



POINT/COUNTERPOINT

STUCK ON SCREENS—

Psychologists' Perspective of the Current Dangers of Children's Overuse of Technology

BY NATASHA KENDAL PH.D., L.M.F.T. AND
NANCY WARKENTIN HOUDEK, LPC, NCC

As psychotherapists in private practice, we are used to hearing parents lament their children's overuse of technology. On the other hand, children and teenagers frequently make an argument to us that technology is how they do homework, connect with friends, research projects, go to sleep at night with their music selection and wake up in the morning with their alarms. Who is right? Do kids and teens today overuse their screen devices, and just how dangerous is this trend?

First, let's define what we shall call "screen time." It is the use of any screen device -- TV, video console, computer, smart phone, reading device, iPad, and other electronics. So, if your toddler is on FaceTime with grandparents in Florida, your school-age child is giggling at baby kangaroo videos, your teenager is looking up the history of the Berlin Wall, your husband is looking up the latest market numbers and replying to email, and you are reading this article online, all of that is "screen time." Clearly, not all screen time is equally dangerous or potentially damaging.

Just how early do our children begin using screened devices? In many cases, children are exposed to screened devices almost at birth - either while being present when their parents use their phones or devices, or by being consumers of technology themselves as their caregivers use screens as baby-sitters. Common Sense Media, a non-profit organization that is dedicated to providing parents and educators with trustworthy information and guidance in the world of technology, released a survey in 2017 regarding media use in kids aged zero to eight. According to the survey, young children spend an average of three hours on various screen devices per day, with children from lower-income families spending on average more time on devices than children from more affluent homes.¹ Among the school-age children, use of screens doubles to six hours per day, with boys using on average closer to eight hours per day.² The statistics are even more dire for teenagers: 24% of 13-17 year olds report being online "almost constantly," and 92% go online daily.

In addition to the concerns of the vast amount of wasted hours each day, there are also concerns about the dangers that overuse of technology presents. An increase in the number of hours on social media has a strong effect on increased rates

of mental health disorders, especially anxiety and depression, among teenagers.³

Below is a partial list of dangers of social media that we, as therapists, see frequently with overuse of screen time in general and social media in particular:

Isolation, Lack of Connections and Emotional Unrest:

To the extent that technology has enabled today's children and teens to be virtually connected to more people on a multitude of levels, it has also created a generation of kids that feel unhappy, lonely, and isolated. Jean M. Twenge, PhD, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University⁴ reports that the young people of today, compared to generations that have come before them, have more leisure time at their disposal and seem to be alone in their rooms for most of that leisure time. This generation of teens is experiencing more depressive symptoms, suicide-related outcomes, and suicide deaths, especially among females. Dr. Twenge's research⁵ revealed that teens who use screens five or more hours a day are 66% more likely to experience at least one suicide risk factor (depression, suicidal thoughts, suicidal plan or attempt of suicide) compared to those who spend one hour a day or less. We are hard wired to be connected with others, as has been researched extensively by Sue Johnson, PhD, psychologist, researcher on the subject of attachment and author of the book 'Hold Me Tight.' Dr. Johnson writes that "the most basic tenet of attachment theory is that isolation—not just physical isolation but emotional isolation—is traumatizing for human beings. The brain actually codes it as danger."⁶ Being connected to others "provides our greatest sense of safety and security."⁷ It then comes as no surprise that the more children and teens isolate with their devices from their peers as well as their family and caregivers, they experience the emotional repercussions of being detached and alone. Children and teens are neither developmentally nor physiologically capable to navigate these feelings successfully on their own which makes parental monitoring on many levels critical.

Deficiency in Learned Social Skills:

For children and teens, the smartphone is a type of lifeline that consumes their almost constant attention. As a byproduct, it has become a substitute for face-to-face conversation, a way to avoid eye contact and awkward silences. In addition, texting and social media are devoid of the experience of receiving emotional responses, facial cues, and body language, modes of communicating that make connecting with another person richer, and affects our sense of compassion and empathy. There is growing concern that these kids aren't getting the practice of effective communication and in-person contact with others, and, consequently, they face adulthood without developed social skills for both the working world as well meaningful social and intimate relationships.⁸

Unrealistic Expectations:

Social media tends to be the online scrapbook of all things happy, successful and fun. Kids that focus too heavily on social media can set themselves up for unhealthy comparison-making, a plan fraught with danger. When kids compare themselves to others and conclude that their life doesn't match up, they see themselves as falling short and not good enough, the breeding ground for low self-esteem, depression and anxiety.

Family Cohesion:

Families are also impacted by excessive screen time. When screens are permitted at the dinner table, kids can't fully tune into a family discussion knowing that more important peer conversations are buzzing at the side of their dinner plate. As kids rely more on their smartphones to fill time, entertain, and be their go-to for answers and ways to cope through struggles, the less they are turning to their parents and caregivers for conversation, guidance and support.

Exposure to Harmful Information:

As we all have experienced, an internet search on one topic can lead us down into the dark and murky world of another. Kids have at their disposal with a few taps on the keyboard a world of videos, pictures and information that they are not developmentally ready to absorb and which could expose them to harm. When kids rely on their screens to search out solutions to personal or emotional issues as opposed to going to their parents or caregivers, they are exposed to responses on topics such self-mutilation, eating disorders, suicidal ideation, to name just a few, with the risk of causing greater harm, and possibly death.

Exposure to threats:

The screens on which our kids are playing games and talk-

ing to their friends are the same screens that can inadvertently connect them with people whose sole purpose is to coerce, manipulate and exploit. Human trafficking, a modern day form of slavery as described by the Department of Homeland Security, is reported to be the second most profitable form of crime after drug trafficking.⁹ Offenders are slithering around in social media sites in astronomical numbers, hoping to latch onto vulnerable kids who buy into their flattery or other tactics promising fame, fortune or drugs.

Cyberbullying, the online version of bullying, contributes to the increase in mental health issues of our current generation of kids. 'Stopbullying.gov,' the official website of the US Government on bullying, defines cyberbullying as "sending, posting, or sharing negative, harmful, false, or mean content about someone else."¹⁰ According to the Center for Disease Control's 2013 and 2015 School Crime Supplement to the National Crime Victimization Surveys, 27 percent of students ages 12 to 18 reported being cyberbullied, indicating that they were bullied at least once or twice a month.¹¹ Cyberbullying causes significant emotional harm that often lasts into adulthood.

It is important to know that certain populations are even more vulnerable to the negative effects of technology described above than an average or neuro-typical child or teen. These populations include:

1. Children and Teenagers on the Autistic Spectrum or those who are struggling with other right hemisphere disabilities, such as Non-Verbal Learning Disability, Social Pragmatic Communication Disorder and others are vulnerable to the dangers that come with screens. Clearly, if children are having social problems in face-to-face interactions, such as misunderstanding context of comments, misreading intention of the speaker, not "getting" humor and sarcasm, and misconstruing concepts that require deep social knowledge (e.g., fairness, friendship, trust), they will have many more problems understanding conversations over text or social media. Additionally, children who do not have deep social intelligence are very vulnerable to online predators because they are desperate for friendships, yet lack them in the real world. Online predators are then more likely to "groom" these kids into getting more and more involved in inappropriate behaviors without a child understanding that they are indeed being victimized.
2. Children with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder also require special supervision of their online activities. Even more so than a typical child or teen, kids with ADHD tend to be impulsive in their actions and lack the ability to think about eventual consequences. They are more likely to respond to a text in anger, post or re-post on social media without a clear understanding of potential harm, or spend a significant amount of time "lost"

in cyberspace without considering homework and other obligations.

3. Children whose parents are separated or divorced also represent a potentially vulnerable group, especially if their parents fail to come up with consistent and clear rules and boundaries around technology use. Sometimes, divorced parents fail to set appropriate boundaries because they are afraid to be seen as a “tough” parent who is then not favored by their children. Children and teens are very likely to manipulate this desire to be seen as a favorite by insisting that the other parent is much more relaxed about rules and expectations. Divorced parents tend to struggle with work-life balance, and may resort to overuse of technology as a “virtual baby-sitter.” Also, children who are exposed to parental conflict and divorce may struggle with issues of self-esteem and self-worth and may find the internet to be a welcome temporary distraction for them.
4. Children with Oppositional Defiant Disorder are very likely to disregard any and all rules that their parents set for them. They require particularly diligent supervision of their online activities because they believe that normal consequences do not apply to them.

It would appear from the previous discussion that the only reasonable course of action would be to permanently disable any devices with screens, but of course this is not a desirable option for most families. The following is a list safeguards and best practices that are helpful in reducing the dangers for kids, making technology a welcome addition to our homes:

- Co-parents and other caregivers need to be on the same page in implementing and overseeing healthy screen time rules. A united front helps send the message to your child that family rules and online safety are important.
- Start children out with a phone that doesn't allow online access to give them time to learn and understand responsibility. This also gives parents time to make a plan for limitations and controls.
- When migrating to the smartphone, monitor the child's activity and their friends' responses. Allow enough time for the child to demonstrate responsibility and the opportunity for parents to have sufficient conversations regarding appropriate and safe use. Add apps gradually as necessary. It is easier to add as you go than to take privileges and apps away after an incident.
- Instead of over-focusing on time spent on screens (most experts recommend no more than two hours per day, by the way), focus instead on offering equally attractive alternative activities that you can do with your child. In our experience, nothing is more precious to a child or a teen

than undivided time with their loved one – not even their devices!

- Ask most kids and they will say that they sleep with their phones in their bed. Establish the rule that devices are charged overnight in the common areas of the house such as kitchen or family room. When your kids object that they MUST have a phone to use as an alarm clock, rock their world by buying them an actual alarm clock!
- Do not seek to persuade your kids and teen to accept your rules around technology or any other family rules. Family rules are the necessary foundation that provide kids structure and limits, with the understanding that they are to be followed.
- Create time in everyone's schedule that is 'screens-off' time. Resist the urge to pull out your own screened device – kids are much more likely to follow our example, not our words. When enjoying family mealtime, make it screen-free!
- Be aware that some teens now have two cell phones - one that their parents provide and monitor, and a second device that is used for purposes of which parents would not approve. Due to easy availability of Wi-Fi environments, these second phones function as well as the “officially” sanctioned ones, and can be easily obtained in any high school for around \$50. So, if your teen is happily giving you their device to be charged in a public area, and then stays up in their bedroom for many hours - check for a second hidden device.
- Remember, kids are very resourceful and typically understand technology far better than the adults in their world. Monitor screen use frequently and openly. Ask for all passwords – and keep them updated. If your child refuses to relinquish passwords, they are not mature enough to handle having their own device.
- Continue to talk with your kids about their 'digital footprint.' Remind them that what they post and write is out there FOREVER.

The guidelines that are described above are, of course, general in nature. Parents and guardians need to individualize their approach and get to know each one of their children at a deep level, because not all technology or parenting advice is going to work for all children. If they notice significant negative outcomes from overuse of technology, parents shouldn't hesitate to act. Keep in mind, on the whole, technological innovations have led and continue to lead to very positive changes in our personal, family and business lives – but it is our responsibility to ensure that our children use technology in a healthy manner.

About the Authors

Natasha Kendal is a Clinical Director of *Natasha Kendal and Associates*, a growing private psychotherapy practice in Bloomfield Hills, Michigan specializing in individual, couple and family therapy as well as parent coaching. Additionally, Dr. Kendal works as a court-ordered and voluntary parent coordinator in the tri-county area of Detroit. She is a frequent speaker on the topics of parenting, mental illness and divorce.

Nancy Warkentin Houdekis is a Licensed Professional Counselor and Psychotherapist, as well as a National Certified Counselor in private practice in Farmington Hills, Michigan. Nancy works with adolescents, adults and couples to develop insight, understanding, and solutions for emotional and behavioral issues, with a special interest in self-esteem.

References

- Bindley, Katherine (2011, December 10). When Children Text All Day, What Happens To Their Social Skills? Huffington Post. Retrieved from https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/09/children-texting-technology-social-skills_n_1137570.html
- Gladden, R.M., Vivolo-Kantor, A.M., Hamburger, M.E., & Lumpkin, C.D. Bullying Surveillance Among Youths: Uniform Definitions for Public Health and Recommended Data Elements, Version 1.0. Atlanta, GA; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and U.S. Department of Education; 2014.
- Johnson, Sue, (published January 1, 2009 - last reviewed on April 25, 2017). Hold Me Tight. Psychology Today. Retrieved from <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200901/hold-me-tight>.
- Michigan Counseling Association (2017). Human Trafficking Training for Mental Health Clinicians. Retrieved February 10, 2017 from Michigan Counseling Association Community Training.
- Shafer, Leah (2017). Social Media and Teen Anxiety
- The Common Sense Census: Media Use by Kids Age Zero to Eight 2017. <https://www.common sense media.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-kids-age-zero-to-eight-2017>.
- Twenge, Jean M. (2017, September). Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation? The Atlantic. Retrieved from <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>
- Twenge, Jean M., Joiner, Thomas E., Rogers, Megan L., Martin, Gabrielle N. (First Published November 14, 2017). Increases in Depressive Symptoms, Suicide-Related Outcomes, and Suicide Rates Among U.S. Adolescents After 2010 and Links to Increased New Media Screen Time. *Clinical Psychological Science*, Vol 6, Issue 1, pp. 3 - 17. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2167702617723376>
- Wakefield, Jane. (2015, March 27). Children spend six hours or more a day on screens. Retrieved from <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-32067158>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Stop Bullying.gov, <https://www.stopbullying.gov/>.

U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "What is Human Trafficking?", <https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/what-human-trafficking>.

S. Department of Justice, Bureau of Justice Statistics, School Crime Supplement (SCS) to the National Crime Victimization Survey, 2015.

Common Sense Census: Media Use by Kids Age Zero to Eight 2017. <https://www.common sense media.org/research/the-common-sense-census-media-use-by-kids-age-zero-to-eight-2017>.

Endnotes

- 1 <https://www.common sense media.org/homepage>
- 2 <http://www.bbc.com/news/technology-32067158>
- 3 <https://www.gse.harvard.edu/news/uk/17/12/social-media-and-teen-anxiety>
- 4 Jean M. Twenge, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" *The Atlantic* (2017, September), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/>; Author of *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy - and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood - and What That Means for the Rest of Us*.
- 5 Jean M. Twenge, Thomas E. Joiner, Megan L. Rogers, Gabrielle N. Martin, "Increases in Depressive Symptoms, Suicide-Related Outcomes, and Suicide Rates Among U.S. Adolescents After 2010 and Links to Increased New Media Screen Time." *Clinical Psychological Science*, (first published November 14, 2017) Vol 6, Issue 1, pp. 3 - 17. <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F2167702617723376>.
- 6 Sue Johnson, PhD, "Hold Me Tight" Psychology Today, published January 1, 2009 - last reviewed on April 25, 2017, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/articles/200901/hold-me-tight>.
- 7 Johnson, "Hold Me Tight," Psychology Today.
- 8 Katherine Bindley, "When Children Text All Day, What Happens To Their Social Skills?" Huffington Post (2011, December 10), https://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/12/09/children-texting-technology-social-skills_n_1137570.html.
- 9 U.S. Department of Homeland Security, "What is Human Trafficking?", <https://www.dhs.gov/blue-campaign/what-human-trafficking>.
- 10 U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Stop Bullying.gov, <https://www.stopbullying.gov/>.
- 11 Version 1.0. Atlanta, GA; National Center for Injury Prevention and Control, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and U.S. Department of Education; 2014.

TEENAGERS RESPOND: RELAX PARENTS!

BY BROOKE BASS AND ABIGAIL KENDAL

Milk + Cookies. Peanut Butter + Jelly. Teens + Tech. They all go hand in hand, but parents claim the last is the most prevalent as of late. Instagram, Spotify, Snapchat, Netflix, Twitter, Tumblr, Pinterest, and YouTube are all popular with teens, but parents tend to think these sites are unequivocally dangerous.

In our experience, children and teens aren't as naive and stupid as parents believe them to be; virtual safety is similar to safety in the real world. Don't open the door to a stranger. Don't get in their car, even if they do have your favorite package of Skittles at hand. Don't accept random messages from people you don't know - it's common sense. While human trafficking, bullying, inappropriate/explicit content, anxiety and depression-related issues and predators are definitely a part of the internet landscape, the majority of these can be avoided using a little common sense. In schools, all students in the state of Michigan are required to take a course on media safety and watch presentations yearly on their digital footprint. Because of education efforts by both parents and teachers, many teens make the decision to maintain their online activity in the private mode.

We do agree, however, that parents should know what their kids are doing online. It's totally okay to check your daughter's Snapchat story every once in a while, just don't

become that overprotective "helicopter" parent who makes teens not only feel uncool, as it breaks that bond of trust that many kids have formed with their parents or guardians at this age. Also, it is important to remember that Wi-Fi parental controls are far from perfect - they often filter totally necessary information while allowing inappropriate content through - you, as a parent, are probably a much better "filter."

Social media and technology advancement have revolutionized how we interact with each other. And in the grand scheme of things, technology truly has done more help than harm.

About the Authors

Brooke Bass is an 8th grader who loves dancing, attending camp and volunteering in her community. When she's not watching YouTube videos on her phone about fashion and makeup techniques, she enjoys spending time with her puppy and teaching him new tricks.

Abigail Kendal is an 8th grader. In her spare time, she enjoys yoga and spending time on her phone researching creative writing and self-publishing. She is also the author of a book entitled "Life in Writing: Thoughts, Epiphanies and Lessons."



SCOTT BASSETT, ESQ.
MICHIGAN VIRTUAL LAW PRACTICE

Phone: 248-232-3840

Fax: 248-928-0355

www.michiganfamilylawappeals.com

scott@michiganfamilylawappeals.com