

What Are Smartphones Doing to Young People?

Last week, the wonderful, CBC radio program [The Sunday Edition](#) featured a discussion between host Michael Enright and guests, psychologist [Jean Twenge](#) and Canadian technology writer [Clive Thompson](#) entitled "[What Are Smartphones Doing to Young People?](#)". Dr. Twenge is the author of [iGen: Why today's super-connected kids are growing up less rebellious, more tolerant, less happy and completely unprepared for adulthood](#) and Mr. Thompson is the author of [Smarter than you think: How technology is changing our minds for the better](#).



They talked about a growing body of data showing that by 2012, about 2 years after smartphones and tablets had saturated the consumer market, research was showing clear spikes in the numbers of teenagers reporting increased loneliness, depression, suicide and self-harming behaviours, as well as decreased reports of happiness and life satisfaction. There remains no clear evidence that any of those challenges are caused directly by cell phone use (or, that any of them directly cause teens to use their phones more often!) but the relationship is now considered to be fact. Until researchers can identify absolute reasons to explain what is happening to our teens, the speakers were left to speculate on their ideas about how the technology might be impacting teens so dramatically.

One possible cause mentioned was that teen users, many of whom spend between 6 and 8 hours each day 'on screens' might be leaving themselves too little time to engage in other activities that actually boost resilience and good mental

health, like having face-to-face interactions and sleeping. It is well-known that sleep has a clear benefit on resistance to stress and depression, and close, intimate relationships provide great personal support. They also discussed how the technology giants behind smartphones and the apps they support are motivated to earn profit and not necessarily to do what is in the best interests of teen users and families.

The speakers offered important tips for parents, including the very basic, but potent direction to simply insist that teens “put it down” and give themselves time to do non-screen activities. They discussed setting daily time limits and tech-free zones, and noted how parents themselves get to make the decisions about at what age they will give their younger children access to their own smartphones and devices. The speakers encouraged parents to be critical consumers of technology themselves and to never forget that they are themselves the primary models their children will look to when seeking examples of how to use a smartphone.

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