

Technology Promises Connection, but Gen Z Sees a Paradox

The information revolution has transformed the way everyone lives—but especially the youngest generations. Recent Barna data show that the average American teen receives their first smartphone at around 12 to 13 years of age and their first tablet around age 11.

The U.S. childhood and adolescent experience is mediated by screens, both in and outside the home. In light of this, how should teens and their families respond to the new force shaping their lives?

My Tech-Wise Life, a new book written by Amy Crouch and Andy Crouch in partnership with Barna Group, seeks to answer this exact question. Amy Crouch, daughter of Andy Crouch—author of *The Tech-Wise Family*—was raised in a family that encouraged an intentional, God-seeking attitude towards tech. Now in college, Amy wants to encourage her generation to reconsider the assumptions tech pushes upon them, a reality that is even more pressing during the COVID era.

Tech Can Make Life Easier—and Harder

Teens have mixed feelings about the predominance of technology in their lives. It's no secret that they are grateful to be connected to the world around them.

Barna data show that, when asked how tech makes their lives easier, 7 in 10 (72%) agree tech offers increased access to information, while 64% state it offers them a connection to friends and family. Other top-ranked answers related to issues of convenience and productivity.

But while teens appreciate the connection and information tech provides, they also worry that their devices are cutting both ways: harming their ability to connect to others and making them even more bored than they were before they picked up their device.

Despite the promises of social media to help connect people, teens worry that technology is coming between individuals. In fact, data show that nearly 7 in 10 teens (68%) agree that devices keep them from having real conversations, and a third (32%) say devices sometimes separate them from other people. Younger generations see a paradox in which tech simultaneously connects and disconnects them from their peers.

Perhaps the on-demand entertainment in their pockets is too powerful. When Barna asked how technology makes 13- to 21-year olds' lives harder, top answers related to productivity, with over half of teens stating issues like wasting time (54%), procrastinating on work (53%) and being generally distracted (50%). Nearly 2 in 5 respondents (37%) admit they get bored easily when they are not online.

Tech is captivating—but teens don't necessarily want to be taken captive. They experience technology as a source of entertainment for boring hours but are uncomfortable with how much it can take over.

Digital Versus In-Person—Teens Prefer the Latter but Often Choose the Former

When asked about tech activities versus real-world activities, teens prefer real-life experiences such as talking to friends in-person, going outside in nice weather and spending time with family. However, preferences don't always translate into reality. Though teens largely prefer in-person to online activities, they admit to often spending more time in the digital realm than in the real world.

While they wish they could engage with the real world, their

devices usually win.

To bridge this gap, Amy Crouch and Andy Crouch suggest a communal, familial set of disciplines around technology.

While teens aren't known for their love of discipline, when it comes to devices, they're largely in favor of having restrictions. Over three in 10 teens (43% of those 13-15 years old, 32% of those 16-18 years old) have had their parents set restrictions on tech—typically on what they can view and on hours of screen time—and over four in five (83%) say they felt their parents' rules were “about right.”

Even among those whose parents didn't set rules, about half of teens (53% of those 13-15 years old, 56% of those 16-18 years old) say that they set their own limits on tech.

With this in mind, Amy Crouch and Andy Crouch conclude that teens do, in fact, hunger for guidance and wise decisions around tech. They propose that kids assess their family's dependence on tech and seek a way forward, through simple but counter-cultural changes like moving devices out of bedrooms, setting device-free dinner times and taking Sabbaths from tech. It may seem improbable, but both Amy Crouch and her father Andy Crouch believe Gen Z has the potential to be the first tech-wise generation. {eoa}

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