TEENS AND TECH

What Difference Does Family Structure Make?

Jean Twenge, Wendy Wang, Jenet Erickson, and Brad Wilcox | October 2022

Institute for **Family** Studies

Wheatley Institute

BYU BRIGHAM YOUNG UNIVERSITY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction

A few decades ago, teens and their parents often debated family rules around curfews, going out with friends, and using the car. Although these issues still arise, the most fraught discussions in many families are now centered on a different concern: electronic devices.

According to Pew Research Center, 95% of 13- to 17-year-olds have access to a smartphone.[1] Between 2009 and 2017, the number of 8th graders using social media every day rose from 46% to 78%, and the time high school students spent online doubled.[2] Common Sense Media estimates that children ages 8 to 12 spent five and a half hours a day on screens in 2021, and teens ages 13 to 18 spent nearly 9 hours a day.[3] Although the 1998 Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) sets 13 as the minimum age for having a social media account, users are allowed to self-report their age, and, as a result, large numbers of children ages 12 and under use social media.[4]

Thus, enforcing rules around technology use has fallen almost entirely on parents. Limiting technology use is a crucial task for parents given links between excessive use—especially social media—and depression in both correlational and experimental studies.[5] Facebook's own research found that Instagram made body image issues worse for 1 in 3 teen girls.[6] Particularly because so many children and teens have their own devices, parents face many challenges in regulating their children's technology use.

These challenges may be greater for mothers and fathers in some family types than others. Because stably married parents generally have more resources and a more consistent bond with the children in their household, they may be better able to handle the challenges of guiding and limiting teen tech use.[7] Having stably married parents means that children are more likely to have access to greater parental resources in terms of time and attention, as well as a more authoritative parenting style marked by clear family rules and consistent rule enforcement.[8] By contrast, single-parent families typically have fewer resources—both emotionally and in terms of time—to devote to their children,[9] which may affect their ability to oversee their children's media use and screen time. Moreover, stepfamilies are less likely to have the kind of stable ties and clear lines of authority between parents and children that are most conducive to establishing clear and consistent discipline.[10] For these reasons, children being raised in non-intact families may have fewer rules guiding their use of technology and more exposure to that technology.

[1] Anderson, M., and Jiang, J. "Teens, Social Media and Technology 2018," *Pew Research Center*, May 31, 2018.

[2] Twenge, J., Martin, G., and Spitzberg, B, "Trends in U.S. Adolescents' Media Use, 1976 –2016: The Rise of Digital Media, the Decline of TV, and the (Near) Demise of Print," *Psychology of Popular Media Culture* 8, no. 4 (2019): 329-345.

[3] Rideout, V., et al., T*he Common Sense Census: Media Use by Tweens and Teens*, 2021 (San Francisco: Common Sense Media, March 2022).

[4] Ibid.

[5] Hunt, M., et al., "No More FOMO: Limiting Social Media Decreases Loneliness and Depression," *Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology* 37, no. 10 (2018): 751–768; Kelly, Y, Zilanawala, A., Booker, C., and Sacker, A. "Social Media Use and Adolescent Mental Health: Findings From the UK Millennium Cohort Study," *eClinicalMedicine* 6 (2018): 59-68.

[6] Wells, G., Horwitz, J., and Seetharaman, D. "Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2021.

[7] The AEI-Brookings Working Group on Childhood in the United States, *Rebalancing: Children First* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute/Brookings Institute, February 2022).

[8] McLanahan, S., and Sandefur, G. *Growing Up With a Single Parent: What Hurts, What Helps* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997).

[9] Ibid.

[10] Ibid.; Cherlin, A. *The Marriage-Go-Round: The State of Marriage and the Family in America Today* (New York: Knopf Doubleday, 2010).

In this report, we examine technology and media use among America's teens, including teens' tech use by their family structure. Given the apparent emotional and physical fallout of excessive tech use, we also explore how factors associated with teen well-being—e.g., depression, life satisfaction, and sleep—are linked to technology use and family structure. This is the first study to explore how adolescent use of technology varies by family structure and how technology exposure and family structure are both linked to the emotional welfare of today's teens.
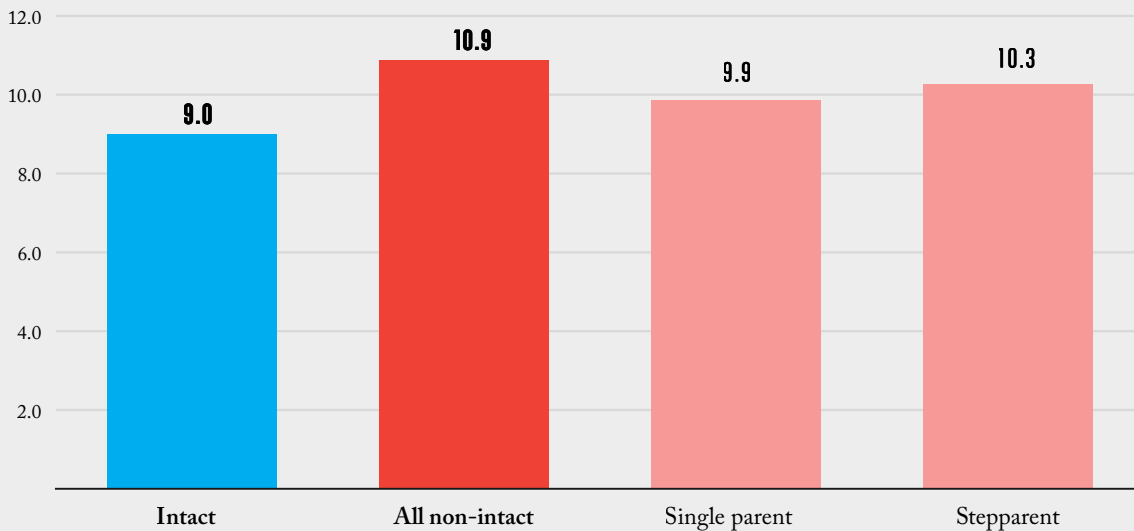
The Teens and Tech Survey

The Institute for Family Studies and the Wheatley Institute surveyed 1,600 U.S. tweens and teens, ages 11 to 18, who were attending 5th through 12th grade in May 2022. The Teens and Tech Survey, fielded by Ipsos, covered a range of topics related to media consumption, family structure, and the mental health of adolescents. The tweens and teens in our sample reported using digital media (social media, gaming, online shopping, video chat, and texting) a total of approximately 10 hours and 4 minutes a day, on average.[11] Although some of this time may include multitasking (doing two or more of these activities at the same time), this is still a staggering amount of time considering the time children spend sleeping, eating, going to school, watching TV (which was not included as digital media), and participating in extracurricular activities.

[11] See Appendix for measurement details.

Family Structure, Technology Use, and Family Time

The amount of time youth spend on digital media is clearly linked to family structure, based on our survey. Youth living with their married biological parents (intact families) spend about 2 hours a day less on digital media than those in non-intact families.[12] Youth living in stepfamilies spend more time using digital media than those in intact families or single-parent families (see **Figure 1**).

Figure 1. Hours per day youth spend on digital media, by family type

Based on teens ages 11 to 18 who attend 5th through 12th grade. Teens in intact families refer to those living with married biological parents.
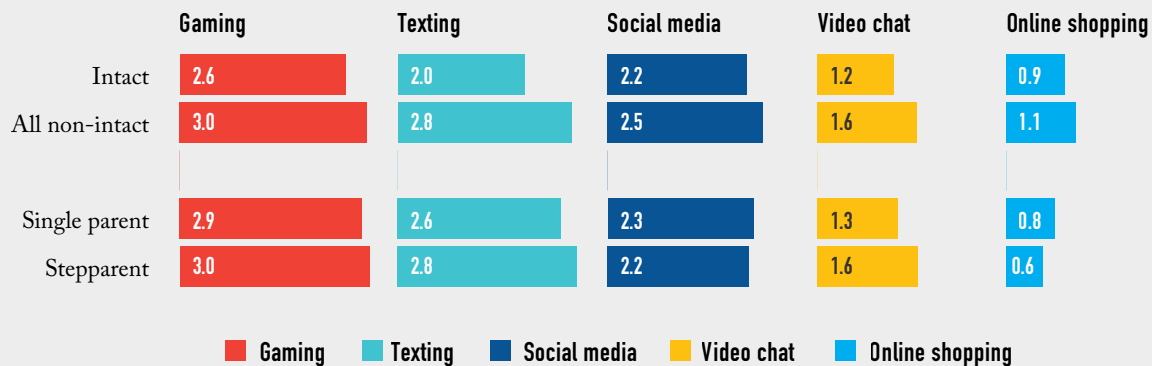*Source: IFS/Wheatley Institute Teen and Tech Survey, May 2022*

IFS/Wheatley

Similar differences appear in time spent on specific digital media activities, with especially large differences by family structure in youth time spent on gaming and texting (see **Figure 2**). For example, youth in stepfamilies report spending about 50 minutes a day more texting than youth in intact families.[13]

---

[12] In this study, teens in non-intact families include mainly those who live in single-parent families or stepfamilies. Other types of living arrangements, such as teens who live with two cohabitating biological parents, teens who do not live with any biological parent, or with married biological parents but one parent is absent from the household, as well as foster and adoptive families, are also included.

[13] Due to smaller sample sizes, results for teens living in other types of arrangements are not presented separately. Teens who do not live with any biological parents and teens whose biological parents are married but one parent is absent generally spend more time on digital media than other teens.

Figure 2. Hours per day spent on five specific digital media activities, by family type

	Gaming	Texting	Social media	Video chat	Online shopping
Intact	2.6	2.0	2.2	1.2	0.9
All non-intact	3.0	2.8	2.5	1.6	1.1
Single parent	2.9	2.6	2.3	1.3	0.8
Stepparent	3.0	2.8	2.2	1.6	0.6

Legend: ■ Gaming ■ Texting ■ Social media ■ Video chat ■ Online shopping
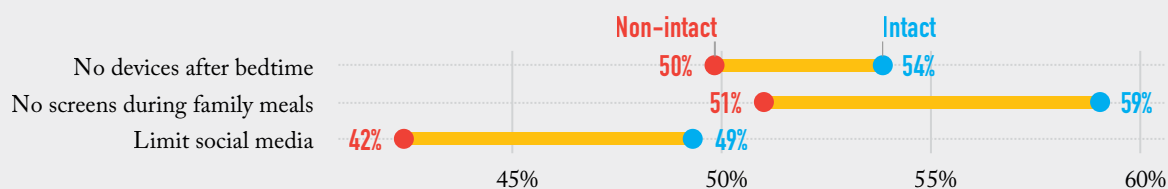
Based on teens ages 11 to 18 who attend 5th through 12th grade. Teens in intact families refer to those living with married biological parents.
Source: IFS/Wheatley Institute Teen and Tech Survey, May 2022

IFS/Wheatley

Why might family structure influence technology time? One possible reason has to do with family rules. Youth in intact families are more likely to report that their families have rules around technology use, including not allowing electronic devices in their bedrooms after bedtime, not allowing screen use during family meals, and limiting the time youth spend on social media (see **Figure 3**).

Figure 3. Percent reporting certain family rules around technology use, by family type

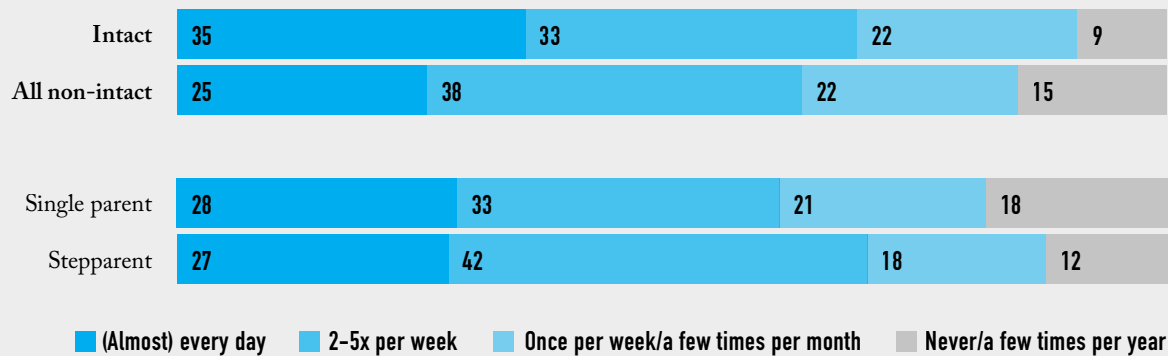|	Non-intact	Intact
No devices after bedtime	50%	54%
No screens during family meals	51%	59%
Limit social media	42%	49%

(x-axis: 45%, 50%, 55%, 60%)

Based on teens ages 11 to 18 who attend 5th through 12th grade. Teens in intact families refer to those living with married biological parents.
Source: IFS/Wheatley Institute Teen and Tech Survey, May 2022

IFS/Wheatley

FAMILY ACTIVITIES

Limiting teens' digital media use is only part of the story. Youth in intact families are also doing more things together with their family without digital distraction. In our new survey, 35% of teens in intact families have family dinner (almost) every day, free from any media disruption, meaning no TV, phone, or tablets. The share is lower among non-intact families: only 28% of teens living with a single parent and 27% of teens in stepfamilies say they have family dinner almost every day without tech distraction. On the other hand, nearly 1 in 5 teens (18%) in single-parent families say they never or rarely eat dinner together with their parents without media distraction (see **Figure 4**).

Figure 4. How often teens report that their families eat dinner together without media distraction
By family type

	(Almost) every day	2–5x per week	Once per week/a few times per month	Never/a few times per year
Intact	35	33	22	9
All non-intact	25	38	22	15
Single parent	28	33	21	18
Stepparent	27	42	18	12

Based on teens ages 11 to 18 who attend 5th through 12th grade. Teens in intact families refer to those living with married biological parents.
Source: IFS/Wheatley Institute Teen and Tech Survey, May 2022
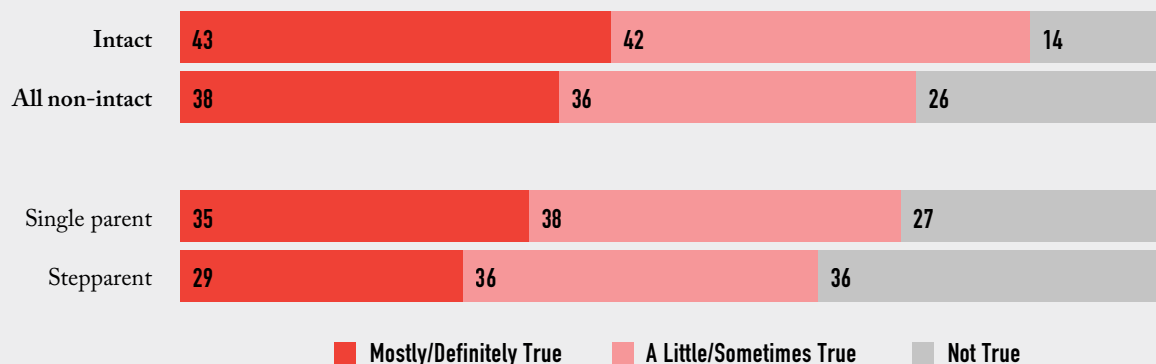
IFS/Wheatley

Meanwhile, teens in intact families also report spending more time doing non-tech family activities, such as playing board games, going for walks, playing sports together, or engaging in other outdoor activities. Half of teens in intact families report these family activities at least a few times a week, compared with 43% of teens in single-parent families and 36% of teens in stepfamilies.

FAMILY MEDIA PLAN AND EXPECTATIONS

Having effective media rules in the family requires that everyone is on the same page and understands the rules. When it comes to expecations of media rules, teens in intact families also have an edge over others. Some 43% of teens in intact families say they have a family media plan and that media expecations are clear in their family, but only 35% of teens in single-parent families and 29% of teens in stepfamilies say this is the case in their family (see **Figure 5**).

Figure 5. Percentage of teens who say media expectations are clear in their family
By family type

Family type	Mostly/Definitely True	A Little/Sometimes True	Not True
Intact	43	42	14
All non-intact	38	36	26
Single parent	35	38	27
Stepparent	29	36	36

■ **Mostly/Definitely True**   ■ **A Little/Sometimes True**   ■ **Not True**

Based on teens ages 11 to 18 who attend 5th through 12th grade. Teens in intact families refer to those living with married biological parents.
Source: IFS/Wheatley Institute Teen and Tech Survey, May 2022

IFS/Wheatley

The larger discrepancy in media rules in stepfamilies may help to explain why teens in stepfamilies spend more time using digital media than other teens. In these blended families, teens may get mixed messages from their biological parent and their stepparent regarding expectations around technology use.

PARENTS AS TECH RULE-MAKERS AND TECH USERS

In a majority of families (70%), mothers primarily set the rules around screen time and monitor teens' media use. This is especially true for teens in single-parent families and stepfamilies: more than 80% of these families rely on moms to set the rules. The share is lower among intact families, where 68% of teens say their mom is the main person in the house for rule-setting, and 30% say it is their dad.

For most outcomes studied in this report, parents and teens in intact families have an advantage. However, this is not the case when it comes to parental tech use. According to teen reports, about 1 in 7 parents (15%) use their phones or other digital devices "almost constantly" during conversation, meals, or family events. The differences by family structure are small: about 14% of teens in intact families say their parents almost constantly use their devices during these times, compared with 17% of teens in single-parent families and 12% of teens in stepfamilies.

## Tech Use, Family Structure, and Teen Mental Health Outcomes

Consistent with previous research, youth who spend more time on digital media are more likely to report more symptoms of mental health problems. Moreover, family structure interacts with digital media use, with teenagers in non-intact families who are heavy tech users most at risk.

Depression. Take depression. While there were few differences in depression by family type among lighter digital media users (less than 8 hours per day), there were larger differences among heavier users (8 hours + a day). The teens most likely to be depressed are heavy digital media users in non-intact families (see **Figure 6**).[14]

Loneliness. The same is true for loneliness. Youth who are heavy users of digital media are more likely to report high levels of loneliness, with the highest percentage among heavy users in non-intact families.

Figure 6. Estimated share of teens who report feeling...
By family type and digital media usage
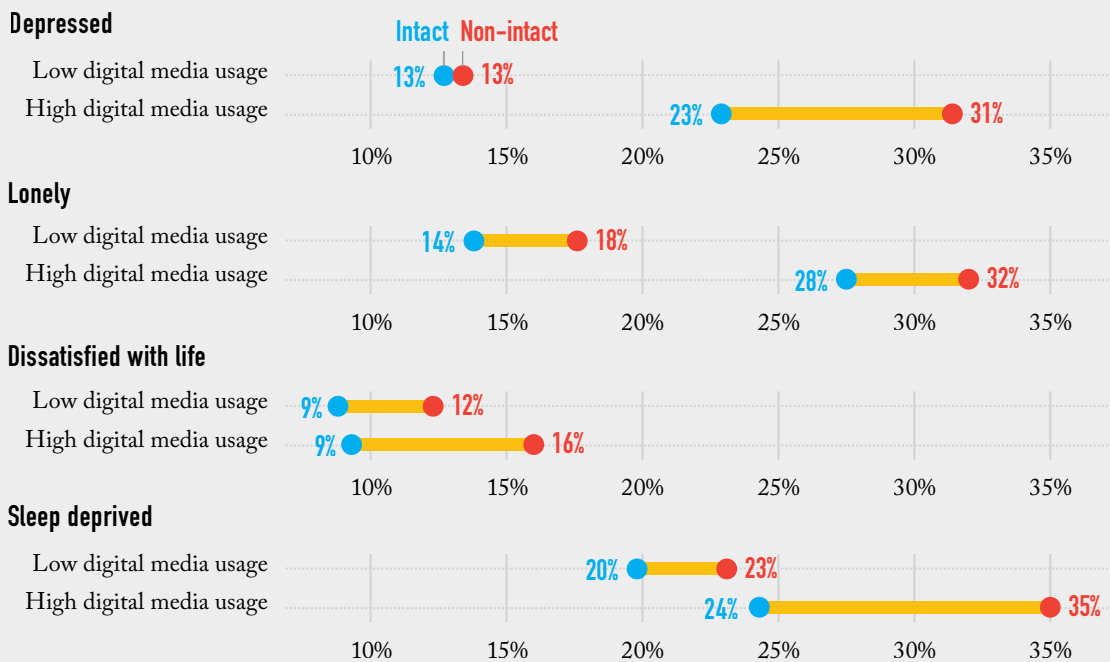
Based on teens ages 11 to 18 who attend 5th through 12th grade. Controls for sex, grade, race/ethnicity, and mother's education.
Teens in intact families refer to those living with married biological parents. Technology usage includes gaming, messaging, social media, video calling, and online shopping.

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institute Teen and Tech Survey, May 2022

IFS/Wheatley

---

[14] Findings in Figure 6 are estimated marginal means that adjusted for sex, teens' grade, race/ethnicity, and mothers' education.
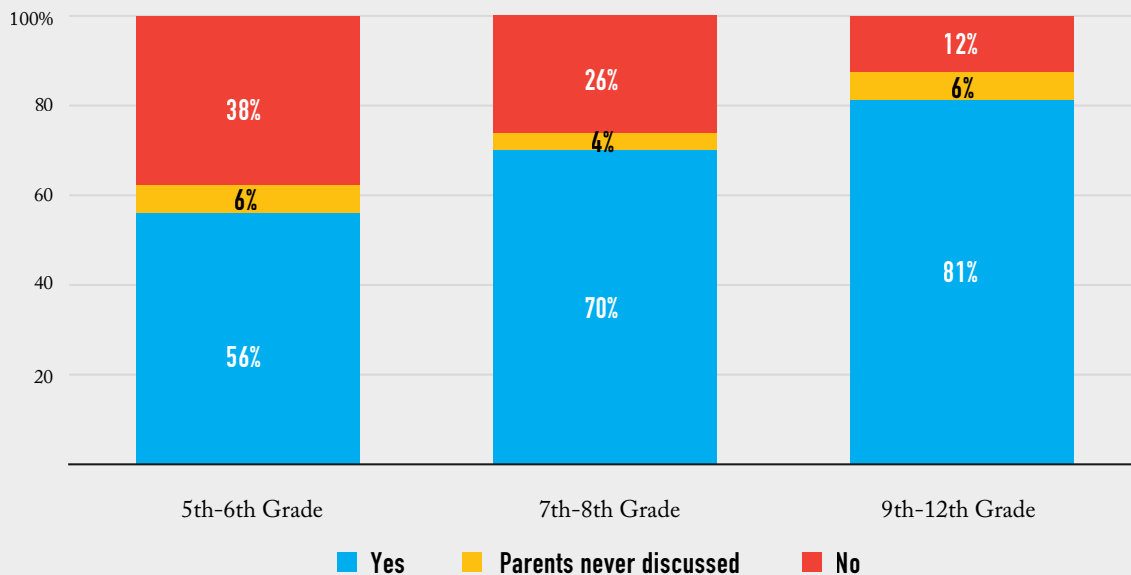
Life Satisfaction. Feeling dissatisfied with life is also more common among youth in non-intact families, particularly those who are heavy users of digital media. The link between dissatisfaction and digital media use is more pronounced in non-intact families than in intact families, where dissatisfaction does not differ by digital media use.

Sleep Deprivation. Youth in non-intact families who are heavy users of digital media are also more likely to not get enough sleep, reporting less than 7 hours of sleep on most nights (youth in these age groups require 9 to 10 hours of sleep per night). Sleep deprivation is most strongly linked to digital media use among non-intact families, compared to intact families. Thus, regulating technology use among youth may be especially important in non-intact families.

Parental Permission to Use Social Media

We also asked youth whether their parents had given them permission to have a social media account, had not talked to them about it, or had said no to a social media account for their child. Although virtually all 5th to 6th graders are ages 12 or under and thus not allowed to have a social media account under COPPA, 6 out of 10 in this age group report that their parents approved their use of a social media account (see **Figure 7**). Seven out of 10 of this age group (5th to 6th graders) spend at least some time on social media, and nearly 3 out of 10 spend more than 3 hours a day on social media. Among the 5th and 6th graders whose parents have forbidden them to have an account, a striking 4 out of 10 report spending at least some time on social media.

### Figure 7. Permission to have a social media account, by age

	5th-6th Grade	7th-8th Grade	9th-12th Grade
No	38%	26%	12%
Parents never discussed	6%	4%	6%
Yes	56%	70%	81%

Legend: ■ Yes ■ Parents never discussed ■ No

Source: IFS/Wheatley Institute Teen and Tech Survey, May 2022

IFS/Wheatley

As youth grow older, more parents allow the use of social media, and more youth who are forbidden to have a social media account use it anyway. By high school, nearly 8 out of 10 teens whose parents explicitly told them that they could *not* have a social media account nevertheless report spending some time on social media (see **Figure 8**).

These findings highlight the difficulty families of all types face in trying to regulate their children's technology use, particularly their social media use. Currently, parental permission is not necessary for minors to open social media accounts, stymying parental efforts to keep children and teens off social media.

Figure 8. Percentage of teens who use social media despite their parents forbidding it, by age

Among teens whose parents forbid them from having a social media account
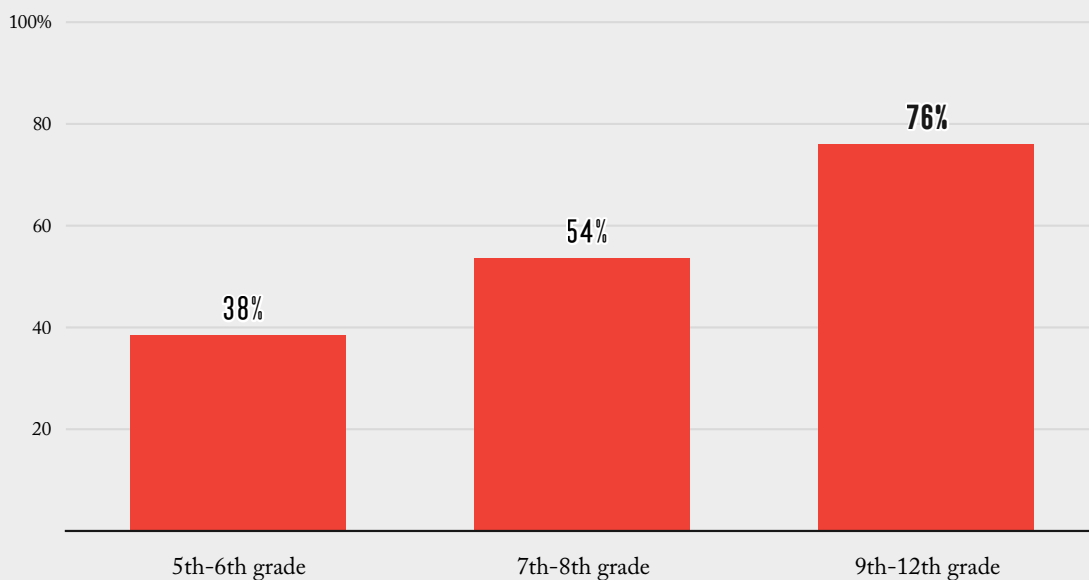
Source: IFS/Wheatley Institute Teen and Tech Survey, May 2022

IFS/Wheatley

Practical Recommendations for Parents

1. Do not allow children or teens to have electronic devices in their bedrooms after bedtime. It is just too tempting to use devices instead of sleep. Have a central location, such as a charging station away from bedrooms, to put devices overnight and preserve sleep. (This is also a good rule for adults.) Getting enough quality sleep is crucial for both physical and mental health.

2. Do not allow children ages 12 and under to have social media accounts and consider delaying social media to ages 16 or even 18. The COPPA law specifies that children ages 12 and under cannot have social media accounts in their own name, but age is self-verified, making it easy for children to lie about their age and obtain an account. Even though many children who are forbidden to have accounts still spend some time on social media, they spend less time than their peers: among 5th and 6th graders in our survey, those whose parents allow social media report spending more than 2 hours a day on the apps, compared to about 40 minutes per day for those whose parents said no to social media. Putting off social media to even later makes sense. Age 13 was the result of a compromise when the law was written and was not chosen for any developmental reason; in fact, age 13 is a particularly difficult time in adolescent development. Adding social media to that mix can be toxic, especially as social media sites are designed for adults, not for teens or children. Facebook's own research showed body image issues and compromised mental health among young users of their Instagram platform,[15] and numerous academic studies have found that teens who spend more time on social media are more likely to be depressed, especially girls.

3. Delay giving your child a smartphone for as long as possible, until age 16 or 18. Children having their own portable internet-enabled device makes it much easier to obtain social media accounts without permission, access harmful information online, and communicate with unknown adults. If you want to be able to contact your child, give them a cell phone without internet access (such as a "flip" phone, or alternatives such as the Gabb phone or Light phone).

4. Limit the amount of time children spend using digital media. Most research suggests that an hour or two of digital media use a day is not harmful, but today's children and teens are spending so much time online that they are missing out on other activities important for mental health and development, including face-to-face social interaction, exercise, reading, and sleep. A limit of 2 or 3 hours a day of digital media use during leisure time (not counting schoolwork) allows communication with friends while preserving time for activities beneficial for mental health.

[15] Wells, G., Horwitz, J., and Seetharaman, D. , "Facebook Knows Instagram Is Toxic for Teen Girls, Company Documents Show," *The Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2021.

5. Discuss digital communication with your children and find solutions for staying in touch with friends. Youth social life revolves around electronic communication, but that does not have to mean teens must spend all their time scrolling. Most research suggests that communicating in real time one-on-one or in small groups (for example, via video chat or while gaming) is healthier than activities such as social media, with its emphasis on delayed communication to larger groups.[16]

6. Work together with other like-minded families. Even if a parent takes all five of these steps, success is more likely with support from other families who are making similar choices. So find other families who set limits and clear expectations related to technology for their children. Socialize with them, and work with them to create tech-savvy and family-friendly communities in local schools, sports teams, and religious congregations.

---

[16] Twenge, J. M., & Farley, E. "Not all screen time is created equal: Associations with mental health vary by activity and gender." *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology* 56 (2021): 207-217.

Conclusion

The link between excessive technology use and diminished well-being among adolescents makes understanding and regulating adolescent media use increasingly important. Family structure emerges as a critical variable shaping how much media adolescents consume in this sample of 1,600 youth from across the nation. Concerningly, the heaviest users of technology are teens in non-intact families, the most vulnerable group in our survey.

In fact, youth living with their married biological parents spend about 2 hours less on digital media compared to those in non-intact families. The adolescents most likely to be depressed, lonely, and dissatisfied with life are heavy digital media users in stepparent, single-parent, or other non-intact families. The link between excessive technology use and poor mental health is larger for youth in non-intact families compared to those in intact families.

Stably married parents tend to bring a host of protective benefits, including more resources and more resilient and stable bonding to help navigate the challenges of regulating teen media use, and clear lines of authority to determine and enforce rules regulating media use. In contrast, single-parent families and stepfamilies tend to have fewer of the emotional and temporal resources that are essential to thoughtful monitoring and enforcement of healthy media use patterns for youth.

This may explain why intact families have more rules around technology use, including not allowing electronic devices in bedrooms or at family meals. They are also more likely to consistently do things like eat dinner, play games, or do an outdoor activity together without digital distraction than non-intact families. In turn, youth in intact families are more likely to get enough sleep compared to youth in non-intact families, for whom digital media use is more strongly linked to sleep deprivation.

All these factors appear to play a role in explaining why our most vulnerable youth—those in non-intact families—spend almost two hours more on screens each day and are more likely to suffer the associated negative effects of depression, loneliness, and more dissatisfaction with life. In this first study to explore how adolescent technology use and its links to emotional welfare vary by family structure, those most vulnerable to excessive media use are also the least likely to get the help they need to regulate their use. Given the risks, efforts to strengthen all families in guiding youth through the complexities of technology use today are needed, particularly for youth from our most vulnerable families. Their welfare especially merits our careful attention.

Appendix A: Methods

SAMPLE SELECTION AND WEIGHTING

We partnered with international survey sample provider Ipsos, which collected a sample of 1,600 teens residing in the U.S. between May 6 and May 20, 2022. The sampling strategy was designed to match the makeup of the nationally representative *Monitoring the Future* survey administered by the University of Michigan, with surveys of 13- to 18-year-olds in 8th, 10th, and 12th grade every year. Weights were applied to make the data nationally representative. Parents gave consent for their minor children to participate.

CALCULATION OF TIME SPENT

Teens were asked how much time they spend per day on certain digital media activities in intervals, using the same questions as the Monitoring the Future survey. We converted these to averages as follows: None = 0; Less than an hour = .5; 1-2 hours = 1.5; 3-4 hours = 3.5; 5-6 hours = 5.5; 7-8 hours = 7.5; 9 hours or more = 10.

CONTROL VARIABLES

Where noted, analyses controlled for sex, grade, mother's education, and race/ethnicity (using dummy variable comparisons for Black, Hispanic, and other vs. White).

CUTOFFS FOR HIGH DEPRESSION

The measures of depressive symptoms used a scale of five answers from "disagree" to "agree," coded from 1 to 5.

Scale:

1. Disagree
2. Mostly disagree
3. Neither
4. Mostly agree
5. Agree

Responses indicating more negative emotions were coded as 4 or 5; responses describing a positive effect were coded as 1 or 2. "Neither" was coded as 3.

An average score of 3 or above was considered a high score, as it is the midpoint of the scale and is approximately one standard deviation above the mean, a common cutoff for mental-health screening measures.

Appendix B: Methods

1. MEASURING DEPRESSION

    a) I enjoy life as much as anyone. (reverse scored)
    b) Life often seems meaningless.
    c) It feels good to be alive. (reverse scored)
    d) The future often seems hopeless.

2. MEASURING LONELINESS

    a) A lot of times I feel lonely.
    b) There is always someone I can turn to if I need help. (reverse scored)
    c) I often feel left out of things.
    d) There is usually someone I can talk to if I need to. (reverse scored)
    e) I often wish I had more good friends.
    f) I usually have a few friends around that I can get together with. (reverse scored)

3. TEENS' DIGITAL MEDIA TIME

About how many hours on an average DAY do you spend…

    a) On social networking sites like Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, etc.
    b) Video chatting (Skype, etc.)
    c) Texting
    d) Playing games on a computer, TV, phone, or other electronic device
    e) Shopping online

Scale:

    1. None
    2. Less than an hour
    3. 1-2 hours
    4. 3-4 hours
    5. 5-6 hours
    6. 7-8 hours
    7. 9 hours or more

4. FAMILY RULES

In your house, are there any specific rules or restrictions about your using your phone, tablet, or computer…

Attributes:

a) In your bedroom during the day

b) In your bedroom at night in the hour before bedtime

c) In your bedroom at night after bedtime

d) During family meals

e) During family events

f) For more than a certain number of hours a day

Scale:

1. Yes
2. No
3. I don't have my own phone, tablet, or computer

5. SOCIAL MEDIA ACCOUNT

Have your parents said it's OK for you to have an account on social media (such as TikTok, Snapchat, or Instagram)?

1. Yes, they have said it's OK
2. No, they have said it's not OK
3. My parents never talked to me about social media accounts

About the Authors

Jean M. Twenge is a Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University and 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*. She holds a BA and MA from the University of Chicago and a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan.

Wendy Wang is Director of Research at the Institute for Family Studies and a former Senior Researcher at Pew Research Center.

Jenet Erickson is a fellow at the Institute for Family Studies, a fellow of the Wheatley Institute, and an associate professor in Religious Education and the School of Family Life at Brigham Young University.

Brad Wilcox is the Future of Freedom fellow at the Institute for Family Studies, visiting scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, and the director of the National Marriage Project at the University of Virginia. Wilcox has published widely on marriage, cohabitation, fatherhood, and the welfare of children.

Acknowledgements