

Smartphones Are Killing Kids

Preventing this attachment to screens is the most effective response to the teen mental health crisis. No one wants to acknowledge this.

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A [mental health crisis](#) has been raging among today’s teens, especially teenage girls. In a recent essay in the New York Times, writer Matt Richter explores this disturbing trend, focusing on the story of M, an otherwise bright girl with potential who eventually suffers from gender dysphoria, anxiety, depression, and self-harm.

M’s problems began at the end of elementary school and quickly worsened as she began middle school. One of her peers, Elaniv, experienced the same thing, and eventually committed suicide at 15 years old. Understandably worried by this, M’s parents tried all kinds of interventions, including medication and therapy, because as one psychologist puts it, “it’s life or death for these kids.”

It is a sad story and one that has become all too common. For all the apparent advantages enjoyed by young people today—they are safer, richer, and much more comfortable than previous generations—they seem to be the most miserable.

So what happened? Why are young people breaking down like this? For me as a teacher and anyone else who works with young people, it is quite simple: screens and social media. Kids are given a smartphone or tablet and they spend more and more time on it. They consume immoral and harmful content that warps their understanding of the world and encourages them to be self-destructive. Consequently, they retreat from everyone around them, suffer extreme loneliness, and increasingly become untethered from reality.

Somehow this explanation never seems to occur to anyone in Richter’s essay. The dots are fairly easy to connect: M gets a phone at 10, her school reports that she can’t focus in class, she starts using different pronouns, she names herself after an anime character who stabs men with scissors, she has frequent emotional meltdowns and starts cutting herself, and she continually complains about being lonely.

And yet, when Richter even bothers to address this argument, he seems to dismiss it altogether: “The [mental health] crisis [is often attributed to the rise of social media](#), but solid data on the issue is limited, the findings [are nuanced and often contradictory](#) and some adolescents appear to be more vulnerable than others to the effects of screen time.” In other words, the data on screens and social media are mixed, so it’s not worth considering.

It is difficult to know whether such [specious reasoning](#) is intentional or not. Either way, it is still an argument used by many people who defend kids having unrestricted access to screens. As such, it demands a thorough rebuttal.

Richter’s point that the science on social media and technology is “limited” and findings differ among individual users is just another way of saying that correlation doesn’t necessarily equal causation. Sure, problems started happening once M had a smartphone and started watching violent anime on it, but this doesn’t mean the smartphone caused the problems. After all, many other people have smartphones and also watch violent anime on them, and they’re not experiencing the same problems.

One does not need to infer from correlation, however, to conclude that the smartphone obviously caused M’s distress. The smartphone’s effects are clearly visible for everyone to see. This is where M gets her ideas and where she spends her time. If she didn’t have it, she wouldn’t know about adopting different gender identities, or violent anime characters, or cutting herself as relief. She would be [innocent](#).

Another major fallacy that draws Richter and others away from blaming the smartphone is found in the way they misdefine the problem as “mental health.” This label has come to cover everything from debilitating schizophrenia to a person feeling a little stressed one day. When pampered celebrities from [Prince Harry](#) to [Will Smith](#) talk about their mental health, it is almost impossible to understand what they even mean. Applying this term to teens committing suicide and experiencing nervous breakdowns only obscures the issue.

Rather, what M and so many of her peers are experiencing could be better described as “screen addiction” and “consuming inappropriate content.” Sure, her poor mental health is a consequence of these two problems, but the nature of her struggle and the potential remedy is directly tied to her screen usage.

Finally, the inclusion of irrelevant statistics and useless testimonies from various “experts” all detract from the matter at hand. As if to justify the grim reality of mass dysfunction, Dr. Candice Odgers remarks, “By many markers, kids are doing fantastic and thriving. But there are these really important trends in anxiety, depression and suicide that stop us in our tracks.”

So what is worse? More teens drinking, smoking, taking drugs, and potentially getting pregnant, or more teens binging on social media, having nervous breakdowns, taking prescription drugs, and potentially committing suicide?

If people have to choose—and it isn’t clear whether this *is* a choice, since this point isn’t explored—most should choose the former situation. In a screen-free setting, kids can enjoy far more freedom and parents can intervene much more easily if something happens. In a screen-saturated setting, kids are compulsively brainwashing themselves while parents look on helplessly.

At this point, it's a very steep hill to climb for M and other kids in the same situation. The parents cannot simply take away the smartphone. This could in fact [create intense trauma](#) for her and likely push her over the edge. Already the mere criticism of "M's pronouns and heavy screen use" from M's grandparents makes her mother Linda feel "judged."

Thus, some sensitivity and patience is in order when confronting the source of the problem, and to Richter's credit, he does make this point in his essay. But a slow and steady weaning off the screen is the only way to recovery, however difficult it is to address a teenager's attachment to her device.

Of course, [preventing this attachment in the first place](#) is the most effective response to the mental health crisis affecting teens. No one wants to acknowledge this. Most parents are attached to their smartphones too. But the sooner they do acknowledge this, the better off they and their children will be. After all is said and done, so much of our collective "mental health," along with everything else that makes life worth living, depends on putting the screen away.

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