

Ever wonder what teens have to say about their tech?
This is the guide for you.



DEAR PARENTS

a digital well-being resource from teens to parents



a project of



THE GUIDE FOR YOU

You've read the books, you've scoured the data. You've listened and watched and read the products of "the experts." What's left? The voices of teens themselves.

We're here to offer a new perspective, one backed by personal experiences as youth growing up in a digital age. In partnership with the Children's Screen Time Action Network, two high school teens, Aliza Kopans and Celine Bernhardt-Lanier, created a resource to give parents more understanding, empathy, and skills around their children's screen use.

The Children's Screen Time Action Network is a project of Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood.



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TEEN TESTIMONIALS

We turned to teens around the world to ask for their perspectives.
Here's what they have to say:

"There's a difference between going to screens to diffuse and relax, and going to screens to escape confronting reality and your problems."

THE PROS AND CONS OF PHONE USE

POSITIVE IMPACTS OF PHONE USE

"Being able to contact friends and family in multiple different ways, keeping up with close friends and really old ones through social media, and also just exploring the internet learning new things, have access to so many worldwide news platforms, hearing stories from different points of views, etc."

"There is a new wave of content throughout social media promoting self love and acceptance which has really taken over a lot of social media platforms. Seeing all this content of women of all sizes normalizing things that I used to hate about myself has actually really lifted my confidence."

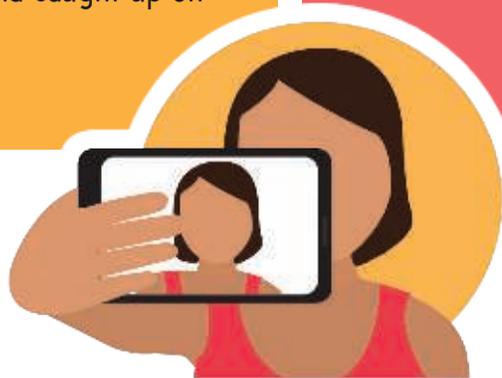
"Using my phone allows me to feel more plugged into the world, and caught up on recent events."

NEGATIVE IMPACTS OF PHONE USE

"I think sometimes I use my phone on something random when I could be spending my time productively. Sometimes I stay up late on my phone when I could be sleeping."

"I, along with many other teens struggle with depression, and as much as social media can be fun and exciting it has really lowered my self esteem, standards, and overall self love."

"Once I start going on my phone, I often fail to recognize how much time I actually spent on my phone."



"The world is not a ticking time bomb, people can wait. You come first."

TEENS' ADVICE ON HOW TO BEST BALANCE SCREEN USE

- "Prioritize other activities. Don't default to using your phone when you don't have anything else to do." - Age 16
- "Make sure that every time you are engaged with your phone that you actually want to be. Sometimes I'll be scrolling for no reason, I don't really want to be on my phone but it's just what I've learned to do when nothing is happening. Recognize those moments, put down your phone, and go do something enjoyable." - Age 18
- "Utilize the screen time section in settings. Set goals for yourself to try to bring down the number." - Age 14
- "Delete any games on your phone. I find that they are completely unnecessary (use that time to be with the people you love or to get outside)." - Age 16
- "When you want to pick up your phone or go on your computer, ask yourself if you're going to feel better or worse after doing so. Do you need a break, or are you just looking for a way to pass the time or procrastinate? Then base your decision off of your answer." - Age 17
- "Set boundaries with yourself and others. There is no need to be constantly checking your phone to reply as fast as possible. The world is not a ticking time bomb, people can wait. You come first." - Age 16
- "Put on a timer for how long you are on a screen for, then take a break and do something screen free." - Age 15

"It is all about trust."

HELPFUL THINGS PARENTS DO TO LIMIT TECHNOLOGY

- "My parents allow me to have 3 hours of phone time a day, but give me extra limits on social media so I don't get sucked in, which I appreciate." - Age 16
- "I like this kind of free-rein idea especially with older kids because in my opinion it teaches them responsibility with their tech time." - Age 16
- "They approach me calmly, without judgement or accusation." - Age 16
- "My parents are pretty chill and give me lots of autonomy. That really helps because whenever they force me to do something my natural instinct is to do the opposite. They let me recognize/regulate when I'm on screens too much which I feel leads me to be more responsible." - Age 18
- "Taking my phone at night is super helpful." - Age 14
- "They never put a very strict time limit on my phone or put limits on the apps I want. It is all about trust." - Age 16
- "Throughout my life my parents have always pushed prioritizing being outdoors. Setting this mentality creates a lack of dependence on technology." - Age 16



"Part of me wishes that we were encouraged to watch movies/shows together instead of alone."

SCREEN SUPPORT TEENS WANT FROM THEIR PARENTS

- "I wish they would tell me if they feel I've been on my phone a lot, to remind me, rather than just take it away." - Age 16
- "I'd appreciate support and engagement with the things I want to do that don't involve my phone. Then we can avoid the debate about spending too much time on my devices in the first place." - Age 16
- "I think often parents just blame teenager behavior on technology instead of trying to understand/workout the problem. We never chose to live in this era so the impacts should not be blamed on us." - Age 16
- "Friendly reminders about screen time would be helpful, as often I don't realize how much time I spent on my phone." - Age 16
- "Part of me wishes that we were encouraged to watch movies/shows together instead of alone. Family movie or game nights are rare." - Age 16
- "They often blame random things on my phone usage, which generally just makes me more annoyed." - Age 16
- "I wish they had started setting limits when I was younger, because I feel as if now my family has a weird precedent where we don't have any rules, and had there been some from the beginning it would be easier for all of us." - Age 16
- "I wish they would be open to hearing my side." - Age 17
- "Understanding that things aren't as simple as they appear from the outside. Social media makes things difficult and helping us manage it rather than just making uneducated assumptions would help." - Age 17



Q&A

We answered the most-asked tech-related questions from parents of teens.

WHY IS IT SO HARD FOR TEENS TO UNPLUG?

Despite all the research discussed by therapist Reshawna Chapple about the health benefits of limiting screen time – how it “improves relationships, develops social skills, ameliorates sleep, makes us safer, reduces anxiety” – regularly unplugging is often extremely challenging in this interconnected era, and not just for us! Even though we know the negative effects of phones, as teens we still sometimes can’t help but use our phones. From a scientific perspective, unplugging is so hard because of dopamine, “a triggering chemical released in our brains that accentuates the seductive pull of technology because it makes us feel good,” according to Dr. Victoria Dunkley. This chemical rewards us when we feel that we are doing something worth our time – for example, checking our notifications or scrolling Instagram. The more we check our phone, the more dopamine rushes through our brain, and the better we feel, and the more we want to check our phones.

Now, from our perspective, unplugging is so hard simply because of connection. Feeling a sense of community through social media reduces the big, dark fear of missing out. Today, there is so much added pressure in work and school environments that, ironically, checking our phones both relieves and creates stress. - **Celine, age 16**

WHERE DO TEENS GET THEIR INFORMATION ABOUT CURRENT EVENTS AND TOPICS OF IMPORTANCE? I’M WORRIED ABOUT THE ALGORITHMS THAT FEED THEM POLITICAL MESSAGES.

With so much readily-accessible and quickly-circulating information, it’s hard for everyone to know the reliability of many sources. Social media platforms, Instagram in particular, act as the main source of current event updates for teens. The information overload makes it nearly impossible to filter out the unreliable, heavily-biased information populating Instagram feeds and Snapchat stories. While some of the published content is reliable, there’s frequently no way – as a teen or parent – to fact check.

My suggestion? Get us a subscription to a media outlet you trust. And better yet, give us multiple viewpoints so our perspective isn’t skewed through your own. We heard from one 16-year-old who said, “I think it is our duty as citizens to understand what is happening in the world.” So however you’re able, bust through the misinformation wall and provide your teen with reliable sources. - **Aliza, age 17**

I WOULD LIKE TO KNOW WHERE THE PRESSURE AND FOMO COME FROM? WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT TO THEM? WHAT CAN PARENTS DO TO MAKE THEIR KIDS FEEL GOOD ABOUT THEMSELVES SO THAT THEY DON’T NEED TO “LIVE UP TO” WHAT THEY SEE ON SOCIAL MEDIA?

FOMO, or the fear of missing out, makes us obsessively check our phones to feel connected to our friends, getting the “inside scoop.” From what I have experienced, FOMO increases anxiety and heavily reduces healthy sleep. We don’t fully recognize that what is portrayed on social media isn’t an accurate representation of someone’s character or reality. Instead, we usually feel pressure to live up to that image of a “perfect life.” This pressure is found mostly on social media apps like Instagram, Snapchat, and Facebook. So, what can you, as a parent, do about this? An important step is establishing usage guidelines with phones so we spend less time online. Another essential step is conversation. Ask questions like “does this photo seem real?” “who will see this?” “do you feel safe posting this?” or



"what do you want to do today?" Questioning our motives can actually encourage introspection and reflection as to why we really use social media. Also, show involvement in our interests and activities to help us enjoy and create a satisfying life offscreen. - **Celine, age 16**

HOW DOES TECH USE REALLY IMPACT MY TEEN?

Just like entering high school or learning to drive, tech use is another dimension of teenagerhood to navigate. It can provide connections and positive exposure we wouldn't otherwise experience, but can also be the cause of hurt feelings. As young adults, it's important for us to learn how to manage our emotions and reactions. Generally, and in moderation, I believe these highs and lows sparked by technology use are okay as long as our happiness is more prevalent.

Because it's so new, we don't know the long-term impacts of tech use. Even in the short-term, each person has a unique relationship with screens. To learn about the impact of screens on your teen, make tech use a dinner-time topic. Along with conversations about what your teen learned in school or how their day was, toss in some questions about their experiences with tech. And share some of your own! Normalizing digital-world discussions opens doors to understanding the real impacts of tech use. - **Aliza, age 17**

MY TEEN IS ON HER PHONE LATE AT NIGHT AND IT INTERFERES WITH HER SLEEP. HOW DO I MANAGE THIS?

Indeed, most of us are trading sleep time for screen time. "Adolescents need about 9 hours of sleep a night," says Johns Hopkins sleep expert Laura Sterni, M.D., "to prevent anxiety, depression, poor school performance, and even obesity for some." According to Children's National Hospital, "the light emitted by our phone's screen inhibits our body's natural sleep rhythms and 'tricks' the brain." Thankfully, there are a few tools and boundaries that you can share with us: turn on do not disturb mode to limit interruptions, set a bedtime reminder in social media apps, put a screen limit (that we don't ignore!), etc. Try to persuade us to sleep with our phones outside of the bedroom at a given time that we both agree on (10 PM, for example). Confiscating our phones at night is not the most reasonable option, but instead, start a healthy conversation to discuss your concerns with us. Then, find solutions together. - **Celine, age 16**

I FEEL LIKE I DON'T HAVE MUCH CONTROL OVER MY TEEN'S TECH USE. I TALK ABOUT SYMPTOMS OF ADDICTION, TELL HER TO QUIT WATCHING OTHER PEOPLE'S LIVES AND GO LEAD HER OWN, AND REMIND HER THAT THERE ARE MANY OTHER THINGS TO DO SUCH AS PUZZLES, READING, ETC, BUT NOT MUCH WORKS. ANY IDEAS?

Similarly to parenting for any other controversial topic, set boundaries to protect our safety and then back off, allowing space for us to figure things out independently. One parent has installed time restrictions on their teen's devices so their teen can "learn to manage technology needs with some limitations." Our "Top Tech Tips" on page 7 detail suggestions on how to healthfully develop an appropriate level of control.

I find it easiest to turn off my screens when there's a more fulfilling alternative than using tech right in front of me. If possible, spearhead family activities (a walk, a game night, a mini-road trip, a bake-off, etc) in which everyone is so engaged and caught up in fun there's not even a want to pull out individual devices. - **Aliza, age 17**



A GUIDE TO AN EFFECTIVE CONVERSATION

Does every conversation about screen use end in an argument?

Like many controversial topics, discussions around technology "have the power to gain or decay trust." By listening with CARE and responding with LOVE, you will head down the route of building trust. Follow these approaches to foster understanding, respect, and collaboration during conversations about screen time.

After reading "A Guide to an Effective Conversation" and "Top Tech Tips," print and fill out the final two pages to put your new skills to work.

LISTEN WITH C.A.R.E.

CURIOSITY

Stay curious when talking with us. Connection takes work, and approaching our wants and ideas with curiosity instead of criticism helps us feel like you genuinely want to learn about us.

AN OPEN MIND

Make screen time conversations a space where we can share our thoughts without fear of being shut down. This doesn't mean you always agree with us, but putting aside your initial judgments and assumptions creates room for a comfortable conversation.

RESPECT

Even though we are younger than you, our experiences are no less important. Mutual respect allows for open discussions. Appreciate that we have insights and creative ideas that you may not have considered.

EMPATHY

Take the time to step into our shoes and look at the issue of screens from our perspective. Your compassion will build trust and promote healthy interactions.

RESPOND WITH L.O.V.E.

LOTS OF QUESTIONS

Ask thoughtful, gentle questions with the goal of understanding where we're coming from. It's okay if you don't have all the answers! If you're at a loss for how to respond, turn to your inquisitive side and take advantage of the opportunity to ask rather than lecture.

OPTIMISM

Keep a positive attitude and express confidence in us whenever possible. Remember that all conversations, difficult ones included, are part of the continuous process towards healthier screen use as well as stronger parent-child bonds.

VALIDATION

Before sharing your perspective, try responding to us with "I can see how you feel that way," "What you're saying makes sense," or "I hear you, and what you're saying is valid and important." This simple act of acknowledgment will contribute to greater trust and understanding.

ENGAGEMENT

Make it clear that you WANT to hear your teen's perspective. After articulating your opinions, show involvement and support. You could ask: "Is there any way I can help?" or "What would you like from me?"

"BREATHE FIRST, REACT NEXT!"

Take a couple of deep breaths to regulate your emotions and clear your mind before responding to your teen."



TOP TECH TIPS

Does every conversation about screen use end in an argument?

Like many controversial topics, discussions around technology "have the power to gain or decay trust." By listening with CARE and responding with LOVE, you will head down the route of building trust. Follow these approaches to foster understanding, respect, and collaboration during conversations about screen time.

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1. DEVELOP A CODE OF CONDUCT

For any agreements around screen use to succeed, set clear and concise boundaries. Although we deny it, screen limits prevent us from wasting away countless hours behind our screen. We need to know the limits! Find realistic and enforceable boundaries that will benefit the entire family.



2. CHOOSE SCREEN-FREE LOCATIONS

Designating certain areas as "screen-free zones" reserves spaces for face-to-face interactions. As a whole family, choose spots where everyone will unplug – whether it is the kitchen, the bedroom, or the car. Putting away devices in certain areas is a double win, helping regulate our tech use and encouraging family time.



3. PLAN SCREEN-FREE MOMENTS

With us, determine appropriate times to disconnect from devices. Developing a routine with screen-free moments built in promotes mindfulness and new, engaging experiences. Here, consistency is key! Eventually, we (and those who expect us to be on our device 24/7) will adapt to the schedule.



4. LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Setting and following screen time limits is hard for everyone, so use it as an opportunity to work WITH us. If you establish agreements around screen-free locations and screen-free moments, follow them too! Hypocrisy doesn't go unnoticed. If work calls, tell us explicitly why you need to turn to a screen. Everyone will benefit from a screen-free support team.



5. LEAVE ROOM FOR EMOTIONS

Keep in mind that you cannot fully dictate how we respond to screen-time limits. After establishing clear regulations together around screen use, leave space for us to navigate our own emotions. It's normal for our temper to flare if you set a boundary that we dislike. Our frustration will subside, just remember to give us room!



PRE-CONVERSATION PLANNING

WHAT DO I HOPE TO GET OUT OF THIS CONVERSATION?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

What approaches have worked for me in the past? _____

What new approaches will I try this time? _____

WHEN I'M LISTENING, HOW WILL I...

Stay curious? _____

Keep an open mind? _____

Demonstrate respect? _____

Hold empathy? _____

WHEN I'M RESPONDING, HOW WILL I...

Focus on questions? _____

Show optimism? _____

Validate? _____

Express engagement? _____



POST-CONVERSATION REFLECTION

DID I LISTEN WITH...

CURIOSITY?
.....

Yes Somewhat No

AN OPEN MIND?
.....

Yes Somewhat No

RESPECT?
.....

Yes Somewhat No

EMPATHY?
.....

Yes Somewhat No

DID I RESPOND WITH...

LOTS OF QUESTIONS?
.....

Yes Somewhat No

OPTIMISM?
.....

Yes Somewhat No

VALIDATION?
.....

Yes Somewhat No

ENGAGEMENT?
.....

Yes Somewhat No

What screen time changes or boundaries were agreed upon? _____

What worked in contributing to a calm, productive conversation? _____

What approaches were not conducive to a constructive conversation? _____

What goals do I have for my next conversation regarding screen time?

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____



ABOUT THE CREATORS

Celine, from Maryland, and Aliza, from Boston, were both raised relatively screen-free, receiving their first smartphones at age 13. While they've each had their fair share of battles with their parents over their tech use, they've found that open communication – disagreements included – is the best way to reap the benefits of technology without allowing it to become all-consuming. In the summer of 2020, they independently signed on to volunteer with Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood. Concerned by the compulsive pull of technology and wanting to challenge adults' perspectives around phone dependency in teenagers, they joined forces to create a resource for parents. Through sharing their insight, tips, and experiences, they hope to spark a movement of parental empowerment and understanding.



Celine Bernhardt-Lanier



Aliza Kopans

JOIN US AT THE ACTION NETWORK!

We invite you to join us at the Children's Screen Time Action Network. Membership is currently free. Find like-minded professionals and parents working to reduce excessive screen use by children. Learn more at screentimetwork.org.

