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# Parents: Stop Worrying About Smartphones

**Devorah Heitner** Author and Founder, Raising Digital Natives

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I'm generally an optimist about kids and technology. Kids are using technology to organize climate change actions and Black Lives Matter protests. They are designing applications and games to stop bullying and track pandemics.  In my work with schools, I see the power and positive effects of digital devices every day.

I'm also a realist, though, about the effects of growing up with a digital reputation to maintain and constant access to information that is not curated for kids by developmental stage. That's why children need thoughtful, sensible mentoring from parents and teachers who are up on not just the digital trends, but how they actually affect our kids.

It's difficult to do that when parents are bombarded by headlines suggesting that digital devices are at the root of some serious mental health issues. An article in *The Atlantic*, "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?", has stirred something of a moral panic among parents. Everywhere I go, parents and educators ask me about the article—and whether it is true that smartphones are making kids depressed.

## Question the Easy-to-Believe Narrative

The answer is … we don't know. We have very little proof to date. It's a good thing that there is more attention devoted to these issues—and that there is research in progress. But the same few studies get recirculated as if they are adding something new to the conversation. It becomes easy to imagine that there are dozens of studies coming out each week that suggest that smartphones make our kids anxious and depressed.

However, there is also plenty of evidence that this generation is not being "destroyed by smartphones." Even the author of the article acknowledges that her research is correlative and that she has not proved that smartphones cause problems, only that many more kids have smartphones, and somewhat more kids have been diagnosed as depressed. I agree with her that increases in depression and suicide are concerning.

Some of the questions the research raises include: Are there other predominant issues making kids depressed or anxious? Are kids more likely to self-report these issues than they were in the past? Are kids with depression spending more time on their phones, rather than getting depressed because they are on their phones? We should welcome more research. It may prove useful in the future. But we also need to focus on the actual young people in our midst.

## What to Look For

If your child is depressed, look at all the possible factors—with the help of a qualified therapist or psychologist. Consider technology. But you'll have to determine whether it's the root of the issues, or a contributing factor to something more extensive. Who is your child interacting with on her device? What content is he viewing? Just looking at minutes of screen time won't tell you everything you need to know.

If your child isn't showing signs of depression, but her use of technology is interfering with sleep, that's a different matter. Sleep is integral to physical and mental health. Work with her to moderate usage or even occasionally unplug. Maybe connected devices can leave the bedroom and you can replace them with a simple alarm clock.

If your child struggles with poor self-esteem, body image, or frequent and intense conflicts with peers, social media and group messaging apps could exacerbate or reinforce negative patterns. Extreme examples would be looking at "how to" content about self-harm or disordered eating. Young minds have trouble recognizing this sometimes—which is where parents can help.

If you suspect that your child is depressed, reach out to a mental health professional. If screen time seems to be taking your child away from physical activity or face-to-face interactions with family and friends, work with them to find balance.

On the other hand, if your child simply has a strong interest in spending time sharing on social media, creating videos for TikTok or live-streaming on Twitch, you can also take it as a positive. Their impulse to connect, share and create is healthy. Honor that, even if you decide not to green-light such a public way of sharing. That decision depends on your child's age and readiness, but ask some questions to uncover their motives.

First, look at what they want to share. This will tell you their goals. Is it to teach others a skill, such as how to play guitar? Or maybe a shared hobby, such as drawing comics or weaving bracelets? Then ask the child how they define success on social media. A kid who wants to make a cooking show with his friends might be in a different place than a kid who is scrambling to amass as many followers as one of the famous YouTubers. You'll sense the difference between a healthy desire to teach or share versus a shallow, self-serving motive, and you can guide the child toward healthy pursuits.

### It's All About Mentoring

Put the headlines aside and approach these issues as a guide. The devices and apps and games are not the important part—your child's growth is. You don't need to know everything about every app. You just need to know enough to help you make parenting decisions.

Here are some ways to help your child:

- Model a thoughtful relationship with devices, and recognize that your behavior sets the tone. No distracted conversations with your child while you're texting or checking Instagram. No smartphones at the dinner table. These are cues that they will follow.
- Set clear boundaries and adhere to them. If checking the news before bed was wrecking your sleep, share the fact that

you've curtailed this practice—and the results.

- Teach them to use technology to make a positive difference in the world, rather than for navel-gazing, self-promotion or obsessing about other people.

Have these discussions with your children and let them be a part of the conversation. They are smart and savvy, and can teach you new skills, too.

## Thoughtful Curiosity and Healthy Skepticism

Despite my skepticism about making the leap from somewhat increased rates of depression in teens to "smartphones are destroying a generation," I am heartened to see the efforts of the Center for Humane Technology. Founded by former Facebook and Google employees, the group is trying to make technology work for humans, rather than the other way around. There are intentional design factors that make apps hard to disengage from, or make us hesitate to put down our phones. These habits are worth looking at with a more critical eye.

All of us can benefit from examining our least mindful tech moments. And we should push back when we feel like apps are manipulating us. Many parents report that kids feel anxious about maintaining an every-24-hour cycle of a Snapchat streak, even asking parents to post for them when they are away at camp. Examining how apps are designed and empowering users to reclaim their attention are promising developments.

So don't despair. Look at the kid you have. Don't fixate on headlines about dangerous viral trends when you know your child's challenge may be feeling like she will be in trouble with friends if she doesn't like all their pictures. She may not be depressed, or even meet a clinical definition for anxiety, but she still may need some mentoring to navigate the digital world.

Approaching all of our kids' media experiences with an attitude of fear and guilt that we are letting them interact in these spaces fails to support them. Techno-shaming other parents shuts down dialogue and community. Thoughtful curiosity and healthy

skepticism are much better ingredients for raising savvy digital citizens. The next generation will not be "destroyed" on our watch. They are using these tools positively and with style. We can learn from them. And we can support them, recognizing their strengths and helping them learn to navigate some of the pitfalls and rabbit holes.

## Work Cited

Twenge, Jean M. "Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?" *The Atlantic*, September 2017. See theatlantic.com.

Devorah Heitner, Ph.D. is the author of *Screenwise: Helping Kids Thrive (and Survive) in Their Digital World*, a guide for mentoring kids in the digital age. She is the founder of Raising Digital Natives. See raisingdigitalnatives.com.