



Real Fear, Real Hope:

# Social Media, Mental Health, and Our Children

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*I think there's really no question what this data is telling us," said Dr. Kathleen Ethier, head of the CDC's adolescent and school health program. "Young people are telling us that they are in crisis."*

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In April 2023, Grounded and Soaring published a three-part series on the impacts of social media and what parents can do about it. Each part has a specific focus:

### **Part I: Empower**

Share key strategies with you to help your kids be and stay healthy. It's imperative that we pay attention and that we act.

### **Part II: Inform & Explain**

Ensure you have access to an accurate, up-to-date view of the experience and challenges facing youth right now.

Share current analysis about three root causes of this crisis and the two current “camps” of thinking regarding social media and youth.

### **Part III: Rally**

Encourage and inspire school communities to rally around our youth. We can take specific actions for their well-being.

We know it will take all of us working together to push back against the overwhelming societal forces stacked against healthy childhoods and adolescence.

This book is a compilation of those posts and is intended as a resource to be shared. If you have comments, questions, or suggestions, please send them our way by clicking [here](#).

# Part I

## Empower

We all know it: something is not working for the youth in our society right now. In Part II, I share with you a deep dive into the three most likely root causes of the current crisis. Then in Part III, I share with you how we as school communities can rally together to support all of our kids' and teens' well-being.

Let's start by immediately empowering you and your family.

How can we best inoculate our kids against the forces that damage and scar them? How can we respond to the current youth mental health crisis in the U.S. as an opportunity to instill in our kids the inner tools and behavioral habits that will grow their well-being and resilience to benefit them for life?

**Here are 10 key strategies:**

**1. Start With Presence, Curiosity, & Empathy:**

Renowned psychologist Dr. Lisa Damour notes, “Too often, ‘mental health’ is equated with feeling good, happy, calm or relaxed...” But it’s more accurately “...about having feelings that fit the moment — even if those feelings are unwanted or painful — and managing them in effective ways.”



It's a given that our kids—just like us—will have a wide variety of moods and emotions, so our job is to be present for them to listen curiously and empathetically when they share struggles. Then, it's to help them understand more clearly what they are going through. Evidence reveals that just giving words to our negative feelings reduces the pain—i.e. “Name it to Tame it.” Dr. Damour shares her approach:

The exercise I use in my own home is that I imagine that my teenager is a reporter, and I am an editor. My teenager is reading me her latest article. My job is to listen so intently that when she comes to the end of the draft, I can produce a headline — the headline being a distilled, accurate summary of what she said that doesn't introduce any new ideas. That shows them that you're listening, and validates their feelings.

By giving this gift of presence, curiosity, and empathy, and clearly reflecting non-judgementally what we hear, we help our kids grow their own muscles of self-awareness, emotional intelligence, and self-regulation. This validates their experience, which in turn helps them learn to trust and value themselves.

Additionally, such an approach will help them develop empathy and listening skills as we role-model for them. (This alone is a gift: a well-publicized study found that over the last few decades, empathy in college-aged students declined by 40 percent.)

## 2. Take Parental Control of the Wild Elephant in the Room: Digital Technology & Social Media

We all struggle with this. Parent shaming isn't helpful. Tech saturates the lives of most of us. We're doing our best every day, and few of us have figured out yet our own fully healthy relationships with digital devices and social media.

New technologies allow for good, too. (I remember witnessing our son learn how to make complicated origami creations, as well as learn how to play the ukelele, all from online tutorials.) For our children and teens though, the verdict is in: most social media and digital tech use, in its current form, degrades our kids' healthy, optimal development; it's misaligned with our values and goals for their childhoods and adolescence.

It's worth considering waiting much longer to give our kids access to social media and digital technology. It's well known that these are intentionally designed to be addictive, so the analogy to drug and alcohol abuse and addiction science is helpful. Note too that, over the last few years, screen time amongst youth has increased. Now, kids 8-12 years old spend on average close to 6 hours per day in front of screens, and teens (13-18 years old) now spend about 9 hours per day in front of screens.

First, research shows that if kids can wait until they are 18 or older to try drugs or alcohol, they are much less likely to develop substance abuse problems. Second, while many people are able to have balanced, non-destructive relationships with intoxicants, many can't; stopping their use completely is the only viable option.

Consider the work of Dr. Anna Lembke, Chief of the Stanford Addiction Medicine Dual Diagnosis Clinic at Stanford University and author of [Dopamine Nation: Finding Balance in the Age of Indulgence](#). She notes how hard it is for us adults, with our well-developed brains, to resist compulsive tech use. With the tremendous dopamine rush kids' and teens' brains experience through digital devices, they really don't stand a chance. Better to just not introduce them to it for now, and wait until they are in high school. Dr. Lemke also advises that any devices kids under 14 use do not give them access to the internet or social media.

However, if our kids are already down the rabbit hole and we want to dial back their tech use, it's hard but not impossible. Just like substance addiction withdrawals tend to dissipate after a few weeks, so too will their tech withdrawals.

What makes tech use and our kids high stakes? Tomorrow I'll share the data and research, but first here's my very personal experience: Around the mid-2000s, my wife and I saw that once our kids were introduced to digital devices and video games, the pleasure of the dopamine rush they experienced through using them was wildly powerful and addictive. From there on out, when they had free time, they'd often ask to use digital devices before anything else (e.g. playing catch or ping-pong, swimming, painting, cooking, walking the dog, board and card games, etc.). This set us up for far too many push-and-pull struggles and the need to set and enforce far more rules than we would have preferred. What we experienced is very common.

We were influenced by our kids' pleas of "All my friends have this!" "I'm the only one in my class who doesn't play it, etc." The competing desires to support their needs for belonging and

inclusion, and knowing what they were asking for was misaligned with our values and goals for them, made it a very tough nut. Looking back, we wish we'd had the strength and foresight to have resisted these pleas longer than we did. Once our kids are introduced to the devices, it's arduous and painful to put that cat back in the bag. We did it. And it was sometimes torturous, but ultimately worth it.

(And, If you think tech use is essential for kids to develop tech skills, check out the recent podcast we recorded with Marin Montessori School parent Tom Preston-Werner, computer programmer and founder of GitHub, [“Why a Low Tech School for a High Tech World.”](#))

**O.K. Friends: No more denial or avoidance. Fist bumps; let's make the time to deal with this. We've got this!:**



## For Young Children

### Resist & Innovate

- As much as possible, keep young kids off of digital devices. Instead, if you need something to give them to take their attention off of you, consider possibilities like these screen-free [audiobook players](#) and screen-free music players. If stuck in the car, board books, audiobooks, “eye-spy” and songs and singing are each much better options than handing them phones or tablets.

### Skip the “Educational” Videos

- “Baby Einstein” products and similar consumer goods marketed as beneficial for kids’ brain growth “have been [linked to](#) developmental issues, sleep problems and delays in learning essential skills like vocabulary.”

## For All Children & Teens

Seriously consider not giving your child a smartphone during their childhood and early adolescence, waiting at least until high school.

If you believe your kids need a way to contact you and other family members, consider something like the [Gizmo Smartwatch](#) (most cell providers have their own version of this), which allows kids to contact only the people you set.

For older kids and teens, the [Light Phone](#) is a brilliant option: It looks like a cool smartphone, but just allows for calling, texting, GPS, and limited apps. (A New England boarding high school recently [banned smartphones for faculty and students](#) and gave everyone Light Phones instead; testimonials show it was a tough adjustment, and now the community is happier and healthier.)

To support your child's interest in listening to music and audiobooks, consider listening devices that don't include the ability to access the internet. [Here](#) is a good list of options. For e-readers or e-ink tablets, select ones without options for searching the internet or other apps. Recommendations [here](#) and [here](#).

## **Own Your Role & Take Control**

If your kids are on devices, set up parental controls (see this [comprehensive summary](#)). For Android, use the [Family Link](#) app to manage apps and set screen time limits. For iOS, go to Settings > General > Restrictions to [limit apps and features](#).

[This article](#) gives hope: “I Used Apple’s New Controls to Limit a Teenager’s iPhone Time (and It Worked!)”

Direct links:

- [Apple Native Parental Controls](#)
- [YouTube Safe/Restricted Mode](#)
- [Google Safe Search](#)

## **3. Knowledge is Power: Media Literacy**

Let's educate our kids with a sober, clear-eyed assessment of the social-media-saturated reality in which they are growing up (including pros and cons). [This article](#) from Nemours Children's Hospital offers a strong starting point.

Teach your kids the difference between “Friends” and “Followers.” Friends care and support each other and spend time together. Friends express interest, empathy, encouragement, and acceptance. Followers click a button.

To give your preteens and teens insight into the ways they are being targeted and persuaded to consume online content—for the monetary profit of others—watch with them “[The Social Dilemma](#)” (on Netflix [here](#)); it’s powerful and insightful. This will help your kids understand that you are seeking to protect them and that there is a clear reason they get sucked into their screens.

#### 4. Help Them Find Their Meaning & Purpose

Young people with a strong sense of inner connection with something larger and benevolent in life are 90 percent less likely to experience depression.

The R.O.I. is phenomenal if we invest ourselves in helping our kids develop this sense. Where do you find your strongest sense of connection with life? Live music? Creating art? Absorbing yourself in nature and silence? Activism? Community belonging?



*Vice President Al Gore speaking to Marin Montessori School community in 2020 on what we can do to address climate change.*

If we can model for our kids that we attend to our inner lives—not solely focused on external productivity—and share what connects us to meaning, we empower them to attend to their inner experience and development.

## **How to help our kids find their purpose?**

Pay attention to what makes them powerfully come alive in their lives. Notice what sustains their excitement and interest, and support that.

I recently read that as an 11-year-old boy in Northern Ireland, when music legend Van Morrison expressed excitement about learning guitar, his working-class family invested in one for him. Imagine if they had not?

Contemporary comedian Seth Rogen tells the story that when he was 12, he shared his interest in comedy with his family. They found a local class for him and shuttled him back and forth; they even drove him to nightclubs to perform.

As a personal example, early in high school, our eldest told us he wanted to become a firefighter. We helped him interview for a position as a “Firefighter Explorer” with Novato Fire Department and then shuttled him back and forth to evening classes. He has since changed his career path toward health care, but the act of validating his inner longings was vital in empowering him with agency and self-worth.

When our youngest asked for help getting a small computer device to record his acoustic and electric guitar compositions, we did. Over the last three years, he’s evolved this into a thriving

online music business (and hasn't asked us for money for the last three years!) and plans to be a college freshman next year majoring in business with a concentration in entrepreneurship in the music industry (yes...there is that major).

The bottom line is that when our children's lives are aligned with what makes them come alive, this is a powerful prophylactic against the negative influences that degrade a young person's sense of self and self-worth.

## 5. Cultivate In Real Life Joy and Belonging

Board Games! [Here's a fantastic resource to find games](#) that fit all ages and that you will actually enjoy playing with your kids. Playing together (or bike riding, or drawing, or cooking, or knitting, or...fill in the blank..) saturates our kids with a sense of family love and belonging.

Consider incorporating the idea of a regular "Tech Shabbat" into your family's weekly or monthly routine. Local author Tiffany Shlain's book, "[24/6: Giving Up Screens One Day a Week to Get More Time, Creativity, and Connection](#)" shares this practice, and [her podcast interview](#) here is excellent: She explains how she and her busy family—with young kids—do this each week and find great value in it.

As our kids get older and enter the fray of the world, the strong foundations of family love we cultivate and strengthen through joyful time together will buoy them for their lives.

## 6. Act Boldly & Hold Boundaries

Dr. Montessori observed that as children enter adolescence, they become “social newborns,” not dissimilar to toddlers in many ways: The onset of puberty creates an almost entirely new way of seeing and experiencing the world. It’s confusing. They often feel and act chaotically.

Just as young children crave predictable order and routine, so do teens—though they will often fight us on this tooth and nail. In reality, clear, consistent boundaries make them feel safe. When they know adults are holding strong guardrails up for them, they can trust that they won’t fall off a cliff (metaphorically and literally) as they explore, work on their identity formation, and individuate from us.

When we sense or get evidence that our kids are unable to manage healthfully enough the freedoms we give them, we need to step in and act and dial back those freedoms.

The calculus is important though: Failure is vital for learning.

Allowing kids enough space to struggle, fail, and develop, is essential. However, some behaviors are too high stakes for us to stand by. Jessica Lahey, author of the New York Times bestseller, “The Gift of Failure: How the Best Parents Learn to Let Go So Their Children Can Succeed” shares her wise insights into how to walk this line in our recent [podcast conversation](#). Essentially, it’s to ask ourselves, “Is it crucial that my kid does or does not do a certain thing a certain way, or is there room for them to mess up and learn from mistakes on this?” In most cases, there’s room.

But sometimes, the risks are just too high stakes. When they are, we need to step in and be the grown-up parents for them.

Clear, consistent boundaries and expectations-setting around our children’s freedoms and responsibilities give them the safety, guidance, and room to explore and struggle that will grow mightily their capacities for successful independence and well-being. The research backs this up too: “Authoritative” parenting (not to be confused with “Authoritarian” parenting) is shown to lead to the most well-adjusted kids; this approach is typified by high warmth and clear, consistent boundaries and behavior expectations.

## 7. Support In Person Friendships & Community

Another well-researched and documented prophylactic is positive human relationships (it even dramatically increases life expectancy). When our kids are young, there is so much we can do to help connect them with friends outside of school. It becomes more difficult as they enter adolescence and assert their privacy—most teens cringe at the idea of their parents arranging “playdates” for them.



That said, they often don't know how to do it themselves, so offer to host their friends, drive them, and find activities that might interest them and their friends and support these. If they have a special interest or a specific identity they are exploring and developing, help them find groups aligned with this.

When you host kids or teens with phones, consider a practice like this: have a basket at the front door where everyone deposits these when they come in. (It's okay to be the strict, no-fun parent sometimes—they'll thank you later.)

## 8. The Gift of Nature

For our family, camping trips and time exploring nature on the weekends (bike rides and hikes), were the times when our kids never asked for, or even seemed to think about, digital technologies. In high school, they each took extended backpacking trips with organizations like the National Outdoor Leadership School (NOLS) and Outward Bound.

Our eldest still talks regularly about his 30-day backpacking NOLS trip in Alaska; he experienced this between his sophomore and junior year of high school. For us, it has been essential to give our kids a relationship with the larger presence of nature as a source of grounding and meaning. And, this is timely, too. See the book, [“Last Child in the Woods: Saving Our Kids from Nature-Deficit Disorder.”](#) And a growing body of research finds that time in nature has a wide array and physical and psychological benefits. Currently, doctors in 35 states are [formally prescribing time in nature to patients](#), recognizing the evidence of its health value.

If we start early, helping our kids cultivate their own close relationship with nature as a source of solace and meaning, this will be a relationship they can come back to again and again, for their whole lives.



## 9. Normalize Mental Health Care

Why do we feel comfortable talking about seeing a doctor for high blood pressure, but feel embarrassed to talk about seeing a therapist or psychiatrist? It seems there's a sense that if we seek mental health care we are somehow weak — as opposed to being inspired by those with the strength to seek help and improve their lives. We don't think someone with a broken leg is weak for seeking care. And, given that rates of anxiety and depression have increased across all ages in the last few years, why would we ignore this and just suffer in silence?

Ups and downs of moods, times of sadness and anxiety, these are all normal parts of life. However, when we see them becoming pronounced and sustained in our kids, don't wait. Specifically, now

that we know how poorly our society's youth are fairing—and the dire consequences of their suffering. Where there is suffering, we need to seek professional help and care.

Finally, by sharing with our children the ways we care for our own mental health, and by supporting them in discovering what works well for them—including seeing professionals—we send a vital, life-giving message: “You matter. You deserve to feel okay. People are there to help you when you need it. Reach out.”

## 10. Be the Change

Whatever behaviors we want our children or teens to adopt, we have to role model these for them.

Do our kids see us reading books or making art? Do they see us putting away our phones during meals and family time? Do they witness us volunteering? Do they experience us expressing our feelings with self-awareness and regulation? When we do become dysregulated and make mistakes, do they hear us apologize with sincerity? Do we share how we find meaning and purpose in our own lives? Do they see us enjoying time outside and exercising? Do they see us taking time for “in real life” relationships? Kids, especially teens, are all about “do as I do, not as I say,” as they observe our actual behaviors as their potent role models.

# Part II

Inform

In Part II, I share with you the evidence for three root causes of the current crisis among youth in our society.

Every generation faces challenges and unprecedented new phenomena. While overwhelming at times, we can come together as a community devoted to the well-being of kids and teens, and meet this moment.

We've got this.

By Sam Shapiro

## **My Fears**

I have two fears in sharing this post with you: First, it's disturbing. But it is the truth. In some ways, it's meant to disturb in order to inspire action: I hope to motivate us all to come together--strength in numbers--to care robustly for our school community and larger society.

My second fear is that you'll feel judged for your personal and parenting choices. That is the last thing we need. This is an enormously complicated, overwhelming time to parent and work to support a family. Feeling judged just paralyzes us and makes us defensive. It's easy to write as if it's possible to parent perfectly. It's not. Because parenting is about human relationships, it is an inherently messy experience, and bruises and bumps along the way are inevitable.

## **My Purpose**

My main goal really is to empower and energize us all with tools, strategies, and knowledge to harness this moment to give our kids the gift of a healthy childhood and adolescence. Behind the current crisis affecting our youth are potent, exciting opportunities to supply the inner tools that will benefit them for life. All is not lost.

While in this series I share three root causes of society's current youth mental health crisis, and what we can do about it, there's a strong emphasis on the risks associated with social media and digital technology use, as well as suggestions for tackling these risks. Some of the depth of concern I have comes from my own experience parenting two kids (now 18 and 21), and learning from both our parenting successes and the total fails and unhelpful parenting choices my wife and I made along the way, including with digital

technologies.

*We're in this together: A No Shame Zone.*

## **The Spark**

About this time last year, a Marin Montessori parent told me she had offered to help friends out by picking up their 3rd-grade daughter and two of the girls' friends from a local Marin elementary school.

On the car ride, she asked the girls if they played soccer, did theater or music, swam, did art, or liked cooking. Every question received a, "No, we don't really do that." When she finally asked, "Then, what do you like to do when you're not in school?" Their reply? "We make TikTok fashion videos."

I knew the research on the importance of physical, creative, in real life playful activities for kids, as well as the American Academy of Pediatrics' declaration that young people should have no or only very limited screen time. Every day I saw too the wholesome joy, friendship, activity, and creativity in our Marin Montessori students who stayed after school for after-school care, or bayside classes; I felt sad and worried that these local eight-year-old girls I had heard about were just spending their time on social media.

This year, as I've studied the issue more closely and looked at the data, I am convinced that we need to act boldly, and now. I'm aware too of the limits of what we alone can do as a school, specifically around digital technology and social media. While schools like ours may make their campuses no-phone zones for kids, and only allow computer use for research, install firewalls,

etc., students' online activities outside of school, at night and on weekends, often end up negatively impacting and creeping into the school community. Schools need partnerships with their families.

While there are possibilities for benefits and pro-social experiences for sure, ultimately the way our kids are currently engaging with the digital devices and programs that are intentionally designed to capture their attention, it needs to change.

## **The Reality**

I know we all sense this, and the data is undeniable that, as a whole, young people in our society are suffering: In the U.S. today, suicide is the second leading cause of death amongst the youth of all genders ages 10-14; for girls especially, there's strong evidence associating excessive social media use with suicide. This is likely why Vivek Murthy, our current U.S. Surgeon General, declared that kids under 14 should not have access to social media.

*Sadly, the kids in the U.S. are not alright.*

## **Why We Need to Take Action Now**

- First, the risks are profound. It's not an exaggeration to say this is a matter of life and death for far too many young people.
- Second, compassion: consider your love for a child or grandchild. You'd walk through fire to help them. Few things are more agonizing than when our children are in emotional and mental anguish. Every parent and grandparent feels this. Even if our kids are flourishing, let's care about those who are not.

- Third, as a society, we are interconnected. This crisis is real. The youth are our future. If they are in crisis, it impacts us all—today or tomorrow.
- Fourth, this crisis has a potent opportunity underneath it: If we face it head-on, we can help our kids develop inner capacities that will grow, enrich and solidify their well-being and resilience, now and for the rest of their lives.

In the last decade, there has been an over 300 percent increase in youth admissions to emergency room hospital visits because of self-harm, suicide attempts, and severe mental and emotional distress.

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recently reported that 42 percent of U.S. high schoolers experienced persistent sadness or hopelessness; 22 percent seriously considered attempting suicide. Teen girls and LGBTQ youths' struggles are most pronounced, with boys reporting worsening symptoms too.

For more information, I've compiled a summary of other statistics and studies illuminating the current crisis.

## **I. Root Cause One: Social Media**

A root cause of the current crisis is a perfect storm of the ubiquity of social media and digital technology and its tragic mismatch for the health of young brains.

Before diving in, here are important, initial helpful contexts:

- We are in a new reality: When most of us were teens, the significant risk factors were external: drunk driving, smoking, unwanted pregnancy, drug abuse, etc. Now, for our kids, their most significant risk factors are internal, namely anxiety and depression.
- Over the last century, our children have begun puberty at around 12; it used to be around 14.
- Teens declining mental health predates the isolation brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, beginning its descent into its alarming state around 2011.
  - Jon Haidt, Professor of Social Psychology at NYU's Stern School of Business, studies and writes most clearly on evidence that the introduction of social media to youth (around 2011) was the trigger and ongoing fuel stoking the rapid, continuing decline in young people's mental health.

When our kids enter puberty (now, younger than ever), parts of their brains explode with a new craving to understand peer social hierarchies and survival strategies. Evolutionarily, this is intended to help them prepare for life beyond our parental protection.

Unfortunately, however, there is a serious neurological mismatch; the rest of their brains, bodies, and selves haven't caught up. (Especially the underdevelopment of their prefrontal cortexes, which then limits their ability to self-regulate and predict the future consequences of their behaviors.)

This specific explosion in puberty ushers in an acute preoccupation with peer social dynamics and judgments. We then layer on social media and the 24-7 digital technology ocean they swim in, and it's completely overwhelming and destabilizing: the devices, apps, and screens they consume have been designed by brilliant adults to addict their users.

## **Really, our kids don't stand a chance.**

Why is this a problem? In addition to the damage to their attention spans and the caustic, dangerous underbellies of the world that social media and the internet open to our kids and invite into their lives, likely the most damaging aspect is the endless social comparison and opportunity for social ridicule that social media offers.

## **When Theodore Roosevelt noted that “comparison is the thief of joy,” he was on to something.**

Social comparison specifically robs us all of joy and satisfaction with ourselves and our lives.

Puberty kicks our kids into being hyper-focused on peer social hierarchy and social survival--and precisely how their peers perceive them. The endless onslaught of social information (e.g., “likes,” harassment from trolls, comments, rumors, pictures of peers having fun without them--all of which can be spread to millions with a click of a button) can throw our youth into a hyper-vigilant state of social paranoia about their moment-by-moment status.

This is not weakness on their part; it's an expression of the need for belonging and the safety that inclusion and approval provide. The persistent fear of humiliation, shame, and exile is debilitating. And, unlike when I was a teen and only had access to a clunky plastic wired phone (or very slow internet connection) to communicate when not at school, the online 24-hour social gossip (and fake gossip) news cycle saturates our teens' lives without relief.

It's absolutely true that adolescence has always included a degree of tumult. Something profound has shifted, however.

As writer Jessica Grosse noted this week, "Most of us who came of age before social media were able to do the hard work of identity formation without having to be aware of the opinions of strangers worldwide. We were lucky to grow up without having to think as much about being perceived and picked over by people who didn't know us."

As I wrote earlier, a 2021 longitudinal study shows elevated suicide risks for girls with excessive social media use. And in recent years, a heartbreaking number of young people of all genders--including elementary-aged children--have hurt themselves or taken their own lives after being harassed and shamed online through social media posts.

The 16th-century Indian poet Kabir once wrote, "Admit something: Everyone you see, you say to them, 'Love me.'" This human need to be seen and valued is so amplified and fragile in

young people, and subjecting themselves to endless peer and anonymous digital commentary and insinuation about their own “loveability” is a disastrous recipe.



## **What to do? Marlboro versus Ford**

Recently, The New Yorker published a very honest [article](#): “The Case for Banning Children from Social Media: Most people seem to agree that something should be done to protect kids from what sure looks like an addictive product. But almost no one knows what that something is.”

Currently, there are two dominant ways of thinking about social media that can be analogized to the “Big Tobacco” camp and the “Car Industry” camp. The first argues that social media is irredeemable, or at least irredeemable in the near term. Just like there is no healthy way to smoke tobacco, there’s no healthy way for youth to consume social media--whatever good there may be is far outweighed by the bad.

Utah recently passed a law requiring parent approval, with legal identification verification, before anyone under 18 can access social media platforms; several states are following suit. In his recent State of the Union speech, President Biden shared his belief that it's time to hold social media companies accountable for what he called an experiment they are running for profit on our children.

The “Car Industry” camp sees social media as a source for much good (often cited is the fact that many youths have found important support, community, and political engagement through social media), but in need of additional safety measures (i.e. add the equivalent of airbags and safety belts). California’s lawmakers lean in this direction, focusing on pushing tech companies to consider child/youth safety in everything they do.

Regardless, there is a growing consensus that social media’s impact on youth has reached a disastrous state. Both Seattle and San Mateo are suing tech companies, accusing them of actively harming kids’ mental health.

Emblematic of this growing awareness is that the Chinese version of Tik-Tok (Douyin) only offers educational content to teens and limits the amount of time Chinese youth can spend on it (no more than 40 minutes per day); it also slows down the time between videos (trying to stop binging) and prevents teens from using it at certain hours, supporting their need for sleep.

While their version only shows videos such as teachers leading science experiments and information about animals, our US version offers such inane and dangerous viral trends as the Nyquil chicken challenge. (I heard one commentator note that the Chinese are producing future astronauts, while the U.S. youth are growing up only with dreams of becoming social media influencers.)

As parents, educating ourselves enough to decide which way we lean--Big Tobacco or Car Industry-- will help us make informed, values-aligned parenting decisions for our kids.

## **II. Root Cause Two: Loss of Meaning & Purpose**

Universally, when our kids hit adolescence, they ask, “What is my purpose?” and “What is the meaning and purpose of life itself?” In previous generations, organized communities in churches and temples, or in community service clubs or Boy and Girl Scouts, etc., provided answers to these questions.

Today, for many specific reasons, far fewer families look to such offerings. This has left a void. Into that void has come the all-consuming distraction of technology and the dopamine-rewarded aspiration of getting “likes” and going viral.

There is good news, though: Even when disassociated from religion or other formal meaning-offering communities, if our kids can develop in their inner lives a sense of connection to life beyond themselves (often described as spirituality), it brings about incredible protection: young people with a strong sense of such an inner connection are 90 percent less likely to experience depression.

Meaning and connection can be experienced in nature, through music and silence, through volunteer service work, in the depths of human connections, through creative endeavors, and even for some through contemplating the wonders of math and science. But, it's most richly cultivated In Real Life, not mediated through screens.



### **III. Root Cause Three: Social Isolation**

A Cigna study concluded what is widely known now: loneliness in the U.S. is at epidemic levels, and it is particularly acute among our youth. Also well known is that human relationships offer a vast array of mental and physical health protections, and the quality of our relationships even predicts how long we will live.

The more time our youth spend sucked into screens, relating to a superficial digital social network sweating for their approval, and away from in-person, human, complex, and gratifying relationships, the less well they will be.

Certainly, the pandemic was horrible in this regard, and we need to, and can, break ourselves and our children away from our habituation toward isolation and screen absorption.



# Part III

## Rally

Now, having considered ten strategies we can adopt at home to foster and support their well-being and having looked clear-eyed at the three root causes working against our kids' and teens' well-being, we can ask:

**What can whole school communities do to best care for each other's children and families? How do we ensure healthy, flourishing school communities in light of the pressures that can corrode them?**

Let's be bold and strike out together with a shared vision for a community that rallies around its kids and teens with love, attention, and strength. When there is alignment between what our kids and teens experience at home and at school, the depth of their learning and the benefits they enjoy are stronger and richer.

And here are some final, important caveats:

- “A little of something is better than a lot of nothing.” Even small shifts to how we think about and manage social media and digital devices for our kids matter.
- This is not a zero-sum game.
- I don't know any parent who is 100 percent consistent all of the time. For example, a number of parents I know, who generally parent “screen-free,” call long-distance airplane travel with their kids the “All bets off” zone, and bring on the screens in plenty for their kids during these trips.

**Perfection is the enemy of the possible. Small shifts and increasing awareness themselves.**



# Toddler & Primary Families

## 1. Support Nervous Systems

If you've visited an authentic Montessori school ("Montessori" was never trademarked, so any school can call itself by that name), have you noticed how quiet and beautifully simple the Toddler and Primary environments are and how happy the children are in them?

High-volume, frenetic energy experiences are overwhelming for little ones. Plan natural, creative, low-stimulation activities (e.g., cooking, building, art, dance parties in the living room, crafts, puppet shows, etc.)

Time in nature together helps children develop their own special relationship with the natural world; this can be a lifelong source of solace. We also know that within just minutes spent in nature, our nervous systems calm.

All of these practices will make it more likely that when your children are at school, they feel grounded and energized to learn and play.



## 2. Foster Independence

When they are at Marin Montessori School, or in other authentic Montessori environments, your children are responsible for cleaning up after themselves, hanging their coats, pushing in their chairs, etc. Bring this emphasis to your home too. (For Toddler & Primary families specifically, the site “Cloud Montessori,” curated by Marin Montessori School’s own Cheryl Chretien and Aliyya Mattos, is a great resource. Check out “[Help Me Help Myself: Quick Hacks for Around the Home](#)” and “[5 Household Chores for Your Child.](#)”)

The longer-term benefits? Confidence based on competence: When children see they can do for themselves, their confidence gets stronger.

### **Toddler, Primary, & Elementary Families**

## 3. Support Relationships

Cultivate school friendships: Knowing that supportive relationships are vital for everyone’s lives, it’s wise to invest the time and energy to arrange get-togethers (even no-frills park playdates) with other families, or host playdates with a class friend.



When we can enjoy and buoy each other as we parent together, we give our kids and ourselves the great gift of the feeling of security that comes from being woven into a larger, caring, joyful community.

#### **4. Limit and Monitor Screen Use**

Consider not giving access to them, or at least strongly limiting time for kids with screens and digital devices. For Marin Montessori School students specifically, this helps your child experience continuity between their school experience and home. (If you've not listened to it yet, Marin Montessori School's Director of Education for Toddler and Primary, Siri Panday, recorded an outstanding podcast episode, "[How to Build Healthy Communication Skills in the Age of the Screen.](#)")

Also, if some children have free rein access, the stories they share back at school become focused on what they saw on screens, which can influence the other children who then go home and plead for similar access.

When you do have children visit your home, offer a no-screen environment. Or, to ensure you're respecting each family's practices, agree ahead of time with families if and what the screen time will be (e.g. mediums, content, time limits, etc.)

#### **5. Geek Out: Invest Time & Attention into Their Delights**

Get excited about each child's inclinations and interests. One of the key values of authentic Montessori education is that children aren't pressured to fit a narrow definition of what makes them affirmable. Offer this gift at home too.

For example, even if you find tree frogs icky, but your kid gets fascinated by them, go for it! Take them to the library to geek out on tree frog books together. Then head over to the zoo to ooh and ahh over their tree frogs. As they get older, help them branch out even further by encouraging them to volunteer with a reptile rescue foundation (they do exist!).

The key is that by signaling delight in what delights our kids, they are learning to value and honor themselves and to trust their intuitions and inherent value. When they are older too, it will be more likely that they will find and choose a life and career path that is deeply satisfying; this is a priceless gift.



## 6. Read Real Books Together

This is likely already part of your routine. For Toddler & Primary children, reading aloud is so important and valuable, both for helping develop literacy and vocabulary and for helping our kids find a love for reading that can soothe and enrich their lives from here on out.

For Elementary aged children, cozy, family group readings can be very special. (We read Tolkien's *The Hobbit* together and took turns reading--though I loved doing the voices so much that I probably read more than others).

At Marin Montessori School, like in many schools, we do a lot of reading, so experiencing this at home reinforces the practice and its value.



## Elementary & Junior High

### 7. Own Your Part

We can continue to create incredible school experiences and environments, but if our kids and teens go home to a “tech wild west” of unfettered, unsupervised, and unmonitored access to social media, group texting, video games, and the internet, the negative effects of those activities will diminish the quality of their school experience, undermining the tremendous potential value.

Additionally, their activity can hurt the experience of their peers by creating a Lord of the Flies-like online culture outside of school that can generate those negative social experiences from which we are all working hard to protect our kids.

Go back to [Part I, Section 2](#), of this series for specific guidance on how to rein it all in.

The most helpful steps you can take for the health of the kids, teens, and your whole school community include the following:

1. Consider waiting on smartphones until high school (see Part I for terrific alternatives)
2. Monitor texts if they do text
3. Limit/keep them off of social media
4. Collect devices at night and when kids are socializing together to encourage sleep as well as real, unfiltered human relationships and activities.

## **8. Be Open to Creating with Tech**

In the older Elementary and Junior High years, if your kids are drawn to technology, consider helping them learn how to create with it; it's the mindless, compulsive passive consumption that is so problematic. There are healthy, age-appropriate ways into coding and robotics with products like Raspberry Pi4 and Lego robotics.

If you live in the San Francisco Bay Area, to get inspired and to learn, definitely don't miss an outing to the Exploratorium interactive museum in San Francisco.

## **9. Present a United Front**

Talk with the parents of the kids your child most regularly interacts with. Get clear on your decisions and practices around digital technology and social media, and share these.

Why? Elementary and Junior High aged kids are highly socially aware and deeply interested in what engages their peers. Your child may come to you and make a case for tech use saying, "So-and-so gets to use it all the time!" Knowing the truth is helpful. Most helpful is if you and other parents can agree on shared practices.

*Strength in numbers.*

(Also, if one of you is tech-savvy and can offer to help other parents install better protections, that is a gift to offer up.)

## **10. Have Each Other's Backs**

If you become aware of a child or teen acting destructively online or expressing worrisome struggles or behaviors, reach out to their parents.

This, of course, can feel awkward and scary--how will they react? As long as you do this from a place of care and concern more than judgment, you can be almost certain that the parents will appreciate the reach out. It really does take a village.

If you were in their shoes, wouldn't you want that information?

## **11. Offer the Gift of Old-School Chores**

Dr. Montessori observed that children want to be included in their communities and families. Daily chores (e.g. setting the table, feeding the pets, putting away the dishes, etc.) have a wide array of benefits. For children in Montessori schools, chores reinforce the message they get from us every day that they are responsible for supporting their community and taking care of their environment.



## 12. Plan Healthy Group Experiences

Work together as families to support healthy, no/low-screen pro-social experiences with your kids. A day of games, group family bike rides, volunteering at a local food bank, going out to the theater together, camping trips, or simply backyard BBQs with frisbees.

These experiences offer a multitude of benefits (e.g., the value of social connections and community, introduction to new life-giving activities, relationship with nature, skills development, altruism, etc.)



## **Onward and Upward:**

Passively accepting the status quo right now is a risk. It risks, quite literally, our kids' and teens' fundamental well-being. The time to act is now.

This need not be extreme. Little changes can make a big difference. If your children are still very young, take all this information and plan ahead for how you will choose to manage the digital media and social media-saturated world they are growing up in. The great news is that all is not lost. Kids and teens are highly resilient. Knowledge is power, and now that we know the dangers and the protections to ensure our kids and school community stays healthy and strong, we can take action.

This is an incredible time to be alive and raising kids. And it's sometimes daunting and overwhelming. Let's take a collective deep breath together. And, let's take strength from recent research that found that children and teens who are educated in Montessori schools are more likely to enjoy greater well-being as adults. Marin Montessori School's 60-year history of educating and supporting tremendously healthy, positive development in kids and teens is a testament to this fact.

**Let's pivot and adapt in that spirit to meet most fully and effectively this new stage in human history. We've got this.**



Questions? Comments?  
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