

Could Smartphones Be Causing Your Teen's Depression?

On vacation at the beach last month, I walked into a pizza restaurant to get some takeout. While waiting for my order, I saw a group of eight girls sitting at a table, waiting for their pizza to arrive. None of them was making eye contact with the others. All I could see were the tops of eight heads and eight glowing screens.

Our generation has had to integrate smartphones and social media into our lives. Our kids' generation has grown up with them. Some experts say that young people today have been part of a 10-year experiment to determine the effects of constant technological and social connection on our lives. The data is just coming in. It is not good. It is absolutely alarming.

In an article entitled "Has the Smartphone Destroyed A Generation?" psychologist Jean M. Twenge writes in *The Atlantic* that parents should be alarmed. I highly recommend that parents finish this short blog post and then take some time to read the entire article linked above.

Among other things, Twenge writes that:

"Rates of teen depression have skyrocketed since 2011." That's when smartphone use became more commonplace.

Psychologically, teenagers today are "more vulnerable than Millennials." Millennials integrated smartphones into their lives, while teenagers today have literally grown up with them.

They are on "the brink of the worst mental health crisis in decades." We are just beginning to see the severity of the problem.

What is the root cause?

Twenge says, "The arrival of the smartphone has radically changed every aspect of teenagers' lives, from the nature of their social interactions to their mental health."

Add to that a CDC study released yesterday that found that suicide rates among teenage girls are at a 40-year high. The most obvious culprit is the power and influence of social media. Vulnerable girls already prone to insecurity or depression are fueling their pain with a constant stream of comparison. Twenty years ago, it hurt to not get invited to the party. Today, our kids get to see pictures of all they missed. This stuff hurts deeply.

As my youth minister friend Chris Trent says, "Constant connection means constant influence." While your teenager might be physically present in your home, he is likely far more connected to the influence of his peers than the influence of his family. If that influence is primarily negative, and it usually is, our kids' well-being will suffer. That will be the case, unless you do something about it.

You would think that all the technology that connects kids to one another would make them happier. The data shows otherwise. A longitudinal study by The National Institute on Drug Abuse found that "teens who spend more time than average on screen activities are more likely to be unhappy, and those who spend more time than average on nonscreen activities are more likely to be happy."

What's a parent to do?

Sadly, the writer of *The Atlantic* article writes something potentially discouraging to parents. She says, "I realize that restricting technology might be an unrealistic demand to impose on a generation of kids so accustomed to being wired at all times."

I agree that putting parameters and controls on your teenagers' smartphone use will be difficult. But parents who love their kids and want something better for them have to be willing to do hard things: the stuff that their kids won't like in the short term but that will benefit them in the long term. This is what parents have done for generations.

There are no sure-fire techniques for this, but parents can start with these steps:

1. Talk about the impact of social media with your kids.

Your kids may be so caught up in their interactions online that they may not be aware of the negative impact they are potentially having. Talk it through with them, helping them to see that what they see as normal might not be normal after all. Talk about self-image, depression and bullying. Most importantly, take time to listen to your kids. It helps if you're not on your phone too much.

2. Remind your kids that having a smartphone is a privilege, not a right.

You probably pay the bill, so you get to control what they do with it. As a parent, you are always allowed to put parameters on your teens' use of their phone. You can control what apps they download and whom they interact with. You are allowed to know their passwords, and you have a right to look at their phone whenever you want. There are some terrific resources available to help guide you in managing all this, including a family contract for smartphone use.

3. Provide oversight with appropriate controls and filters.

We like the Circle device for controlling time spent, bedtimes, content and apps used. It's incredibly powerful at home, and CircleGo provides accountability when they are away from home. We let our kids know that we will follow them on any social media platform they are on. If you're really

concerned about what your kids are saying or doing online, TeenSafe offers another level of oversight. It's sort of like the secret police of smartphones.

4. Have a common charging station.

Some families have benefited from charging all phones in the kitchen or in the parents' bedroom. At a set time every night, all phones are checked in for the night. This ensures that your family connects with each other for a while, and that neither your kids nor you are on your phone late into the night.

5. Start the dialogue way early.

Your preschoolers and elementary-aged kids should know that they can expect some clear ground rules for when and if they get a smartphone. And by the way, don't give your elementary child a smart phone. If they need to stay in touch with you for emergencies, get them a cheap flip phone. It's far easier to indoctrinate your young kids with these guidelines than it will be to introduce them to your 16-year-old for the first time. You probably still need to do it.

Need Some More Help?

At [Info For Families](#), we are committed to creating resources to help parents have some of these critical conversations with their kids. Our book, *The Talks*, is a one-stop-shopping resource to guide you in helping your kids navigate our hyper-sexualized culture. We also just released *The Young Man's Guide to Awesomeness*, an easy-to-read book for teenage guys. It helps them to get a plan with Mom and Dad's help to "guard their heart, get the girl and save the world." Check them out! {eoa}

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