Teens and Tech: What Difference Does Family Structure Make?

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.

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.

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.

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.