

## **Report: Teens' Digital Media Habits Shaped by Family Structure**

*Youth from non-intact families more likely to use technology excessively and struggle with mental health*

WASHINGTON D.C., October 31, 2022 – While the most widely debated family rules used to revolve around curfews, going out with friends or access to the car, today's biggest family battles are often centered on a different concern: electronic devices. Parents limiting their children's technology use is a crucial task given links between excessive use—especially of social media—and depression and anxiety in both correlational and experimental studies. But a new study shows that family structure and family connection can also play a role in the amount of time teens spend on the screen.

A new report from the Institute for Family Studies and the Wheatley Institute observes the impact family structure can have on adolescents' interaction with digital media. The report, *Teens and Tech: What Difference Does Family Structure Make?*, explores how adolescent use of technology varies by types of families they are in and how technology exposure and family makeup are both linked to the emotional welfare of today's teens.

“Almost every family struggles with containing tech usage among their children and making sure that tech usage doesn't affect their child's emotional well-being,” said Jean Twenge, the lead author of the study. “Our research found that in non-intact families, this challenge may be greater, as the heaviest users of technology are teens that live in single-parent, stepparent or other non-intact families.”

According to the study, which surveyed 1,600 youth aged 11 to 18 from across the nation, youth living with their married biological parents spent about two hours less on digital media compared to those in non-intact families. Moreover, some 43% of teens in intact families say they have a family media plan and that media expectations 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.

*Teens and Tech: What Difference Does Family Structure Make?* is the first study to examine technology and media use among America's teens segmenting their tech use by their family structure. Given the obvious emotional and physical fallout of excessive tech use, the report also looks at how factors associated with teen well-being—e.g., depression, life satisfaction, and sleep—correlate with technology use and family structure. It found that 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 a concern for any family, but our survey showed that teens from non-intact families are more at risk

for diminished well-being due to disproportionate screen time,” said Jenet Erickson of the Wheatley Institute. “In a stable family, kids are more likely have access to greater parental resources like time and attention, but single-parent families typically don’t have those resources, which can affect their ability to monitor their children’s’ screen usage and the effect that usage has on mental health.”

Among the report’s findings:

- Youth from intact families spend roughly nine hours per day on digital media, whereas those from non-intact families use digital media about 10.9 hours a day
- In a majority of families with teens (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 one in seven parents (15%) use their phones or other digital devices “almost constantly” during conversation, meals, or family events. The differences are small across various family types.
- While there were few differences in depression by family type among lighter digital media users (less than eight hours per day), there were larger differences among heavier users (eight hours + a day). The teens most likely to be depressed are heavy digital media users in non-intact families.
- Even though legally not allowed to have a social media account, seven out of ten 5th to 6th graders (ages 12 or under) spend at least some time on social media, and nearly three out of ten spend more than three hours a day on social media.

As a result of these findings and past research, the authors share the following practical recommendations to parents:

- Do not allow children or teens to have electronic devices in their bedrooms after bedtime.
- Do not allow children ages 12 and under to have social media accounts and consider delaying social media to around age 16.
- Delay giving your child a smartphone for as long as possible, ideally until around age 16.
- Discuss digital communication with your children and find solutions for staying in touch with friends.
- Work together with other families and create tech-savvy and family-friendly communities in local schools, sports teams, and religious congregations.

You can read the full report at:

<https://wheatley.byu.edu/teensandtech>

### **About the Institute for Family Studies**

The Institute for Family Studies (IFS) is a research and public education organization whose mission is to strengthen marriage and family life and advance the well-being of children.

### **About the Wheatley Institute**

The Wheatley Institute at Brigham Young University engages students, scholars, thought leaders, and the public in research-supported work that fortifies the core institutions of the family, religion, and constitutional government.