. He was indicted in Kentucky two months later for online enticement and the production of child sexual abuse material. In February of 2025, the 25-year-old pled guilty to a boatload of charges, including cyberstalking, racketeering, conspiracy to murder, and the production and distribution of child sexual abuse material.

The bad news: He was hardly the only bad actor out there. Tinajero belonged to a group called 764, an online network that preys on children and teens, coercing its victims into ever-increasing sexual and violent behaviors. In fact, according to the Anti-Defamation League, the group actually *teaches* its members how to groom, exploit and ultimately destroy its victims. The FBI is working 250 investigations tied to the group.

And the threats posed by groups such as 764 are just the beginning. According to the Child Crime Prevention & Safety Center, an estimated 500,000 predators are online on any given day. And very often, they find their prey on *Roblox*. Or *Minecraft*. Or other online forums where teens and children gather … and many adults assume are safe.

How Predators Work

Far from just the internet's most popular bogeymen, online predators are very real and very, very scary. They hang out in digital worlds populated by children and teens, looking for particularly vulnerable marks. According to the FBI, the group 764 sought children between the ages of 8 and 17, especially those who came from racial minorities, identified with the LGBT community and/or suffered from mental health issues such as depression. Many predators look for people with low self-esteem and who might be open to hearing from a kind, supportive voice—even if that voice comes from a complete stranger.

These predators then try to gain a child's trust. They might masquerade as someone the kid's own age. They might flatter or encourage the child to see them as a compassionate friend—someone who understands them far more than, say, their own parents do. And then, after that trust has been established, the predators try to take what they came for.

Often, they encourage their prey to migrate to other, more anonymous forums (Discord and Telegram are favorites) to engage in private, intimate conversations. They may offer gifts in exchange for explicit photos or videos. (If a child or teen was contacted through *Roblox*, for instance, a predator might offer the in-game currency of Robux.)

Once they have that explicit content, the blackmail begins: Predators may threaten to send those images to the child's parents or friends, or simply release them to the world—unless the child does exactly what the predator asks.

Some predators even ask to meet up with the child or teen in person. In June 2025, a Fresno man was nabbed in a sting operation for trying to meet up with someone he thought was a 13-year-old girl.

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It should be noted, though, that *boys*, not girls, are most vulnerable to online blackmail and sextortion. A USA Today investigation found that sextortion has been linked to the suicides of at least 30 teen boys since 2021. All died 24 hours or less after the blackmail began.

What You Can Do

All of this sounds terrifying. And no question, it is. But you can take steps to protect your kids from this terrifying danger. And if you've been reading this Tech Guide from cover to virtual cover, the first will sound mighty familiar.

» **Talk to your kids.** And let's take that meaning as broadly as we can for a moment. Talk with them about whatever they're interested in: sports, fashion, Minecraft, superheroes. Remember, predators look for kids and teens seeking support, validation and, yes, love. If your children feel valued and loved at home, they'll be less susceptible to outside influences pretending to offer it.

» **But also, talk with your kids about this threat.** These can be uncomfortable conversations. But they need to be aware that "stranger danger" is probably far more a threat online than it is on the street or supermarket. Moreover, these strangers can masquerade as friends or pretend to be teens themselves. (Oh, and by the way, these predators sometimes are.)

» **Give them warning signs.** If a stranger seems particularly friendly, they should be wary. If they start steering conversations toward sex, ask for pictures or encourage your kids to reconvene in other, more private online forums, tell your kids to cut off the conversation and tell you immediately.

» **Tell your children to be cautious about what they post.** Discourage them from posting photos or videos. Warn them about the dangers of posting personal information online. If they have social media profiles, make sure that those profiles are private.

- **Review anything your children want to install on their devices.** According to the **Department of Justice**, you should pay special attention to games, apps or social media sites that feature end-to-end encryption, direct messaging and user anonymity. Predators use these tools to further their own ends.
- **Supervise your kids' internet activities.** Keep computers in open, commonly used areas in your home. Set reasonable screentime limits. If your kids have their own phones, check what they're using them for: Monitor their social media messages and posts, and you might even consider installing monitoring software on your home's devices. And if possible, restrict those devices' usage. Have set times or places in your home where phones are off limits. And when it's bedtime, collect those phones and put them in a safe space *outside* your kids' bedrooms.

The world has always been a scary place, and today's threats can feel especially alarming. But parents, you have your own set of weapons to fend off these 21st-century dangers. The greatest of these is the love you have for your kids. Make sure they know how much you do love them—and that any of the guardrails you put around their internet activity is because of that love.

SECTION

4 Cyberbullying

More than half of all teens have experienced cyberbullying.

In 2007, the lifetime cyberbullying victimization rate, as measured by the Cyberbullying Research Center, was 18.8%. That makes sense, given that Facebook was only 3 years old, YouTube was just 2, Twitter (now X) had only been out for a single year, and Instagram, Snapchat and TikTok weren't even a twinkle in their developers' eyes.

But in 2025, 58.2% of teenagers reported having been cyberbullied at some point in their lifetimes.

It's not because the number of bullies has increased all that much. According to additional data from the Cyberbullying Research Center, 19.1% of teens said they had cyberbullied someone else in 2007. That rate only increases to 24.5% in 2025.

Rather, cyberbullying has increased because the avenues available—and the methods that offenders can employ—have diversified. Block a bully on one social media platform and they'll just switch to a different one. Ignore some demeaning messages and they'll escalate to doxxing.

Over the next few articles, we'll unpack those different avenues and methods. We'll also touch on the topics of sextortion and deepfakes.

But we'll also talk about the myriad ways you can help protect your kids from becoming victims and how to come alongside them if they do, hopefully strengthening your bond with your child in the process.

58% of teenagers report having been cyberbullied at some point in their lifetimes.

The New Avenues of Cyberbullying

By Bret Eckelberry

Growing up, I didn't have my own phone (unless you count the ancient prepaid phone my parents had purchased for me in case of emergencies) or social media accounts (I was already in high school when Facebook hit its stride). Online multiplayer games were widely popular but still limited by scope and, at times, a reliable internet connection.

As such, being at home meant a certain level of disconnect from the wider world. My home was a safe space, a reprieve from any issues I may have encountered at school or elsewhere.

But that's not the world most kids live in today.

We are in an age of constant connectivity. Nearly 70% of the world's population has access to the internet. In the United States, that number is closer to 95%. Social media provides unparalleled access to millions of people online. More and more games are offering online features, even those touted as single-player experiences. Our phones receive text messages in the blink of an eye and allow us to carry on multiple conversations simultaneously.

There's virtually no limit to the communication afforded by our digital devices. And that, strictly speaking, is not a problem. The problems come from how we use this technology.

Unfortunately, we don't always use it well. As internet usage has become more widespread, so too has a new type of harassment—one that facelessly lurks at the edges of this digital frontier:

Cyberbullying.

Bullying in the Digital Age

Bullying is nothing new. The first official use of the term appeared in a British newspaper in 1862, but the problem of bullying is much older than that.

However, the digital boom that started in the 1990s and has continued through to today has transformed bullying from a predominately in-person offense into something that can occur almost anywhere and at any time.

If your child has access to the internet—and according to the statistics, most children do—he may find his bullies harder to escape. Our constantly connected world presents new digital avenues that bullies can use to reach your child, even when he's in the relative safety of your home.

So let's look at some of these avenues and discuss what you can do to help safeguard your child from cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying on Social Media

As you might imagine, social media is a large contributor to cyberbullying. According to Pew Research Center, nearly half of U.S. teens have experienced some form of cyberbullying, which includes offensive name-calling, the spreading of lies and rumors and sharing unsolicited, explicit images.

Is the solution to simply cut the cord and eliminate all social media access for your child? Well, maybe. But that might be easier said than done. After all, social media can be especially beneficial in connecting your child to his friends, and those friends may offer reprieve and support from cyberbullies. In a study by Pew Research, 74% of teens said that social media helped them feel more connected to their friends.

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But that connectivity also comes with risks.

The *purpose* of social media, after all, is to get its users to spend more time on social media. Besides the fact that, as we've noted in previous articles, more time on social media heightens the risk of mental health issues, it also increases the chance that your child will experience some form of cyberbullying.

There are a couple of ways you can combat these negative influences:

» **Awareness:** First, get a sense for how much your child uses social media. Then, depending on what you discover, set up a plan to limit his screen time. Talk to your child about cyberbullying. Encourage him to share his experiences—whether he has seen someone being bullied online or has been bullied himself.

» **Acknowledgement:** Recognize your child's desire to connect with friends (and the wider world) through social media. But remind him that time to connect with family and recharge (without a screen) is just as important.

» **Action:** If your child is being cyberbullied, come alongside him to combat it. An effective way to prevent cyberbullying is to **block communications from the perpetrator**, a feature widely available on most social media applications. Some schools also have official channels to report cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying in Video Games

Of course, social media is not the only digital space where cyberbullying can occur. 85% of U.S. teens say they play video games, according to a Pew Research study, and 8 in 10 teens in that same study identified bullying as a problem in gaming.

Many teens use video games as a social experience, with a wide variety of games offering competitive or cooperative gameplay online. Oftentimes, games that have an online component will include voice or text chat features so players can communicate. This can promote connection between friends (or even introduce new friendships). But, as anyone familiar with a Call of Duty voice chat can attest, problems often crop up, too.

Forty-one percent of teens say they have been called an offensive name while playing a video game, according to Pew Research. A disturbing 12% have been threatened physically. And 8% have been sent unwanted sexual material.

So, what are some ways to protect your child from these issues?

» **Awareness:** If your child plays video games, get an understanding of his gaming habits. What types of games does he play? How often does he play them? If he's gaming online, who is he playing with—only friends or strangers too? And has he experienced cyberbullying while playing a game?

» **Acknowledgement:** According to Pew Research, nearly 90% of teens say they play video games with others. Gaming is often used as a social experience and can be positive. But as we've seen, there can be some harmful encounters as well.

» **Action:** If your child plays video games, make time to play with him, even online. It will give you a sense of the types of games he enjoys as well as the communities that exist around those games, both positive and negative. If he is encountering bullies while gaming, work together to block those influences or find a different game with more affirming interactions.

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Depower the Bully

If your child has already experienced cyberbullying, give yourself some grace as his parent. Even with the best safeguards in place, you won't be able to shield him from every form of bullying that's out there.

But you can help prepare him for a bully encounter. You can limit the amount of time he spends in spaces where bullies lurk—including online avenues. You can teach him how to respond. And you can inform other adults in his life to help monitor the situation and prevent it from escalating further.

We may live in an overconnected world, but you can still foster a safe space for your child, letting him know that you will always love and support him, regardless of the challenges he may face.

What Parents Need to Know About Cyberbullying

By Adam Holz

We've just talked a little about the phenomenon known as *cyberbullying*—and where a child might experience it. And as that word implies, it fuses various bullying behaviors involving harassment and intimidation with an online, digital component. But you might still be surprised to hear the many ways an online bully can make an intended target's life miserable.

Forms of Cyberbullying

You might think that cyberbullying is just the online version of what happens face to face: Someone being mean, rude or intimidating. And it certainly is those things. But cyberbullying takes a number of distinctly different forms. Some forms are merely kids being mean (though that can still have a terrible effect), while other forms cross the line into illegal behavior.

» **Trash talking.** This kind of aggressive online criticism might be what we're most likely to think about when we hear the word *cyberbullying*. Depending on the severity of the language used, **experts quantify different levels of trash-talking as dissing, denigrating, flaming or trolling**. These kinds of attacks all essentially involve putting someone down or seeking to tarnish a victim's reputation.

» **Exclusion.** This expression of cyberbullying involves intentionally leaving someone out of a digital group chat. It can often occur because the victim does something that causes the majority of the group to want to exclude them from further participation; however, many instances of exclusion require no preamble.

- **Trickery.** This form of cyberbullying involves feigning friendship for the purpose of earning someone's trust, then using information against them online. And it can range from simply embarrassing the victim, affecting how other people might see that person, to much more serious forms of bullying, including *impersonation, doxxing* or *sextortion*.
- **Harassment.** This involves repeatedly sending threatening or intimidating messages via email, text or social media.
- **Cyberstalking.** This may not always be recognized as cyberbullying, especially if perpetrated by a victim's former friend or significant other, but it involves closely monitoring someone's online activities, either for the purpose of bullying them or because of a dangerous fixation or attraction.
- **Impersonation and fraping.** These two forms of cyberbullying are related. They involve someone hijacking a victim's social media account and posting content that will potentially damage their reputation. Fraping is actually short for *Facebook raping*, and it communicates the idea that someone's online integrity has been forcibly violated by such a takeover.
- **Doxxing and outing.** These terms are also related as both involve revealing personal information about someone for the sake of harming them. Doxxing and outing often involve extreme *harassment* and public shaming with the intent of causing someone emotional distress and relational damage. And it can include exposing a victim's sexual identity issues, political affiliation or even private location information, sometimes with the intent that someone will confront the victim in person and cause them physical harm.

- **Swatting.** Much like *doxxing*, swatting is intended to cause someone emotional distress and even physical harm. It involves making an anonymous call to law enforcement falsely accusing the victim of illegal activity. The idea is to get officials to send a SWAT team to the victim's house, hence the name.

- **Sextortion.** This practice involves using sexual images, texts or information to blackmail someone. Sextortion can involve images or videos that someone has willingly sent, deepfakes or even private information that was hacked for the purpose of extorting a victim. The FBI warns that there has been an increase in the number of cases of financial sextortion involving minors (a 20% increase from October 2022 to March 2023). And sometimes, these cases can result in the suicide of the victim.

Responding to Cyberbullying

Being picked on never feels good. When bullying is severe, it can even cause significant emotional damage. With cyberbullying in particular, victims may feel an increased loss of control due to the ubiquity of the digital platforms where it occurs. There's also greater potential for revictimization, since it can be difficult to remove things from the internet once they've been posted and since even blocked bullies can create new profiles with relative ease.

Given those realities, it's no surprise that research indicates cyberbullying victims are more than four times as likely to struggle with suicidal thoughts and attempts than children who aren't targeted.

As parents, it can be intimidating to know how to respond. But there are several ways we can help protect our kids from this threat and help them navigate challenges in this area.

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Recognize that times have changed. It's tempting to trot out a "When I was your age …" speech if our kids are experiencing some form of cyberbullying. But what's different today is the intensity of rejection and isolation our kids may feel when their online world—which they often rely upon for connection and relationship building—somehow seems as if it's turned against them.

Don't minimize cyberbullying. With good intentions, we might unintentionally minimize our kids' experiences when we say things like, "Well, it's just a part of being a teen. Everybody gets picked on. You've just got to tough it out." We want our kids to be resilient. But those sorts of responses shame them and invalidate their experiences. They also communicate to our kids that we're not there to help them, and that we can't be trusted to hear about their struggles and hurts.

Listen intentionally. If you discover that your child is experiencing cyberbullying, before you do anything else, *listen*. Invite your child to share her feelings as honestly as possible. And before trying to fix either those feelings or the situation, empathize with the emotions she may be experiencing, such as loss, shame or feeling excluded.

Build your relationship with your child. As much as we want to protect our kids from hurt and harm, sometimes hard things happen. In those moments, we want them to know that they can come to us. Working on our relationships with them—and letting them know we're not going to judge them harshly even if they've made a big mistake or poor choice—paves the way for deeper relationship and trust.

Pay attention to changes in behavior. If you notice a significant behavioral change, such as withdrawal from relationships or a diminished desire to connect with others, it could be a sign that something is amiss. Teens, of course, can be moody and irritable almost by definition. But still, no one knows your kid's behavior, interests and way of moving through life as you do. And if something suddenly changes, it's important to lovingly engage and gently seek to find out what's happening with them.

I understand, firsthand, why it can seem like a scary world out there. But we don't have to live in fear as we raise our kids. Instead, we have an opportunity to relate with them intentionally, to love them well and to guide them through the crazy digital world we're living in today.

For more on how to deal with this tough subject, check out "**Bullying and Cyberbullying**" by Dr. Danny Huerta for Focus on the Family.

Artificial Intelligence and Weaponized Deepfakes

By Kennedy Unthank and Emily Tsiao

If there's one unfortunate truth about humanity, it's that when we're introduced to a new technology, it isn't long before someone attempts to weaponize it.

AI image and video generation are becoming increasingly more impressive. In mere moments, anyone with the know-how can create an AI-generated picture of whatever they want. And if you upload a photo, many generative AI models can scan the picture, take the subject and insert him or her into pictures and videos. Or, if you'd like, they can remove unwanted parts from a picture and replace them with convincing stand-ins.

As a result, many have become the victim of a deepfake.

What Is a Deepfake?

In simple terms, a deepfake is a picture or video in which someone's likeness is convincingly manipulated to show them saying or doing something they never said or did.

Unsurprisingly, this technology has been weaponized since its inception—often as a way to generate sexually explicit photos of others. The BBC reports that some apps allow "nudification," where the photos of real people are edited by artificial intelligence to make them appear naked. *Plugged In* has likewise reported on celebrities who've been the victims of deepfake sexual videos.

Reports of these abuses continue to rise, especially as the technology becomes more realistic and easier to use.

WIRED reports on an independent study conducted in 2023, which found that "at least 244,625 videos [had] been uploaded to the top 35 websites set up either exclusively or partially to host deepfake porn videos in the past seven years." Internet Watch Foundation, meanwhile, reported an increase in the number of people using AI to generate deepfake images of child sexual abuse material. Thorn, a nonprofit focused on online child safety, reported that "1 in 8 young people personally know someone who has been the target of deepfake nudes while under the age of 18." In the same study, 1 in 17 also reported being a deepfake victim themselves.

Though deepfakes aren't real, the effect they have nevertheless feels visceral. In many cases victims, both children and adults, feel humiliated by the pictures or videos. That's because deepfakes are intended to dehumanize their targets. What's more, even when identified, not every fake picture is necessarily scrubbed from the Internet, causing victims to worry that their likenesses may be used to make sexually charged content again. And they're left with lingering doubts whether others will believe the new pictures to be fake.

1 in 8

young people personally know someone who has been the target of deepfake nudes while

under the age of **18**

The Law Behind Deepfakes and Advice for Parents

The United States signed the Take It Down Act into law in May 2025 following the use of deepfake technology to exploit high school girls in Texas. The law prohibits anyone from publishing real or deepfake visual depictions of others without their consent, under threat of fines or

imprisonment. It also requires many platforms to create a formal process through which users can report and take down any such depictions.

But for parents who'd rather get in front of the danger, here are some ways to mitigate those dangers for your kids:

Set your social media accounts (and those of your children) to *private*. If a bad actor can't find pictures of you online, then they can't use those pictures to create deepfakes. Setting your social media accounts to private will allow you to approve or deny friend/follower requests. It will also ensure that strangers are unable to scroll through (and download) photographs posted by you and your family.

Remove people you don't personally know from your friends/followers list. A private account is only as safe as the people you've approved to "friend" or follow you. It can be tedious and time-consuming, but you should remove anyone whom you don't personally know. This will also afford you the opportunity to block any fake, hacked or spam accounts.

Consider removing people whom you *do* personally know. Jeremiah 17:9 warns us that "the heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately sick." This suggests that not everyone you know can be trusted with your family's safety. Ministry Safe, a company that performs background checks and trains church volunteers to recognize child sexual abuse, reports that 90% of sexual abuse victims are abused by someone they know and trust. Though it may be difficult, you should carefully consider who among your social media friends may have access to your family's personal photos.

Avoid posting pictures of your children online at all. Many parents only share pictures of their families online so that distant friends and family members can stay in the loop. However, as our previous points suggest, you can't always be sure how those photos will be used by the recipients. Reduce the risk by reducing the number of photos you post. Only upload

pics where your child is pictured alongside other members of your family (this makes it harder for AI to get a clear shot of your child). And when appropriate, obscure your child's face with an emoji or blur effect.

Ask others not to post pictures of your child without your express consent. Many a proud grandparent has been guilty of "grandsharenting," sharing photographs of their grandchildren without the consent of their son or daughter. (For that matter, parents can be guilty of "sharenting," too, posting pictures of tweens and teens who would prefer not to have such an online presence.) Ask your friends, family members, church groups and even your child's school not to post pictures of your child without prior approval.

Educate your older kids about the potential for sexual exploitation and deepfakes. Even when we follow these steps, our kids still pose a significant danger to themselves. Ask your teens if they feel safe with their online presence. Talk to them about the proper way to respond if they encounter a stranger on social media or a video game. See how they feel about oversharing images. And if they do get exploited, *don't blame or judge them*. Remind them that this was a *crime* committed *against* them. Even if your child supplied their attacker with an image beforehand, the responsibility of the abuse falls on the abuser, not the victim.

SECTION

5 Digital Freedom

ADOBE STOCK/ JACOB LUND

72% of U.S. teens say they feel peaceful when they don't have their phones.

As parents, we often think we know what's best for our kids. And if you've been reading through this guide so far, then you might have reached the conclusion that what's best for your kids is to take away their screens.

Many experts might agree with you. Myriad studies tell us that smartphone access for kids isn't exactly a *good* thing: The blue light from digital devices disrupts teens' sleep patterns. Social media can lead to depression and anxiety. Children with access to the internet will likely be exposed to pornography before they're 18.

But it may surprise you to learn that teenagers are well aware of these detriments. Which is why, in a survey conducted by Pew Research, 72% of teens reported feeling "peaceful" ("often" or at least "sometimes") when they don't have their phones on them. By comparison, only 44% said being without their phones ever made them feel "anxious."

So how can parents cultivate that screenless peace?

In the next few articles, we'll talk about embracing the feeling of boredom, exploring "dumbphone" options and what your family can do with the time that's reacquired when the phones are away.

74% of teens say they feel "happy" when they don't have their phones.

The Beauty of Boredom

By Bret Eckelberry

> "All of humanity's problems stem from man's inability to sit quietly in a room alone." – Blaise Pascal

I remember when I first realized what a smartphone could do.

It was in the waiting room at the dentist's office. I had filled out all the requisite paperwork and had nothing to do but wait to be called in for my appointment.

I was bored, so I took out my new phone—the first smartphone I had ever owned.

As I perused the internet on the small screen, I had a lightbulb moment. In my hand was a digital gateway to boredom-busting entertainment. It offered an endless stream of news, videos, podcasts and social media posts. Waiting for my appointment would be a breeze.

From there, it only got easier to fill up the silent spaces in my life with screen time, boxing out boredom every chance I got. I treated the feeling like many people do—an unwelcome guest, to be shooed away as soon as possible.

But is boredom actually a bad thing?

Turns out, we all could use a little more boredom in our lives.

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Why Do We Fear Boredom?

Odds are your child has complained to you about being bored at least once or twice. And it makes sense: As humans, we are conditioned to seek stimuli. As such, boredom can feel uncomfortable; we'd much rather be entertained.

Not only that, but when the mind is allowed to wander (and wonder), it can lead us to places we might not initially want to go: "When you think about nothing … your mind wanders and thinks about, for example, big questions of meaning in your life," says Dr. Arthur C. Brooks, a Harvard professor and social scientist.

It can be daunting to contemplate your existence while riding the school bus or driving to work. It's much easier to fill that space with the radio, or a podcast, instead.

The Benefits of Boredom

Certainly, we shouldn't be bored all the time, so why is it good to spend time in silence rather than listening to that podcast or watching that video? Are there really any benefits to boredom?

Actually, there are quite a few.

Spiritual Benefits

Dr. Brooks argues that time spent in silence, when we're bored, is a good thing. The challenging questions we sometimes contemplate in those moments are important in developing a sense of purpose.

As Christians, we should view this as an especially good thing, because the contemplation of meaning and existence brings us closer to God. Asking the big questions and listening for God's voice is something we *should* be doing. Psalm 37:7 tells us, "*Be still* before the Lord and *wait patiently* for him," and Psalm 62:5 says, "For God alone, O my soul, *wait in silence*, for my hope is from him" (emphasis mine).

As parents, encourage your child to ask meaningful questions about her existence and purpose. Use the opportunity to guide her to the ultimate answer: God, the creator and fulfillment of us and our purpose. (Ephesians 2:10)

Mental & Emotional Benefits

In a world with an increasing number of distractions, escaping the noise into silence—seeking boredom, as it were—can help with focus and aid in the information-processing function of the brain.

Boredom can serve as a restorative state for the brain: It's a time to rest and recharge. Studies have shown that silence can reduce stress and anxiety—even more so than listening to relaxing music.

We all need a break every now and then, and our brains are no exception. When we constantly chase away boredom with our smartphones or other digital devices, we're depriving our mind of the rest and silence it needs.

Creative Benefits

Boredom sparks creativity, too. Ever had a great thought in the shower or while performing some other mindless task? If so, then you have a sense of what our brains can do when we're not in a constant state of mental exertion and distraction.

It's the same with your child. When you provide her with space to think—free from digital distraction—your child will come up with some interesting ideas. She may even think of creative solutions to problems she may be facing.

Depending on the age of your child, you may need to push her in the right direction: What are some things she can do if she's feeling bored, besides screen time? You know your child's interests best. Maybe she could draw, shoot hoops or work on a craft project. Communicate to her that boredom isn't a bad thing; it's an opportunity to try new things or enjoy a beloved hobby.

Embrace the Boring!

It's not a poor reflection on your parenting if your child becomes bored. There's no way you could provide her with something to do every minute of every day. Even if you could, you shouldn't, because boredom is natural and necessary.

Don't fear boredom in your family. Embrace it! It allows us time to consider important questions, to rest and to get creative—all good things that contribute to our happiness and well-being. So, take some time, put the phones and tablets aside and see what your family can come up with when they're, *ugh*, bored.

It might not be so boring, after all.

The Rise of the Dumbphone Trend

By Kennedy Unthank

If you were to ask people "Who has the least interest in a smartphone?" I'd wager the majority would say it would be a Gen Xer or older. After all, they're the ones who grew up without cell phones as an ever-present reality.

But the statistics tell a different story: The people ditching their smartphones at the highest rate are those within the *youngest* generations. They're picking up "dumbphones," devices that lack many of the advanced features that come with smartphones, such as social media accessibility.

But before we look into dumbphones, we first must ask *why*?

A Tech-Drowned Generation

Such a switch makes more sense if we give some foundational background information. Gen Z (1997-2012) was the first generation to grow up in an environment with smartphones, social media and the Internet as an ever-present reality. In fact, Google (first released on Sept. 4, 1998) is roughly as old as the oldest members of Gen Z itself. And given that Gen Z spent, according to research firm *dcdx*, an average of seven and a half hours on screens each day in 2024, it makes sense why some refer to Gen Z as the "iGeneration" (alluding to Apple's iPhone).

But while that near-instant connectivity to world events and other people comes with its benefits, it also comes with costs—such as heightened feelings of anxiety and depression. (It should be seen as no coincidence, then, that Gen Z experiences the highest rates of mental health issues.)

To their credit, many members of Gen Z recognize the problem. In its "2024 Digital Wellness Report," BePresent (a software company that works against screentime addiction) found that 83% of Gen Zers believe they have an unhealthy relationship with their phone. And according to research company The Harris Poll, 6 in 10 Gen Zers support a parent restricting access to smartphones until high school. That support tracks with another study published in the *Journal of the Human Development and Capabilities* which warned against providing a smartphone to those under the age of 13.

And in recognizing the addictive issues inherent in smartphones, Gen Z is largely leading the charge toward safer, healthier connection alternatives.

Dumbphone, Smart Choice

As I wrote for *Plugged In* in an article addressing this topic ("Appstinence and the 'Dumbphone' Trend"): "Dumbphones are sought out by those who find smartphone app restrictions too easy to bypass; who find smartphone features and social media too addictive, public or problematic; who just want to live simpler, yet still-connected lives."

Don't be fooled: Obtaining a dumbphone doesn't mean reinstalling that landline or learning how to text on a T9 keypad once more. In fact, recent technological developments have made weaning away from the smartphone more attainable. For instance, increased customization allows users to straddle the line between smartphone and dumbphone, offering access to apps like Google Maps, Spotify and QR code scanners while still restricting social media use. And several websites have customizable search options to help users find a dumbphone with the exact specifications they need.

83%

of Gen Zers believe they have an unhealthy relationship with their phone.

That's not to say the trend doesn't come without its struggles; it's true that not everyone enjoys the switch, and wireless networks for dumbphones may differ by region. But many Gen-Z members who have made the switch report spending less time on their phones, instead filling that reacquired time with hobbies and projects. They also report lower feelings of phone-based anxiety (most often brought on by notifications and doomscrolling, two issues largely mitigated by switching to dumbphones).

When most tech-centric stories we hear are about how technological advances are making us more dependent, more anxious and dumber, trends like these are a breath of fresh air.

All the Time in the World

By Emily Tsiao

Zzzzz ... BEEP! BEEP! BEEP!

Snooze.

Zzzzz ... BEEP! BEEP! BEEEEEP!

Turn off. Check time. Check messages. Open Instagram. Scroll ...

... one hour later:

Check time. PANIC.

Sound familiar? Perhaps you're more familiar with this one:

Come home. Check time. Check messages. Look up recipe for dinner. Receive Snapchat notification. Respond. Scroll ...

... two hours later:

HUNGER. Check time. Face palm.

Maybe you've had similar experiences. Perhaps you've gone to bed early only to stay up well past midnight browsing through Amazon. Or possibly you've gotten on YouTube to show someone a video and wound up on the app for hours.

I've been there. That was me pretty much from the time I got my first smartphone until just a few years ago when I finally decided that I needed to give up social media once and for all.

Granted, giving up social media didn't solve my problems overnight. For weeks after, anytime I was bored, I would instinctively reach for my phone. I felt so starved for entertainment that I'd open up my bank-account app just to give myself something to do.

Eventually, I wound up deleting the majority of my apps—essentially turning my smartphone into a "dumbphone"—until I could get a handle on the addiction-like compulsion to *constantly* scroll. I had to get creative to find ways to fill the hours I had reclaimed.

And if you and your family decide to cut back on screen time, you may find yourself in a similar situation, asking yourself: What am I going to do with all this time?

Smell the Roses

I had to retrain my brain to entertain itself. And one of the first things I did was get out and smell the roses.

OK, so I didn't *literally* smell the roses. But I did spend more time outdoors. And let me be frank: I am *not* an outdoorsy person. I don't *mind* being outside, but I burn quite easily. And bugs, ahem, *bug* me. That said, getting out of the house—away from the temptation of my phone, my computer and my TV—allowed me the opportunity to really think about what I wanted to do with all my free time.

I committed myself to going for a walk at least once a day. During those brief expeditions, my mind was allowed to wander and wonder. So I thought about what goals I wanted to accomplish with the next few months and years. I thought about skills I had always wanted to have. I thought about what hobbies it would be cool to participate in. And, in due course, I also took the time to evaluate which of those goals, skills and hobbies would actually be attainable.

But I also thought about my relationships. I thought about friends whom I never seemed to have time to hang out with. I thought about my parents, whom I love dearly but rarely call. And I realized that social media had lured me into a false sense of security with those relationships. It had given me a false sense of *connection*.

Call Your Mom

Social media is all about *connection*; however, it misses the *substance* of connection.

For years, I thought I was connected to friends and family because I was following them on social media. (Roughly 74% of teens say social media makes them feel more connected, too.) I'd comment on the occasional post; they'd do the same. So when I gave up my social accounts, I had to find new ways to connect.

Ironically, I wound up seeing more of my friends and family than I had when we were seeing each other daily on our social media feeds. Instead of exclusively sending messages, we made plans to hang out (or, for friends who lived farther away, we called each other on the phone). As it turns out, we were missing out on a *lot*.

In order to have a chat, we each had to take time out of our busy days to prioritize each other. Sure, there was some awkwardness as we compared schedules to find what worked best for both of us, but then, when we actually got to talking, it was so worth it. There are just things that can't be communicated via text, things you enjoy about a person—their personality, their laugh, their facial expressions and hand gestures.

It wasn't that I couldn't make plans with people before I gave up my socials. It was just that I *didn't*. And my relationships weren't the only things impacted by my bad habits.

Just Do Something ...

Teens say that social media allows them to share their interests and activities. They say it can be a space to discover new ideas and knowledge. And some even say it can help them learn about different points of view or show their support for causes.


40%
of teenagers say that social media hurts their productivity.
45%
also say they're spending too much time on social media.
55%
haven't even tried to cut back.
ADOBE STOCK | 345153216

But according to Pew Research, 40% of teenagers say that social media *hurts* their productivity. 45% also say they're spending too much time on social media. Yet more than half (55%) haven't even *tried* to cut back.

I wasn't a teen when I quit social media, but I could easily identify with them. I had probably saved roughly 200 knitting patterns on Pinterest and followed at least a dozen knitting channels on YouTube, but I hadn't bought even a single skein of yarn.

When we aren't constantly glued to our screens, we tend to find the time we never seem to think we have. In my case, I took the time to learn how to knit. I started drawing again (a favorite pastime from my youth). I started playing the piano again. I read books that had been sitting on my shelf for years.

Before my purge, I would have said that there just weren't enough hours in the day to do all the things I wanted. As it turns out, there were a lot of hours to do those things. Maybe not enough, per se, but certainly many more than I had previously believed.

... And Do It Together

So as your family reclaims those lost hours, don't be worried about how you'll fill the time. Trust me, you'll find plenty to do. And if you do find yourself drifting into boredom, don't panic. Just sit back and enjoy this time *together*.

In your free time with your family, even if you're each participating in a different activity, you might find yourselves opening up.

ADOBE STOCK | JACOB LUND

When we aren't all acting like screen zombies, we naturally feel more comfortable asking questions, telling stories, humming a tune. Someone may wind up suggesting a group activity, such as going for a walk together.

And who knows? You might learn that you actually really enjoy walking outdoors.

A Letter from the Editor

Dear Moms and Dads,

Thanks for using *Plugged In's* Parents' Guide to Technology. We know that these issues can be incredibly challenging, and hopefully this guide has helped you navigate some of these issues.

I know it seems like *Plugged In* sure says "talk to your kids" a lot, but I promise it's not without good reason. Our first priority in navigating any technology-based problem—be it screen time, social media, pornography, cyberbullying or even mental health concerns—is to help you build a relationship with your son or daughter.

It's important to install the guardrails: parental controls, screentime limits, no-phone zones, monitoring apps. *It's even more important to establish trust.*

When your kids are little, those guardrails will help protect them from accidental exposure to things that could harm them. But without the conversations about why we put those guardrails in place, they won't learn how to protect themselves from danger as they get older. Instead, they'll search for ways to bypass your protections (and likely find them). They'll lie about how and how often they use their devices.

But worst of all, they won't trust you to stay calm if they mess up. And you won't trust them to make the right decisions.

Talking to your kids about tech is a little like helping them *physically* protect their phone. You buy a sturdy phone case. You explain that the phone is a privilege—one that can be taken away (or not replaced) if she starts throwing it around. But most importantly, you make sure she knows that she is infinitely more valuable than any phone. You let her know that if she makes a mistake and the phone breaks, it's not the end of the world. It's going to be OK.

You'll find a way to navigate that issue together because you *love* her, not because you don't *trust* her.

Maybe she won't have *quite* as much phone freedom (at least until she can prove her responsibility), but at least she'll know that Mom and Dad are more concerned about *her* than the phone.

Guiding our kids through the landscape of ever-changing technology isn't an easy task—and it's probably not going to get any easier. But we hope that this Tech Guide gives you some landmarks to help keep you and your family on course.

Emily Tsiao | Editor

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