



Helping Teens Become Smarter
Than Their Smartphone

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Tech is a great tool, but a lousy crutch.



Last month a teenager I know pretty well asked me honestly, “You don’t think I really spend too much time on my phone, do I?”

She had heard all the hype about “too much time on screens.” You probably have too:

- Screens hinder sleep. In fact, in a recent study by the National Sleep Foundation (1), more than half of parents said their 15-to-17-year-olds routinely get only seven hours of sleep or less when the recommended amount for teens is 8 ½ to 10 hours. Why? 68 percent of these teens keep an electronic device on all night.
- Screens can make your grades drop. A brand new study by Michigan State University (2) followed 500 MSU students, monitoring their academic performance as professors competed with smartphones, laptops, and other devices to get participants to engage. “The more they relied upon their gadgets as a distraction—even if it was to undertake quasi-relevant activities such as reading the news—the further their grades fell.”
- Screens are a new playground for bullying. Gossip has just been given a turbo boost. Roughly 43% of teens have been harassed online, with about 25% of them claiming to have suffered more than one instance of it (3). Girls are twice as likely to be victims of cyber bullying compared to boys, and sadly, twice as likely to commit it, as well. Unsurprisingly, kids who’ve experienced cyber bullying are much more likely to attempt suicide than those who haven’t.
- Screens create a pressure to be liked in a world where many females already feel self conscious about their looks... like whether or not they have a thigh gap.
- Screens are tool that a growing number of teenagers use for sexting. Last year Researchers from Drexel University surveyed college students (4), asking them if they had ever sent or received “sexually explicit text messages or images” when they were under age 18. Fifty-four percent said yes.
- Screens provide so many distractions, experts now claim kids shouldn’t own them until they are 13-years-old (5).

So is this just a bunch of helicopter parents worrying too much, or do we really have something to be concerned about? Let’s face it. All the people who wrote those articles mentioned above warning us about the dangers of smartphones and social media... they all own smartphones! I own a smartphone. I love it. (I just used it 10 minutes ago to find the name of the song playing in a restaurant—thanks Shazaam!)

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So when does tech become a problem?

The answer is simple. We need to teach our kids: Tech is a great tool, but a lousy crutch.

The moment we all become socially dependent on tech... Houston, we have a problem. Don't get me wrong, smartphones are a great tool that can actually help us enhance our personal relationships. You can see the new baby pic your best friend posted from a different state while eating your breakfast. You can text your kids from work to tell them what time you're picking them up. You can call your spouse while driving home. This is where tech can "enhance" existing relationships. But tech becomes scary when it's our primary source of interpersonal communication.

I've been researching youth culture and technology for decades, and I've encountered countless studies about young people spending too much time with technology. The results are always the same. Those who spend more time engaging in true face-to-face relationships are actually better able to understand emotions and social cues than those whose "friends" are mostly communicated with via a screen (6). In addition, research shows that many young people are basing their own self worth and value through online affirmation. In other words, "Did they like my Instagram post? Why not?" The result is too much time trying to impress an online audience and a decline in intimate friendships. In other words, many young people today are substituting true friendships with online "friends."

This even has ramifications into the dating world. A new study from researchers at Stanford and Michigan State found that couples who met online are less likely to stay together longterm than those who meet offline (7).

What does all this mean?

Our tech can be a great tool, but it becomes detrimental to our personal relationships when tech is our primary world of personal relationships.

Are you teaching this to your kids? Are you modeling this?

In my "How to Be Smarter Than Your Smartphone" school assembly, after hashing through many of these realities with teens, I always challenge them:

So if Mom or Dad accuses you of spending too much time with tech, don't argue. Instead of getting defensive, just slide your phone into your pocket, go hang out with your friends and talk with them face-to-face.

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In fact:

- Log off of social media for a day and just hang with your friends outside.
- Go on a kayak ride with that girl/guy you talk with so well.
- When you see that beautiful sunset, resist the temptation to snap a pic, find the perfect filter, caption it and post on Instagram... instead just enjoy the freaking sunset, maybe even look up and thank the creator of the sunset. But then pull out your phone and text your mom telling her when you'll be home.

Tool—yes!

Crutch—nope.

JONATHAN MCKEE is the author of over a dozen books including *Get Your Teenager Talking*, *Sex Matters*, and the brand new *More Than Just the Talk*. Jonathan speaks to parents and leaders worldwide. Read more from Jonathan at TheSource4Parents.com

- 1- <http://sleepfoundation.org/sites/default/files/2014-NSF-Sleep-in-America-poll-summary-of-findings---FINAL-Updated-3-26-14-.pdf>
- 2- <http://www.thedailybeast.com/articles/2014/06/24/is-it-time-for-a-classroom-cellphone-ban.html>
- 3- <http://www.thesource4parents.com/YouthCultureWindow/article.aspx?ID=290>
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