# What Is Tech Doing to Kids' Mental Health?

The tech revolution has radically reshaped the way young people communicate, maintain their friendships, get their entertainment, and spend their leisure time.

But increasingly, experts and non-experts alike are recognizing the unintended consequences of all this screen time, and they're asking whether constant exposure to technology might be putting young people at an increased risk for mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, loneliness, and even suicide.

The problem isn't with the technology itself but with its uncontrolled and excessive use. In moderation — about an hour a day — watching videos, texting, engaging with social media, or playing video games can bring enjoyment and enhance young people's social connections and communication skills. But when it comes to electronic devices, moderation can prove difficult if not impossible. In fact, tech insiders have begun speaking out about the addictive quality of the digital technologies they helped create, a fact they say is no accident but an integral part of their very design.

**Effective School Solutions**

*Reinventing K-12 Mental Health Care*

# Technology Use Is Up... *Way* Up

**9**

HOURS PER DAY STUDENTS (AGES 13-18) ENGAGE IN MEDIA USAGE

Today 95 percent of teens own or have access to a smartphone. Forty-four percent said they're online many times a day, and 45 percent said they use their phones "almost constantly."[1]

One research study found that kids aged 13 to 18 are spending nearly nine hours every day engaging with media of one kind or another.[2] For more than half of their waking hours, these kids are plugged in. For younger children, between the ages of 8 and 12, the consumption was lower, but still nearly six hours per day. The advent of smartphones has meant that technology is now portable and ubiquitous — enabling kids to have access to screens everywhere, all the time.

Jim Steyer, who directs *Common Sense*, a nonprofit organization concerned with the media, says he's shocked how little anyone has done to explore what exactly this all means for young people. "Where is the research?" he said. "We're conducting the biggest experiment on our kids — the digital transition — without research."[3]

[1] https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/
[2] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/about-us/news/press-releases/ landmark-report-us-teens-use-an-average-of-nine-hours-of-media-per-day
[3] https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-switch/wp/2015/11/03/ teens-spend-nearly-nine-hours-every-day-consuming-media/?utm_term=.369e01fb4aca

# Mental Health Issues Are Also on the Rise

But research is being done on the effects of technology on young people's mental health, and the findings are alarming. Along with the meteoric rise of smartphone and tablet use, young people are experiencing a rapid increase in mental health challenges. Some researchers note a direct connection between kids' escalating use of technology and the rise of depression, anxiety, and other mental health problems.

Psychology professor **Jean Twenge of San Diego State University** has studied the cohort born between 1995 and 2010 and has dubbed them "iGen" — the first generation who can't remember life before the internet. She and other researchers have little doubt that the overuse of technology is, at least in part, behind the soaring mental health crisis among teens and young adults. "Rates of teen depression and suicide have skyrocketed since 2011," Twenge writes. "It's not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental-health crisis in decades. Much of this deterioration can be traced to their phones."[4]

Twenge and her colleagues have analyzed a mountain of survey data collected from thousands of teens over a number of years, and these are just a few of their findings:
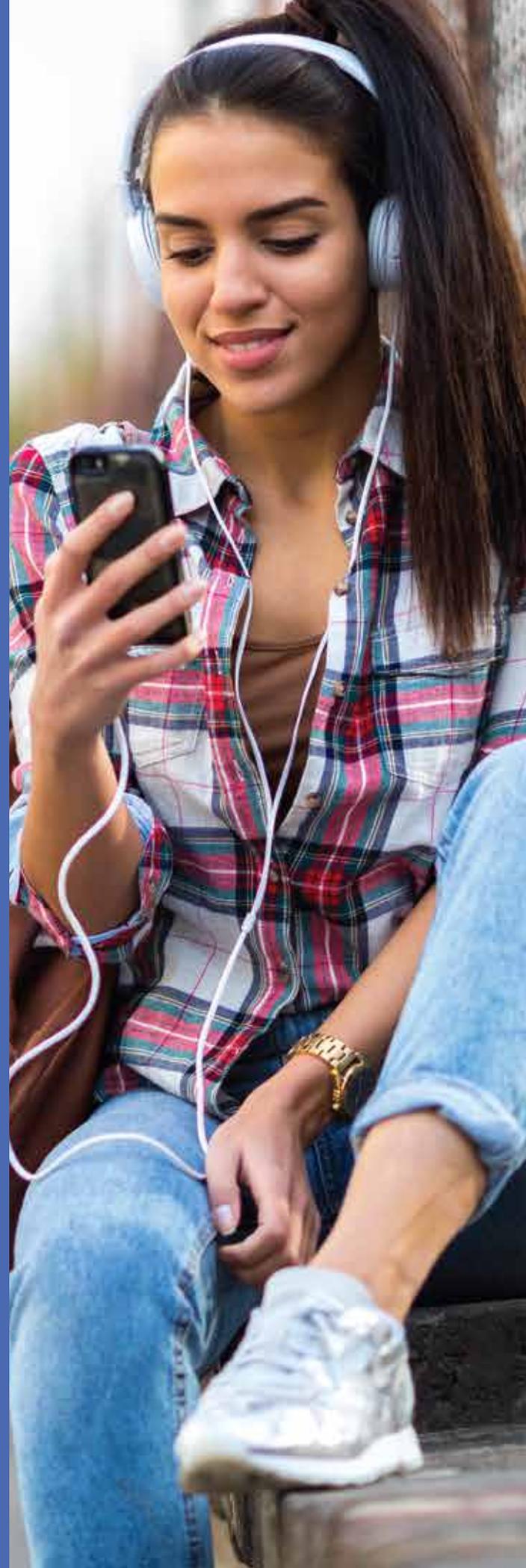
- Between 2011 and 2015, the number of 8th and 10th graders who felt lonely rose by 33%.

- Between 2010 and 2015, the number of teens who had experienced a major depressive episode rose 56%.

- Between 2010 and 2015, the number of adolescents who died by suicide rose by 31%.

Another research analysis looked at more than one million 8th, 10th, and 12th graders between 1991 and 2016 and noted that an abrupt decrease in psychological well-being — as measured by self-esteem, life satisfaction, and happiness — occurred after 2012. Researchers note that until that year, these measures had been steadily increasing. Further, the research found that adolescents who spent more time using electronic communication and screens and less time engaged in non-screen activities had lower psychological well-being.[5]

While there's no conclusive smoking gun, Twenge says the timing of these changes coincides neatly with the ascendance of smartphones and excessive screen time. "By far the largest change in teens' lives between 2012 and 2016 was the increase in the amount of time they spent on digital media," she says.

[4] https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/09/
    has-the-smartphone-destroyed-a-generation/534198/
[5] https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/
    S2211335518301827?via%3Dihub

# So What's the Connection?

If technology is having a negative impact on young people, the question is why. A number of factors may link the rise of technology to the decrease in overall well-being among kids, including the addictive nature of the technology itself, which can crowd out a healthy range of offline activities and erode a sense of self-control. But here are some specific factors that may be contributing to a decrease in overall happiness and satisfaction among young people.



## Social Media and the Push for Perfection

Some of the biggest online draws for tweens and teens — girls in particular — are photo-based platforms like Instagram and Snapchat. Long before the arrival of social media, body image was a mine field for adolescent girls, but with the rise of online selfie culture, the problem has only intensified, putting the most vulnerable girls at risk for constant comparison, self-criticism and low self-esteem. It's no secret that social media puts a huge emphasis on photos and looks, and many young people use filters to subtly or not so subtly overhaul their images. Some apps are even referred to as "pretty filters" because they reshape and alter photographs to make them more conventionally attractive. Today's teens are immersed in unrealistic images of their peers — not to mention airbrushed celebrities. Is it any wonder that many of them feel they don't measure up?

## Feeling Left Out

It's only human nature to want to be included and to feel bad when we're not. But social media makes these social slights impossible to ignore. When teens see evidence online of their friends getting together without them — all documented with an endless stream of photographs — they can feel lonely and left out. The modern "Fear of Missing Out" (FOMO) that many young people experience is generated in part by constantly seeing pictures and videos documenting what everyone else is doing.

What's more, when teens see pictures of their peers online — curated to give the impression they're always having fun — they can feel that their own lives are somehow inadequate. While comparisons like these aren't caused by social media, these platforms vastly increase the amount of time young people spend comparing their lives to others'.

## Cyberbullying

A majority of kids have experienced some form of online bullying, whether it's been name-calling, having false rumors spread about them, being the recipient of physical threats, or other online attacks.[6] Of course, bullying among kids isn't new, but online cyberbullying is a product of the digital age, and, the ubiquity of screens makes digital bullying hard to escape. Victims of online bullying are at an increased risk for depression. Kids who experience cyberbullying can feel isolated and helpless. Nearly all kids see online bullying as a large problem that affects them and their peers.

## Loss of Sleep

As kids spend more and more of their time with screens, they're spending less time doing other things, and one of those things is sleep. Not only are adolescents staying up late watching videos and scrolling through their social media feeds, but one research study found that one in five kids wake up in the middle of the night to send texts or check their social media accounts.[7] And even when they do unplug and try to go to sleep, they may have a hard time doing so. Online interactions are energizing and can make it hard to turn the brain off and wind down. Additionally, the blue light emitted from screens has been shown to interfere with the onset of sleep. Most experts believe young people need roughly nine hours of sleep, and getting less than that can have a negative impact on mood, energy levels, and engagement at school.

## Screen Time Over Face Time

For all of social media's promise of bringing people together, it's an ironic fact that screen use seems to be eroding teens' preference for in-person communication. A recent study found that teens' desire for face-to-face communication with their friends has declined substantially in the wake of social media. More teens said they would rather communicate with their friends by text than face to face. At the same time, these young people acknowledge that using screens detracts from in-person encounters. "Fifty-four percent of teens agree that using social media 'often distracts me when I should be paying attention to the people I'm with.'"[8] As in-person interactions and shared activities fall by the wayside, it's not surprising that many young people feel lonely, unsatisfied, and depressed.

Young people themselves are aware that living their lives on their phones isn't satisfying. Many teens say they're uncomfortable with their excessive phone use. They know it isn't healthy, and that it's making them unwell. But that doesn't mean they know how to stop it.

[6] https://www.pewinternet.org/2018/09/27/a-majority-of-teens-have-experienced-some-form-of-cyberbullying/

[7] https://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2017/01/170116091419.htm

[8] https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/research/2018_cs_socialmediasociallife_executivesummary-final-release_3_lowres.pdf

# What Can You Do?

*There are ways we can all fight back. We can talk with kids about responsible technology use, and model it ourselves. In the tech world, a movement is afoot to address the rampant problems of overuse and smartphone addiction. But in the meantime, making mental health services available for young people is critical.*

Twenge reports that in 1982 only 4% of high school seniors had seen a psychologist, but by 2015 that number had risen to 11%. And the need for therapeutic interventions is likely much higher. Twenge says, "Practitioners need to prepare for an increasing wave of iGen clients." And she worries what will happen if these kids don't get adequate help.

Schools may be called upon to provide more mental health services, yet they are simply not built to handle large-scale mental health needs. Teachers, guidance counselors, school social workers and school leaders are overwhelmed as students with emotional and behavioral challenges consume an outsize portion of their time and attention.

Piecemeal approaches without a comprehensive plan, such as simply adding a social worker, barely make a dent. Sending students off to specialized therapeutic schools outside the district is a common response, but these out-of district placements (ODP's) are often less than ideal.

[9] Twenge, **iGen,** Simon and Schuster, 2017.

# About Effective School Solutions

In recent years, school districts across the country have found success with comprehensive clinical programs embedded in the school day. Operated by expert outside providers in full partnership with host districts, these programs give educators a place to go — right in their own buildings — supporting the kids who need the most help. The results are promising. Students stay in their own school, enjoying everything their home districts offer, while benefiting from extensive wrap-around therapeutic services. Attendance and grades go up; disciplinary incidents go down. Social workers can better manage their caseloads, and in general all educators regain countless hours.

ESS provides innovative clinical programs for districts seeking to reduce costs while increasing the quality of their in-district education for students with emotional and behavioral problems. We bring highly qualified, experienced clinicians who have specific expertise in working with children and/or adolescents with significant emotional and behavioral challenges.

ESS programs are based on a decade of thorough research and measurable student outcomes. The results are dramatic. Aggregate data from the 2018-2019 school year shows that on average ESS students' grades increased, on average, 22 percent from pre-ESS levels. Absences went down by 37 percent, and disciplinary incidents dropped by 44 percent. As of the 2018-2019 school year, only 3 percent of 1,762 students that ESS has served required an out-of-district placement.*

*2018-2019 ESS High School Programs*

**97%**
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**22%**
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**37%**
REDUCTION IN STUDENT ABSENCES

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