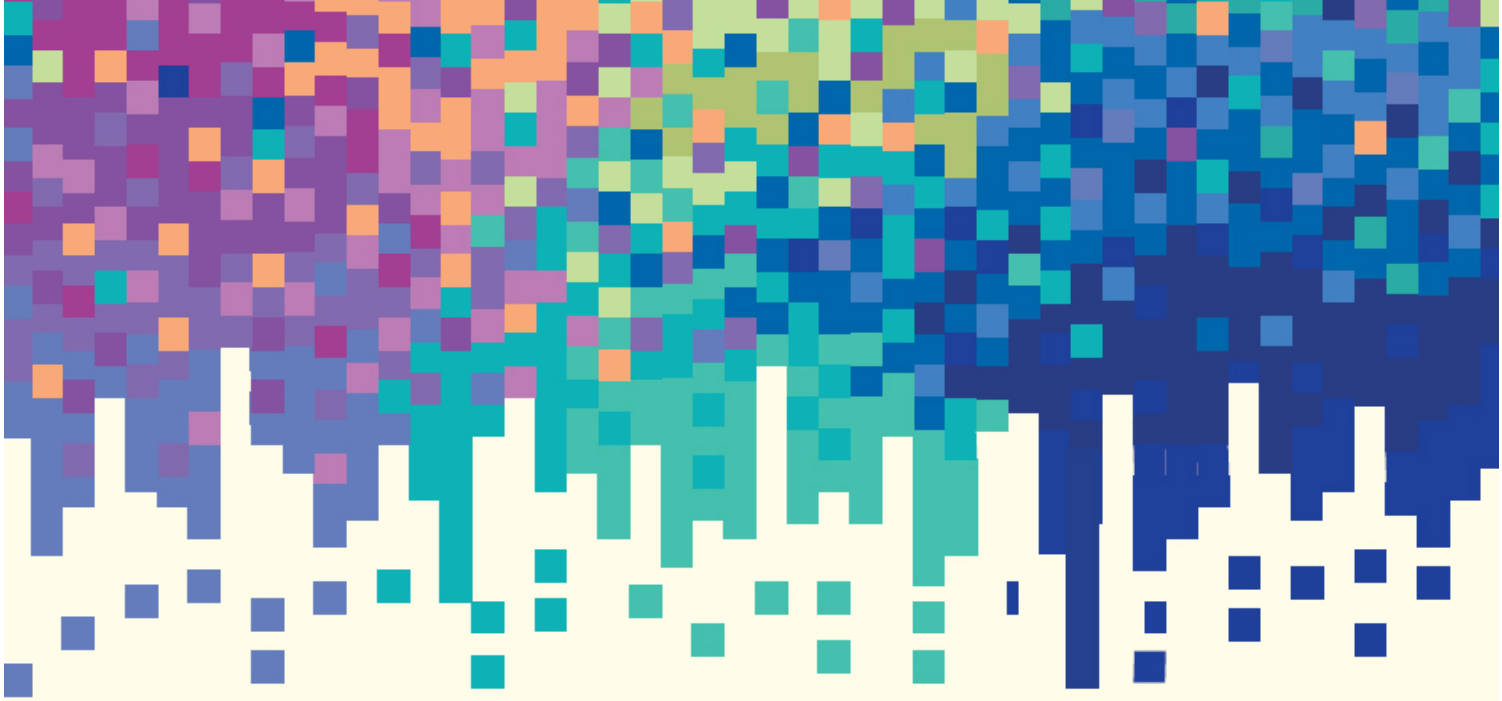


It's Their WORLD...

Teens, Screens, and the Science of Adolescence

Erin Walsh

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CONTENTS

Introduction

Part 1: “What Am I Capable Of?”

Chapter 1: Built for Discovery

Chapter 2: Primed for Rewards

Chapter 3: Sensitive to Stress

Part 2: “Who Am I?”

Chapter 4: Separation and Connection

Chapter 5: Independence and Exploration

Chapter 6: Online Self-Expression

Chapter 7: Love, Relationships, and Sexual Identity

Part 3: “Where Do I Belong?”

Chapter 8: Belonging with Friends

Chapter 9: Self-Worth

Part 4: “How Can I Contribute?”

Chapter 10: The Power of Purpose

Chapter 11: The Power of Voice

Afterword

Acknowledgments

Recommended Resources

Notes

Index

Reading Guide

About the Author

CHAPTER 1

Built for Discovery

"Isn't it odd, we can only see our outsides, but nearly everything happens on the inside."
—CHARLIE MACKESY, *THE BOY, THE MOLE, THE FOX AND THE HORSE*

When I have conversations with adolescents about technology, I often start by asking, "What do you love most about technology?" and "What's not working for you?" I like asking these questions for two reasons. First, I always learn something new. Young people are observant, insightful, and adept at figuring out innovative ways to make tech work for them. Second, I am constantly reminded that adolescents and adults have many of the same concerns. There are plenty of things teens wish adults understood better, but the idea that adults are hand-wringing while young people cling thoughtlessly to their devices is mistaken. Many of their concerns are related to how adults use technology. It turns out that adults and adolescents are in this together, trying to figure out answers to the same question: "How do we live well in a world dominated by screens?" Young people have a lot to contribute to this conversation.

The Adolescent Brain Is Not Broken

I had just finished setting up my computer for a student presentation at a large middle school in the Midwest. The auditorium was cavernous and quiet. To be honest, giant auditoriums are not my favorite settings for engaging with students. They don't lend themselves to conversations that fuel learning and reflection. But the principal had made a compelling case for bringing information about technology and the brain to the entire student body and promised that classroom teachers would follow up with more interaction.

Soon students started to trickle in. While most were happily immersed in conversation, one student approached me. I welcomed him, grateful to be able to talk one-on-one with an audience member before standing on a stage in front of hundreds of tweens and teens. As we exchanged greetings, I learned he was a seventh grader.

"Are you the speaker who is going to talk to us about our brains and technology?" he asked.

"That's right," I replied.

"So, is it true then that our brains are broken in middle school?" he wondered.

"Oh, no. I'm so sorry," I responded.

"What do you mean?" he replied.

"Your brain is so far from broken. But I'm not surprised you've heard something like that. Not only is that story unfair, it's also untrue."

By that point, students were filling the auditorium. The seventh grader gave me a polite but skeptical look, clearly eager to rejoin his friends. He pushed back the hair falling over his forehead. "Listen," I said before he left, "I'll give you the short answer now, but I'd love to talk more after this workshop. Your brain isn't broken; it's transforming. And it's built for discovery."

I didn't need to ask this middle schooler where he got the idea that his brain might be broken. References to vulnerable and out-of-control adolescents are everywhere. They show up in news headlines like "Watch Out! Teens Online Are Risky Business." They also creep frequently into parents' nervous conversations as their kids stand at the precipice of adolescence. Dr. Ellen Galinsky, author of *The Breakthrough Years*, surveyed parents about words they would use to describe the teen or adolescent brain. Sadly, only 14 percent of parents used clearly positive words.[1] When popular media discusses the science of the teenage brain, it often tells a simple story that blames the brain for all the teen behaviors adults find challenging—especially risk-taking online and offline.

The tween and teen years *are* rocky, and risky behaviors *are* part of the picture. Adolescent brain science does help explain and normalize some of the ground-shifting changes and behaviors that confuse teens and parents alike. For example, we know that the prefrontal cortex is the brain's "orchestra conductor." The prefrontal cortex coordinates competing information and impulses from across the brain and helps people regulate their emotions. It is the brain's thoughtful decision-maker that helps humans engage in goal-directed behavior. And during

adolescence, it is also the site of major construction and renovation. But the teenage brain isn't broken, compromised, or injured. Instead, changes in the adolescent brain prime young people for learning and discovery.

Adolescence Is a Window of Opportunity

When I do workshops with young people, I often ask, "Is being a teenager really that different from being a little kid? Everyone wants to talk about adolescence, but is it really that different from being seven or eight years old?" Nearly all nod their heads up and down emphatically. I often follow up with, "How is it different? What feels different?"

"It's way harder," some say. Others report, "It's way better," "There's more pressure," or "There's more drama."

Every human takes a unique path from childhood to adulthood. But the words and experiences that young people share about this journey tend to be similar. It is an emotionally intense time full of contradictory feelings and impulses. On the one hand, adolescents are ready for independence. On the other hand, they are nervous about it. They feel confident and prepared. They also feel unsure and overwhelmed.

These descriptions make sense considering what is going on inside the brain during adolescence. The human brain develops in fits and starts —not in an even, steady, uniform way. That's because the brain is modular, meaning certain brain circuits and structures govern specific brain functions. As children grow up, certain areas have periods of intense activity and development, while others remain relatively quiet. Then the quiet structures begin to develop rapidly, while the previously active ones reach the end of their growth spurts.

Although growth spurts happen at every phase of development, early childhood and adolescence are two critical periods of rapid change across the brain. During the first few years of my children's lives, I could practically *see* my kids' brains growing. Going from totally dependent to walking and talking felt like a miracle. Spend any amount of time with a toddler or preschooler, and it's clear that their brains are constantly learning and changing.

Kids certainly learn and grow a lot in elementary school, but neurologically speaking, it's a relatively quiet period. That changes as they reach middle school. Just like the rapid change in early childhood, throughout adolescence the brain undergoes an extensive "overhaul and

upgrade."[2] It is a series of major construction zones. These construction zones are shaped by a few key developmental processes: blossoming, pruning, and myelination.

The first two developmental processes are paired. At the onset of a neural growth spurt, the area of the brain ready for intense growth starts to overproduce dendrites. Dendrites are the branches at the ends of the neurons (brain cells). During a growth spurt, these branches go through hypergrowth. This is called **blossoming**. After this overproduction of dendrites, experiences take over the process. Experiences cause certain neurons to fire, and as they fire, the branch connections bridging one neuron to another get stronger. The branches that don't fire shrink, wither, and eventually disappear. This is called **pruning**. Experience, therefore, prunes or sculpts the circuits of the brain. Experiences during neural growth spurts, more than at any other time, shape the brain's neural networks and have a huge impact on the brain's wiring.

The third developmental process is called **myelination**. Myelin is a fatty substance coating the axon (cable) of each neuron. Myelinated axons transmit chemical electrical signals quickly and efficiently. Signals sent along axons that are not insulated with myelin are slower and more susceptible to electrical interference. The contrast is stark. An electrical charge travels one hundred times faster on a myelinated neuron than on an unmyelinated one.

These developmental processes drive dramatic changes in the brain from age ten to twenty-five. Through myelination, the adolescent brain is getting faster and more efficient as neurons in the brain become more effective at communicating with each other. Meanwhile, accelerated blossoming and pruning help overhaul key brain regions. This is why many neuroscientists refer to adolescence as both a window of sensitivity and a window of opportunity. During this time, young people explore and learn from the world around them. They form a sense of identity, purpose, and contribution. They learn essential skills for adulthood, including healthy decision-making, emotional management, and relationship building. Changes in the brain prime young people for these essential tasks.

As the brain begins to undergo renovation during adolescence, changes don't always unfold evenly. Here's the catch: the emotional center of the brain goes under construction first, followed by the prefrontal cortex. The prefrontal cortex is responsible for planning, keeping goals and information in mind, managing big feelings, assessing risk, and making decisions. This means that newly supercharged

emotions can sometimes outpace the more deliberative and thoughtful prefrontal cortex. This is especially true during emotionally intense or stressful situations. Researchers often distinguish between so-called "hot" (high-stakes) and "cool" (low-stakes) executive function skills. Hot executive function skills often lag behind their cooler counterparts. This helps explain why young people are often more capable of thoughtful decision-making in lower-stakes environments than in emotionally charged ones.[3]

The order of brain renovation also accounts for some of the intense and bewildering behaviors associated with adolescence when emotions are running high. Parents often ask their kids, "What were you thinking?" to try to make sense of their actions. It's just as common for kids to stare back blankly, unable to explain their thought process. They *are* capable of thoughtful and reflective action. They *aren't* trying to be difficult. But they are still learning how to regulate their behavior in hot situations. This can be as confusing for them as it is for their parents.

The intensity of adolescent emotions can be overwhelming to teens and to the adults around them, but these emotions are not a liability. Dr. Galinsky explains that these strong emotional reactions have unique benefits. During this stage, kids are moving out into the world, where they will need to navigate complicated social dynamics without constant help from adults. This means that they need to be "highly sensitive to social and emotional situations."[4] According to Galinksy, strong emotional reactions position them to be the "emotional detectors" that they need to be to explore the world.

The Brain Gets Good at What It Does a Lot

The adolescent brain is primed for developmental leaps and growth, but too often adolescents' environments don't set them up for success. Teens today spend as much time online as they do offline. Eight and a half hours *a day* with entertainment media[5] is a lot of time. It's the equivalent of a full-time job.

Given how the brain grows and develops as shaped by experiences, it makes sense to pay attention to how adolescents' tech habits and activities shape their experiences while their brains are growing. What they're doing is reinforcing brain wiring for those activities. Conversely,

what they're *not* doing is weakening other circuits. This is true of all experiences young people have during this window of opportunity.

Experience is not the only driver of brain development. Genetics matter as well. If you have children who are biological siblings, you can see firsthand how kids who share a lot of DNA can differ from one another. For example, my first child slept like an angel. As a naive first-time parent, I assumed this was due to my exceptional parenting. My second child slept like a rabid raccoon—in other words, not at all. I learned quickly that kids' behaviors and personalities are shaped by a lot more than just the experiences they have. There is a lot of natural variation, or neurodiversity, in how kids' brains develop, function, and experience the world. Being a parent means embracing neurodiversity and all the ways it shows up in ourselves and our kids.

For example, a teenager with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) might find it a lot more challenging to focus their attention amidst digital distractions. That's partly due to their genetics, or hard wiring. That same teenager might also use tools to help them stay organized, turn off their phone while they do homework, and take activity breaks to improve attention and focus. These strategies and experiences are called their soft wiring. It's important not to over-attribute teens' behavior in either direction. Chalking up a challenge to genetics and a growing brain robs them of agency and opportunities for skill building. Likewise, overemphasizing experiences contributes to the harmful fallacy that all brain variations can or should be "fixed" with the right kind of practice. Adults should try to remember that a constant interplay between kids' genetics and experiences shapes how they show up in the world.

Nevertheless, environments and experiences are worth paying attention to. Neuroscientists often say that "the neurons that fire together wire together." That is: the more often neurons pass on an electrical charge from one cell to another, the stronger the connections between those neurons become. This is especially true while the brain is undergoing a growth spurt. A middle schooler playing a brand-new video game may frequently lose lives and strength. But after a few weeks, the moves feel automatic, and it is easier to advance through the game. Whether it is video games, math facts, music, empathy, managing feelings, impulse control, social communication, or sports, the brain gets good at what it does a lot.

Adolescents Aren't Unwise; They Are Developing Skills

Poor online decisions can be baffling to parents who have discussed internet safety tips with their kids. Many adults consistently share advice like "Think before you post," "Be aware of your digital footprint," and "Be kind online." Indeed, most young people can recite these phrases quickly and confidently. Many add an eye roll for emphasis.

Young people do get it. Today's adolescents have been raised with frequent warnings from parents and teachers about the risks they might encounter online and reminders of the long-term consequences of online missteps. Many could write a persuasive essay about online ethics and responsibility. Most young people use a variety of creative strategies to manage their online information and privacy.[6] But they are still learning.

Hamza, parent of an eighth grader, pulled me aside before a workshop at his daughter's school. "I just don't get it," he said. "We've talked about this over and over. She knows better!" He shared that his daughter had gotten pulled into an online conflict in a large group chat. The group chat started with light banter about an upcoming basketball game. It quickly devolved into hostility. A few kids left the chat, but many stayed on, including Hamza's daughter. It became increasingly hurtful and ended late at night with promises of a physical altercation the next day at school. Hamza found out about it when school staff reached out to address the conflict that was now playing out in the hallways.

Hamza's frustration may resonate with you. It's helpful to remember that challenges like this are less about kids knowing what to do and more about kids managing feelings and building the skills needed to navigate complicated social dynamics.

The Teenage Brain Is Built for Discovery

Risk-taking isn't a "bug" in development. It is an adaptive feature. And honestly, it's necessary. Increased motivation to explore and try new things—to take risks—positions teens to tackle the risky challenge of growing up.

If kids' brains were built to hang back, consider all worst-case scenarios, and wait for total certainty before trying something, they might never leave home. Leaning into risk is key to positive development. While parents tend to associate risk-taking with negative

outcomes, the UCLA Center for the Developing Adolescent simply defines risk as doing something when the outcome is uncertain.[7] Risk-taking looks like and leads to many and varied things. For a young person, standing up in front of class to screen a short film on relationship violence and pointing out racism in a Discord server are risky moves. They are also filled with potential for learning and growth.

INSIDE INSIGHTS

Hamza's daughter likely didn't engage in the group text because she analyzed it, weighed the pros and cons, and thoughtfully decided to participate. Intense and stressful situations like this put a lot of demand on hot executive function skills. The part of Hamza's daughter's brain that helps her slow things down and consider alternative actions is still developing. Strong emotions can quickly override the more thoughtful and deliberative prefrontal cortex in higher-stakes scenarios. With more practice, she will get better at managing her feelings and accessing her prefrontal cortex during situations like this. Once things cooled down, Hamza's daughter was probably able to identify helpful response strategies such as leaving the chat, changing the topic, or talking with an adult about physical threats. With adult support and opportunities for reflection, such challenging experiences are exactly where young people build the skills they need to navigate future dilemmas.

Growing up is full of uncertainty. The combination of a prefrontal cortex under construction and emotions in overdrive means that on balance, young people are motivated to forge ahead anyway. Indeed, research shows that teenagers do have a higher tolerance for ambiguity than adults have.[8] The brain is built for discovery—even in the face of uncertainty. The good news is that the brain also learns from its experiences.

"I will never forget what that felt like," a tenth grader named Liam shared with me.

"What *what* felt like?" I asked. I could tell that it wasn't a positive memory.

"It wasn't a huge deal," Liam went on. "But when I was in seventh grade, someone took a video of a kid crying in our class and shared it

online."

"Of you?" I asked, trying to clarify.

"No. Not of me. But sort of a friend. A class friend, anyway. It was free time, and everyone was just messing around, and things got rowdy. This kid stumbled into the edge of a table, and I think he for real hurt his leg. He went back to his table to get it together, but it was clear he was messed up about it. Instead of asking if he was okay, everyone just kinda laughed. I didn't do anything. I just sat there and let it happen."

"It makes sense that that isn't a pleasant memory," I agreed.

Liam said, "After school, I ended up talking it through with my dad. I eventually apologized to my friend for just sitting there. It ended up being fine overall, and the video didn't go far. But it was a while ago now, and I still feel awful every time I think of it."

I wouldn't wish the emotional intensity of that memory or the suffering of the crying classmate on anyone. But the clarity with which Liam recalled this incident illustrates how teenagers often learn powerful lessons through experience. With help from a caring adult to make sense of what happened and plan for next steps, the painful episode turned into a site of reflection and repair.

The teenage brain remembers such experiences more intensely than an adult's brain does. In the teen brain, there is more communication between the striatum (the reward center) and the hippocampus (the memory center). Elevated sensitivity to rewards also helps teens attend to new information. (More about this in chapter 2.) All this together means that adolescents are likely to form strong and specific memories as they get out and explore the world—even when they fail. Neuroscientist Dr. Laurence Steinberg argues that learning is more likely to stick during this developmental window.[9]

During adolescence, increased independence and exploration bring missteps and mistakes. These don't always have to be painful. Successes and failures alike give teens valuable information about themselves and how they want to show up in the world. This information ranges from more benign things, like what online influencers they want to follow, to more significant things, like whom they want to be in a relationship with. Avoiding missteps entirely isn't possible. But learning from them, something the teenage brain is good at, is key to healthy development.

Approaching Screen Time with the Adolescent Brain in Mind

The latest science supports the idea that adolescence is a time for exploration, learning, and discovery. This idea challenges the dominant model of adolescence as a time to be endured, policed, protected, and monitored as young people move through dangerous minefields. Wall-to-wall talk of online risk fills news coverage of teens and tech. It suggests that a vulnerable brain should not be let loose on the internet. That's why it's so tempting to respond to adolescents with a fear-based approach that shuts them out or locks them down. As parents, we've all had days when we are tempted to walk around our homes powering down devices and tossing phones, earbuds, and controllers out the window.

This approach isn't the worst idea—for babies. There is little evidence showing that babies under eighteen months benefit from screens (except for video chatting with loved ones).[10] As children get a little older, adults can easily protect them from risky content by creating safe and contained "digital playgrounds" for them. Time limits can be easier to draw for young children (though they're admittedly likely to spark tantrums) because the boundary between on and off is still relatively clear. Researchers call these kinds of time and content rules "restrictive mediation strategies."[11] Turning off the TV, approving only specific shows, or taking away the tablet can certainly reduce time on screens and thus risk exposure for younger children. That said, research indicates that young children benefit most when adults also use media *with* them and help them make sense of what they are viewing and doing.[12]

The need for an expanded parental toolkit intensifies during adolescence. The challenge is that parents are tempted to double down on restriction as their sense of control diminishes and digital risks escalate. But relying on restriction alone robs teens of the practice, learning, and discovery that their brains are built for. Here are a few reasons that restrictive strategies alone don't work well for tweens and teens.

Control Tends to Assume All Tech Is Toxic (It Isn't)

If technology only *harmed* young people, then relying more heavily on restriction would make more sense. Instead, as upcoming chapters explore, research shows that technology and gaming have divergent impacts on young people's mental health and well-being.[13] Depending

on the teen and their tech habits, digital activities may be protective or detrimental. Even the most vulnerable adolescents appear to be more sensitive to the negative sides of social media *and* gain more than their peers from the positive experiences they have on social media.[14] Especially for older adolescents, overly restricting them from all platforms might cut them off from much-needed support.

Control Isn't a Good Fit for the Teenage Brain

The teen brain is built to explore, engage, and learn. Clinging solely to restrictive strategies puts parents on a collision course with these developmental drives. It also doesn't work well. A review of the research demonstrates that the effectiveness of restrictive strategies declines with age and tends to backfire with older adolescents.[15] This doesn't mean that parents should hand kids a phone at age ten and say, "Good luck out there!" Setting clear and purposeful boundaries while gradually providing more opportunities for the independence and exploration adolescents crave is a better fit for their brains.

Control Doesn't Promote Skill Development

Finally, evidence shows that restriction alone can inadvertently make young people more vulnerable to the very risks adults are trying to protect them from. Even if parents hold off on phones or social media, young people *will* encounter online risks and challenges at some point. The question is whether they will have developed the skills to navigate them. In other words, how will they be able to deal effectively with online risks if they haven't had any practice?

Additionally, online interactions and challenges are often inextricably linked with offline ones.[16] For example, simply deleting an app doesn't help kids practice the skills they need to navigate the social conflict unfolding in the hallways of school. Setting a digital curfew doesn't mean that teens automatically have other healthy ways to deal with the anxiety that rears up at bedtime.

The skills that young people need to navigate these online and offline dilemmas are still developing. Left entirely to their own devices, adolescents are more vulnerable. Without coaching related to the complex realities they are negotiating, they lose opportunities to discover what they are capable of. Remember, the brain gets good at what it does a lot.

From Control to Connection

Given all of this, it makes sense that teens need adults to be more than just the on-off regulators of screen time. Purposeful boundaries really matter. This book dedicates a lot of time to the importance of screen-free time and spaces. But even if you hold off on phones and social media for as long as possible, teens still need you to engage, connect, coach, and communicate about their screen use.

A study of nearly four thousand adolescents and parents offers good information about what actually works when it comes to teens and screens.[17] Researchers used an online survey tool to recruit a national sample of English-speaking thirteen- to eighteen-year-olds similar in racial and ethnic makeup to the US adult population. This study was unique in a couple of ways. First, rather than looking only for *commonalities* among the participants in the study, the researchers also looked for key *differences* between subgroups of teens. This is helpful because a lot of screen-time research lumps all subjects together, which can mask important granular differences between groups.

In addition, instead of looking only for harms, the researchers were interested in the risks and benefits of technology use. In other words, they wanted not only to identify what was going *wrong* in the lives of some digitally connected youth; they also wanted to know what was going *right.* This is no small thing. When researchers focus on population averages and risk factors, they can overlook important insights about the strengths, skills, and protective factors that help teens thrive. Asking "What is going right?" in the lives of teens is just as important as asking "What is going wrong?"

What did this team of researchers find? The good news is that almost two-thirds of the teens in this study were doing well. This subset, called the "family engaged" group, had better health outcomes and higher well-being indicators. You might expect that this subgroup had limited screen time or strict rules. But that wasn't necessarily the case. Instead, when it came to parental involvement, here's what these teens tended to have in common:

- screen-time rules based on content and purpose, not just time
- positive parent-teen communication
- family devices and co-using media with parents

- lower parental social media use

The remaining one-third of young people in the study were not faring well in their health outcomes and well-being indicators. Their parents were heavy social media users and enforced few or no boundaries around screen use. Other studies have shown that parental screen use is a strong predictor of teens' screen use.[18] Teens seem to do better when their parents balance meaningful restrictions with healthy modeling and opportunities for communication, skill building, and shared decision-making. The wisdom emerging from a broad collection of studies on this topic says that active engagement in young people's media use as well as using media together helps protect kids from media-related risks.[19]

Discovery Takes Time, Patience, and Practice

"This weekend was amazing!" a colleague shared with me. "Last weekend? Not so much. It's a roller coaster."

"What do you mean?" I asked.

"My teen and I went to an event on Saturday with their favorite cosplay YouTubers. I wasn't sure if I would be doing more than playing chauffeur, but we ended up walking around together, and I was so blown away. There was so much creativity and community! I had no idea."

"And the weekend before?" I prompted.

"A living nightmare," she replied. "My kid was outraged that their digital curfew still stands for tenth grade and spent the entire weekend telling me what an awful parent I am."

"What a ride," I offered empathetically. "I've been there."

We've likely all been there! Finding the right balance of limits, connection, and coaching sounds good on paper. In practice, it can feel messy, foggy, and bumpy. During a negotiation over video games or a discussion about influencers and body image, it is easy to wonder, "Is this going to turn out okay?" It is especially overwhelming when teens hit major bumps on the road. Is it our job to protect them? Prepare them? The answer to these questions is a little frustrating: "It depends" and "Yes, both." For example, when it comes to cyberbullying or exposure to online hate content, parents should step in and work to protect young people. On the other hand, adolescents do need to learn how to navigate conflict with friends and how to solve digital dilemmas. Swooping in to

rescue them in these scenarios inadvertently makes them more vulnerable. This book walks through such complicated issues and unpacks the risks and opportunities of growing up in a world dominated by screens.

Tell Your Teen: We Are on the Same Team

"What is wrong with me?"

I asked myself this question often when I was a teenager. Some of my behavior was perplexing. During my adolescence, happiness sometimes turned to complete despair in a matter of seconds. These were abrupt changes, to say the least. They were likely disorienting to my parents on the outside—and they were confusing to me on the inside as well.

My mom's consistent, gentle response meant the world to me: "There is nothing wrong with you. We will figure this out together."

At the time, I didn't dry my tears and give my mom a warm and loving "Thank you." Instead, I often responded with a wail followed by an indignant "You don't understand!"

Yet on some deeper level, her quiet confidence was bedrock during a time of great upheaval. Growing up was exhilarating. It was also hard. I needed grownups around me who believed we could do hard things together, especially when I doubted myself.

Communicating to our teens that we are on the same team is an essential part of parenting in the digital age. Being on the same team doesn't mean being best online friends. It also doesn't mean taking over the role of their prefrontal cortex through control and restriction. Instead, it means stepping into their digital lives with care, connection, and coaching. We can set boundaries so our teens experience safety and support. We can also expand opportunities, build skills, and walk with our teens through mistakes. Perhaps most importantly, we can assure them that there is nothing wrong with them. Their brains aren't broken. Their brains are transforming. There is a lot to discover on the path ahead. Good thing their brains are built for it.

When it comes to digital media, parenting styles tend toward three main approaches: restrictive, balanced, and hands-off. To identify your style, choose the statements below that fit you best.

Overall:

A. I don't think anything good can come from technology.
B. I think there is a lot to learn and discover with technology—both positive and negative.
C. I am skeptical that anything that bad can happen online.

I think that:

A. The more time my teen spends away from technology, the better.
B. I want my teen to be able to balance technology use with other life experiences.
C. It's up to my kid to decide what they do online. I don't or can't get involved.

I believe:

A. Teens should be protected from digital media.
B. Many opportunities my teen can access online are valuable.
C. The risks and rewards of teen digital media use aren't important.

In our family:

A. Only my opinion about technology counts.
B. I ask questions, listen to my teen's opinions, and enjoy exploring technology together.
C. I defer to my teen's opinions and desires when it comes to their tech use.

In our home:

A. I've set rigid rules and strict enforcement with my teen around their tech use.
B. We have purposeful tech boundaries, consistent enforcement, and meaningful negotiation.
C. My kid is pretty much in charge of their tech use.

Review your choices and take note of patterns. Were most of your responses A's, B's, or C's? (A=restrictive, B=balanced, C=hands-off.) This exercise isn't meant to assign you a parenting style or judge your answers. It is designed to help you reflect on where you are and where you want to go as you consider moving toward a balanced approach to screen time.

Now, pause and think about these three questions: What did you learn or notice about yourself from this set of questions? What do you want to continue doing? What do you want to change?

IN ACTION: DIGITAL DECISION-MAKING

Scenario: Your middle schooler asks to create an online account for a new video game all their friends are playing. How should you respond?

Response: Teens do better when their parents balance meaningful restrictions with healthy modeling and opportunities for communication, skill building, and shared decision-making:

1. You are not comfortable with games that have explicit first-person violence, sexual violence, or racial or cultural stereotypes. Your middle schooler knows this because you have talked to them about why you think those stories and messages are harmful. You've agreed that these games are off-limits in your family. When your kid approaches you with a game request, remind them of the agreement and ask if there is anything you need to know about the game.
2. Ask your kid to take the lead on researching the game. Ask them to consider a few questions:
   - What is the game about?
   - Why do they want to play it?
   - Who will they play it with?
   - How do Common Sense Media and other sources review the game?
   - How would they stay safe while playing the game?
   - If it costs money, how would they contribute to or pay for it?
3. Keep a close eye on gameplay in the first two weeks. After that, watch your kid play now and then. Consider playing together, if your kid will have you! Ask who they are playing with, what they like about the game, and how they are getting better.



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