

low scrollers

Forget screenagers, these low-tech teens are finding the off switch
– and pushing their parents to unplug, says *Amy Molloy*.

Teenagers want paper.” I was recently talking to a mum friend who works in education, and she offered this surprising insight. Whenever she has resources to share with students, she gives them two options: a PDF or a printed document. “Most of them choose the printout,” she says. “They tell me they’re on their phones all the time – they don’t want another PDF – or an online workshop.”

Another friend, the mum of 15-year-old Ariel, has just installed a landline at her daughter’s request. Her daughter quit all her WhatsApp groups – 10 of them – and now, if her friends want her, they have to call her on “the dumbest phone imaginable”. Whenever she can, Ariel prints out her classwork so she can read it without scrolling. She still uses an iPhone for the “essentials” – maps, music and Snapchat. (The latter uses an app blocker, set to 30 minutes a day.)

When I ask if she’s a luddite, she’s on the fence. She knows the word from TikTok – which she still checks occasionally – where a growing number of teenagers are reclaiming it. A 19-year-old influencer shares how to order an Uber from a flip phone. A teen shares the results of her digital detox to her 40,000 followers. Another unboxes her new notebook, exclaiming, “The paper is so buttery.”

For a generation raised on screens, a no-tech life is not an option – but this is the compromise. They’re not “digital

minimalists” (Gen Zers own, on average, 13 technology products), but they’re fighting back against big tech – with teen spirit.

The number of 12- to 15-year-olds who take breaks from smartphones, computers and iPads rose to 40 per cent in 2024, according to research company GWI. Another big shift? GWI found a “noticeable rebound in IRL (in real life) fun” with 12- to 15-year-olds increasingly enjoying walking holidays, cinema trips and seeing friends on weekends. For these low-tech teens, it isn’t about rejecting digital advancement, it’s about choosing your poison, while still enjoying the perks of innovation.

Dr Danielle Einstein is a clinical psychologist and adjunct fellow at Macquarie University, specialising in anxiety and technology use. She agrees more teenagers are taking proactive steps to reduce their tech use.

“I’ve heard that university students are hanging out at one another’s homes with board games,” says Einstein. “They turn their phones off or put them away when they arrive. They are turning their backs on the idea of needing to be constantly available to everybody they care about.”

It goes beyond their own habits – they also want to break a cycle.

“Students who work in after-school childcare have told me they aren’t going to raise iPad kids,” says Einstein. “They see first-hand how even

iWatches and iPhones erode children’s ability to sort through their own problems. It is great to think that some teens could inspire behaviours for their parents to follow.”

However, she warns we must recognise the “addictive pull of technology” both for teenagers and parents – and the reasons why we struggle to pull the plug.

Nearly 40 per cent of teens say they spend too much time on their smartphone, according to data from Pew Research. Over 70 per cent of teens say they “often or sometimes” feel peaceful when they don’t have their smartphone. However, 70 per cent say the benefits of smartphones outweigh the harmful effects for people their age. The top reason? Smartphones make it easier to pursue hobbies and interests, and to be creative. So, how can a teen scroll less, but still reap these benefits? The answer could lie in good old-fashioned paper.

Earlier this year, 200 people of all ages joined a “reading rave” in Amsterdam, hosted by The Offline Club. The same organisation recently held its first offline event in Adelaide, where people gathered at a coffee shop to read, crochet, play board games and listen to vinyl records together.

In New York, the Luddite Club – a group of “former screenagers” who met at high school – decided to start their own “anti-social network”. Through their website, young people can apply

to be paired up with a “luddite pen pal” and send snail mail to each other.

The “zine scene” is also seeing a resurgence. Zines are those small, handmade booklets that were popular in the 1970s and ’80s. Some people run a business selling zines, while others give them away to friends and family. The most popular zine categories include hand-drawn cartoons and “perzines” – personal essays that feel like long social media captions, only printed.

“At zine fests you will mostly see a younger crowd, with a few old school zinesters like myself sprinkled in for good measure,” says Brigitte Coover, a former teacher based in the US, and the creator of Commonplace Zines. When Coover began introducing zines into her lesson plans, her teenage students embraced them. They found them relaxing and engaging, and loved having a physical product to share with their friends afterwards.

According to Coover, a lot of new zinesters gravitate toward the “eight-page mini zine”, made using one side of a single sheet of paper. It’s affordable, accessible and you’re in control of your content.

“With fears of digital censorship, coupled with TikTok (being temporarily banned in America), I think young people are craving a more tangible offline world,” Coover says. “The zine community is very anti-gatekeeping, so adding zines to the



classroom felt like a natural step for me. It seems a lot of teachers and librarians my age (44) felt the same way – and the students love it!”

For low-tech teens, there isn’t one strategy. It’s all about highlighting your personal digital weakness – and making your screen time count.

A 17-year-old boy, who games for hours on the weekends, tells me he reads a novel when travelling on the train to school. A neurodivergent teen uses a printed calendar because it quiets her mind. Another teen is learning to code but quit Netflix because it messes with their sleep.

The focus is on autonomy, and creating a digital landscape that lights you up, rather than drains your battery.

As for the argument that our teens need phones for safety, Einstein disagrees. “It’s the opposite really,” she says. “Feeling as though you need a phone for safety, stops you recognising

that you are OK without one. Phones themselves do not keep you safe. They are practical and convenient – that’s it. If you use them in the wrong way – by messaging [your kids] at the wrong time – they increase anxiety and undermine teen resilience.”

Einstein offers the example of a teenager missing the bus, and calling a parent to complain, ask for advice or to be picked up. “It makes more sense for that teenager to navigate what to do about missing the bus on their own,” says Einstein. “It’s annoying for them, but at the end of the day, they will get home and realise that they are OK. They might afterwards talk to a friend who has also missed the bus and get a sense of achievement that they managed [to get home on their own].”

For many parents, untraceable teenagers are a terrifying prospect. Many of us remember low-tech clubbing in the ’90s: no phones, no

“Feeling as though you need a phone for safety, stops you recognising that you are OK without one. Phones themselves do not keep you safe. They are practical and convenient – that’s it.”

Ubers, no way to find your lost friends. (There’s even a TikTok trend about it: “Millennial Moms telling Gen Z about clubbing.”)

No-tech clubbing certainly had its benefits (no photographic evidence), but it also had plenty of downsides (searching for a payphone to SOS your dad). Instead of going cold turkey on the tech, it’s more about compromise – which ironically can mean buying more technology.

Over 18 million people have viewed a TikTok video by influencer “Sammy K” explaining why she takes a flip phone on a night out. According to Sammy, it eliminates all the bad things that can happen like “accidental drunk posts and bad hookups”, and reinforces the good: “connecting with people, taking photos and videos”. Yes, it means buying even more technology – she has multiple flip phones, plus accessories and uses a smartphone in the day – but that’s the Gen Z way. •