

Views from VanDeWalle

Brandy VanDeWalle, Extension Educator in Fillmore/Clay Counties

October 14, 2020

Youth, Screen Time & Social Media

This past week, I listened to a webinar hosted by Bryan LGH which featured Collin Kartchner who is an advocate for teen mental health. Specifically, fighting social media's influence on teen mental health and emphasizing that their voice matters. There has been a lot of research which supports this, and results are shocking. This is one of the reasons, I as a parent was hesitant on allowing my 7th grader access to a smart phone. After Collin's presentation and reading through literature, as a parent and educator there will be some changes made in our house and I hope you'll read along to see key research points.

On his presentation sponsored by BLGH, Kartchner pointed out that parents need to be role models for their kids when it comes to phones and devices. This can be very hard to do in such an instantaneous society. Social media has made us share more than we have ever shared before. Think about it, how many posts do you see every day? It is easier to connect with others and keep them updated on events which is handy, and it is also easy to push your political, social or other differing views which can create tension. How many of us carry cameras with us to kids' events or other celebrations? When is the last time you've actually printed off pictures to physically display? I know I have caught myself being too involved with watching my kids through my phone rather than firsthand with my eyes.

When you pick up kids from school, do they see you on your device? When you are at home on the couch debriefing everyone's day, are you on your device? Have you checked your screen time lately? How many hours are you working or socially engaged on your phone? Is it fair to blame our kids for wanting to be on their phones? They have been conditioned that phones are a lifeline and connection.

Jean Twenge, a Professor of Psychology at San Diego State University authored a study that found teenagers are increasingly depressed, feel hopeless and are more likely to consider suicide. Her and colleagues found a sudden increase in teens' symptoms of depression, suicide risk factors and suicide rates in 2012 — around the time when smartphones became popular. An excerpt from an article on NPR, found that, "Twenge's research found that teens who spend five or more hours per day on their devices are 71 percent more likely to have one risk factor for suicide. And that's regardless of the content consumed. Whether teens are watching cat videos or looking at something more serious, the amount of screen time — not the specific content — goes hand in hand with the higher instances of depression." She found that half an hour or one hour seemed to be the time youth could handle electronic devices in terms of mental health. Twenge said that at 3 hours and more, there is a more pronounced increase in youth who had at least one risk for suicide.

Melanie Hempe, RN and founder of Families Managing Media summed up why social media is not for teens. 1) Social media was not designed for them. Biologically, their underdeveloped frontal cortex can't manage all the temptations and information on social media. 2) Social media is an entertainment (and marketing) technology. It will not make them more prepared for real life of a job. 3) A tween's "more is better" mentality is a dangerous

N EXTENSION

match for social media. Do they really have as many “friends” as social media portrays? 4) Social media is an addictive form of screen entertainment. 5) Social media replaces learning the hard “work” of dealing face-to-face with peers. 6) Social media can cause teens to lose connection with family and instead view “friends” as their foundation. 7) Social media use represents lost potential for teams. It’s too easy for teens to waste their brain on a digital world, as it’s hard to balance everything.

So, what can we do? Twenge suggests both teens and adults limit time on social media and phones to no more than two hours. She encourages people to spend time resting, seeing friends face-to-face (of course in COVID-19 times, FaceTime or other electronic devices might have to be adapted), going outside, exercising, engaging in a non-electronic hobby, etc. If you use your phone to facilitate those things, that’s an acceptable route to take.

Collin Kartchner also provided ideas for families. First of all, one day each week, have a designated time for NO phones. He recommended the time of 5-9 p.m. because kids need time to talk to their parents and parents need to listen. Kids need family dinner with no phones or distractions. He said to talk like it’s 1994. He also recommends making sure your children get 8 hugs every day for 8 seconds minimum. That might seem like a lot, but kids need physical touch and connection with their parent/guardian. He recommended that parents, guardians and even grandparents also evaluate their own digital behaviors and make necessary changes. Create a Family Tech Contract that is voiced by all family members, signed and posted on the fridge or visible spot.