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Teens and Technology: Taking a Step Back

Looking back, I believe our parents were right. I remember begging mine for a phone in middle school, wanting to be just like my other socially invested friends. My parents' hesitation, similar to many parents around the world, was an intuition that we all should have paid closer attention to. Researchers *have* been paying attention to it though, analyzing each move we make. Shelley Turkle, a clinical psychologist and professor at MIT, effectively illustrates the truth about modern technology in her article *The Empathy Diaries*. Her ideas follow a similar trend in what young people have been discovering recently: screens have actually impacted us in an unfavorable way. Peyton Perkins, a first year student at the University of New England, reflects on the deep integration of technology into daily life, portraying it as both a convenience and a dependency in her article, *Where Did We Go Wrong?* Similarly, Kaia Anderson who is also a first year student at the University of New England, argues in her article *Helping the Addict: A Call To Action*, that cooperation across generations to address technology addiction is greatly needed. Each author reveals a powerful perspective that exposes my generation's overdependence on technology. I believe teens must reduce personal technology use to rediscover their authentic selves, improve mental health, and build real social skills.

The overuse of personal technology, especially social media, has taken a noticeable toll on my mental health. I have seen its harmful effects reflected in the well-being and identities of those around me. In her article, Turkle thoughtfully examines how the mental health of both teens and their parents have been affected by technology. She states, "...children experimented with identity by building avatars... constant was the anxiety of adults around children and machines... They watched, unhappy, as children became lost in games and forgot about the people around them, preferring, at long stretches, the world's in the machine" (Turkle 346). In other words, adults' anxiety over children becoming absorbed in their

online identities is unfortunate for both sides, leading to misunderstandings. What I am trying to state is that both adults and children were clueless going into this technological boom. They did not know that many of those children growing up on personal devices now struggle to find purpose or direction without digital stimulation. Perkins continues this idea and provides insight from a college student's perspective. She claimed, "We are in a constant state of 'where is my phone?' Feeling uncomfortable in the elevator; check your phone. Nervous before an interview; check your phone. We want to access technology not necessarily because it is helpful, but because we have made it an extension of who we are" (Perkins). In other words, growing up surrounded by screens has affected us so deeply that functioning without them feels nearly impossible. It defines us, offers us comfort, and ultimately becomes a part of our identity. It is ironic to hear parents express skepticism, as Turkle notes, toward these online avatars, only for teenagers like Perkins to realize how unprepared they are for the real world without those online avatars. I went through a similar experience myself, feeling uneasy in the silence of the world without the constant comfort of my phone, in which we delve into those online avatars. It quickly became clear how deeply rooted the problem was, but with consistent practice, putting down my phone became less uncomfortable and ultimately brought me a sense of clarity. For those aiming to achieve similar clarity, learning to endure that initial discomfort is crucial. I believe that relying on social media to define ourselves holds us back both professionally and socially. To move forward with purpose and truly stand out, I know that we need to put down our phones, reconnect with ourselves, and rediscover what makes us unique.

As students, we can tell in the classrooms who the outliers are. The people who play games on their phone instead of paying attention to the lecture, or those who lack communication skills during group projects really stand out. Due to technology being let into classrooms, students lacking viable social skills grow exponentially. Anderson, a college student, argues "...kids my age don't know how to navigate the world and do things for themselves. The presence of technology has had negative effects on behavior, especially when it comes to attention span and engaging with others. However, these behavioral changes seem to be an adaptation to a constantly evolving technological world that prioritizes efficiency and speed over focus and in-person communication" (Anderson). Becoming accustomed to short videos, such as

TikTok and Instagram, makes sitting through lectures and reading slides much more difficult for Anderson and I's generation. I speak for much of my generation when saying that it is almost impossible to avoid this evolving technology as Anderson describes. It is fascinating to see the effects Anderson describes unfolding exactly as Turkle once predicted. In 2013, Turkle analyzed a middle school where the use of personal technology was rapidly increasing. Turkle highlights the perspective of a teacher at the school, who reflects, "It is a struggle to get children to talk to each other in class, to directly address each other. It is a struggle to get them to meet with faculty... These students seem to understand each other less" (Turkle 344). In other words, students' social skills continue to decline as they fail to practice them in school. Turkle clearly conveys to readers that we must reclaim meaningful conversation, but I've experienced that teachers have become increasingly hesitant to place my peers and I in awkward situations, having to talk to one another. That being said, I could have missed meaningful conversation because my teacher placed us all in front of screens too early. What I am trying to illustrate to readers is that reducing personal technology use in schools will be beneficial for all. Especially helping students learn to communicate effectively, stay present, and develop real-world social skills.

What would the world be like without our everyday screens? Is that even possible? I do not know if going back in time would be beneficial, but most claim to want that. Specifically, Perkins includes this feeling in her writing, conveying that she wishes to grow up in a different time. She reminisces,

Whenever I talk to my parents about their childhood... constantly riding their bikes and spending a majority of their time hanging out with friends in the great outdoors... parents grew up in the late 70s, it makes me realize how much technology has changed over the last 100 years. I wish I was born in the time period where I could grow up without getting into a fight with other girls by simply saying something like 'okay.' (Perkins)

Many, like Perkins, compare themselves to past generations by sharing stories of simpler times. I relate to this nostalgia, as I too hope to reconnect with others in the way my parents once did. Everything from friendships and relationships to casual encounters with strangers feels more genuine to me in the context

of screenless communication. The issue is that every day it gets harder to disconnect from our screens, the addiction and dependence on our personal technology keeps growing. Anderson affirms this statement, portraying technology as an inescapable grip, impacting everyday life. She states,

Even schoolwork is rapidly transitioning to becoming almost all digital. It is a rare occurrence if I have an assignment that is to be submitted on paper; written as opposed to typed. Other areas of our lives like shopping, even grocery shopping, can be done completely over apps. The list is growing ever longer by the day. Dating, meetings, reading, and writing are just a small list of things that have been greatly influenced by the increase of digitalization. So, of course we are all addicted and of course this issue isn't a simple fix. (Anderson)

Anderson powerfully illustrates how deeply our everyday lives are entangled with technology, exposing a dependence we often try to downplay. It's a difficult truth to accept, as much as we pretend otherwise, we truly rely on technology. Anderson's statement is a slap back to reality, in that Perkins' wish to reclaim the old ways may be nearly impossible to achieve because of how deeply we've brought technology into our lives. Although, my perspective is that our chances to reclaim these ways rely on our own efforts. While we may not be able to fully recreate the past, we can still choose every day to step away from the distractions that keep us disconnected. I firmly believe our phones hold us back from deeper engagement, making it all the more important to step away from them.

Humans need connection just as much as phones need charging. Society as a whole should be using each other to recharge, such as fostering the connections we make and creating personal growth. Turning to the wisdom of older generations, as Anderson suggests, aligns with Turkle's call for meaningful conversations. Perkins's reflections on the value of simpler times remind us that reclaiming a slower, more connected way of living is not out of reach, it just requires conscious effort. I urge readers to pursue a goal that prioritizes significant connections while reducing dependence on screens. If society comes together and starts practicing these lifestyle changes now, we have a chance to collectively reclaim our individuality, restore authenticity, and rediscover what it truly means to be human, even in the digital age.

Works Cited

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