

## Smartphones, Social Media, and Video Games

- Some of what she has to say is an oversimplification but that is my only negative
- She's research driven and intelligent
- I think student pastors, teachers, and parents need to read this book if only to have it be a part of the conversation
- She is agreeing with Anxious Generation (Haidt) that smartphones and social media are causing anxiety and depression
- What's new?
  - **"Screen time trap"** - "These parents weigh the costs and the benefits of giving their child a smartphone or social media access. They are led to believe that they can sufficiently mitigate any costs to their child while reaping all the benefits."
  - "Digital technologies need not be an inevitable part of childhood... embrace the kind of life you already want for your kids"
  - Society wide experiment

She says that moderation isn't an option... but why?

### Oxytocin versus Dopamine

"We can't get oxytocin through a screen. Friendships built on dopamine instead of oxytocin are shallow. So kids feel lonely. That loneliness is compounded by feelings of isolation and being left out."

"When we examine smartphones and social media apps, it's clear they are designed to undermine any impulse control or effort to use them in moderation. In fact, the effect they produce in the brain resembles the most addictive drugs, like cocaine."

"Dopamine doesn't create satisfaction or lasting pleasure; it only produces "wanting" so that we will repeat that action."

- “there are a thousand people on the other side of the screen whose job it is to break down the self-regulation you have”

“Any app with a reward component or social networking aspect like messaging features - and this includes online games - will have this compulsive effect from dopamine. Whether kids spend fifteen minutes or an hour in the virtual world, kids carry it with them long after they leave the apps”

“For 80% of those with a diagnosed psychiatric disorder, such as ADHD, an autism spectrum disorder, or a tic disorder, taking the screens away reduced symptoms by at least 50%. And for many patients without any underlying condition, their symptoms (including tantrums and poor focus) entirely disappeared.”

“We’re losing our capacity to delay gratification, solve problems, and deal with frustration and pain in its many different forms.”

“They also cause them to lose their appetite for things of the real world”

“Hyperstimulating triggers, like social media, that lead to unnaturally high levels of dopamine release, thus damage the brain’s dopamine reward system and leave it unresponsive to natural sources of pleasure.”

“Blaise Pascal once said that all of humanity’s problems stem from man’s inability to sit quietly in a room alone”

## STEP ONE: Fast - Screen Detox

- **FEAST** to explain five necessary commitments—
  - Find other families;
  - Explain, educate, and exemplify;
  - Adopt alternatives;
  - Set up digital accountability and family screen rules; and
  - Trade screens for real-life responsibilities and pursuits.

## Schools

## Laws

## Social Media

- Restrict Social Media out of Childhood
- Parental Consent for Social Media
- Ban Social Media for Minors
- Device-Level Verification and Consent

## Pornography

- Age Verification for Adult Websites
- Automatic Device Filters
- Cleaning up Social Media
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### Peers Can Be Predators

Privacy settings and parental supervision tools especially fall short when predators are peers. Even if a child's account is set to private, it doesn't keep out the predators who are their "friends."

Apart from the combination of a youthful sex drive and an underdeveloped frontal lobe, boys are easily persuaded to send images to a supposed-teen girl because sending nudes to peers has become normalized for teens today. Kids don't identify it as exploitation. As Bill explained to me, "They think it's just a boyfriend or a girlfriend or a friend that's joking around." This is why boys like Walker so easily fall into sextortion schemes.

My conversation with Bill led me to look further into the data on peer-to-peer exploitation. He wasn't exaggerating. I found that teens are using their smartphones to produce their own porn and distribute it to one another at alarming rates.<sup>7</sup>

At North Penn High School in Pennsylvania, explicit images of teen girls "were uploaded alongside, in some cases, girls' names. . . . The photos and videos were apparently first shared with only one person, sometimes through social media apps like Snapchat, before being saved and uploaded to the Dropbox, according to students."<sup>8</sup> This high school isn't unique.

One college student I spoke with told me that boys in his high school regularly swapped nude pictures of girls from their school and neighboring high schools. Before meeting a girl at a party, odds were, they had already seen her naked.

### External Controls Are Limited

Parental controls can help to some extent in protecting children from the exchange of nude images. Apple has a built-in nudity

detection tool that parents can enable to detect nude images in incoming or outgoing messages, and when nudity is detected, the photo is blurred and the child is given the option to message a trusted adult.<sup>9</sup> And now Apple's iOS 18 "will require that the Screen Time passcode for the Family Sharing group be entered on the child's device in order to view or send a sensitive image."<sup>10</sup>

External parental control software can also help parents monitor or block dangerous material. For example, Bark monitors a child's texts, emails, web browser activity, and some apps using its AI technology and sends the parent alerts if it detects explicit images or other unsafe content, like cyberbullying, violence, or drug/alcohol content.<sup>11</sup> Another software called Canopy also uses AI to detect nudity in web browsers or photos taken on or downloaded to a device, blocks out explicit content in real time, and prevents a child from accessing or sharing a potentially risky photo until it's reviewed by the parent.<sup>12</sup>

But some of the most common places that illicit photos and other dangerous content are shared or viewed, like Snapchat, TikTok, and Discord, all block third-party controls, or in the case of Instagram, block their access to messages.<sup>13</sup> Parents are flying blind when it comes to social media.

One mom lamented to me, "I hoped that getting a parental app would kind of solve all my problems, and it really doesn't. It just gives me a little more information about where they're spending their time online and not necessarily what they're doing on those apps."

### Porn Filters Fall Short

Most parents are aware of the dangers of online pornography, so they set up filters to block it on their children's devices, on

Porn!

what?

or effective or fixing bugs in them once found, but even worse, their own products are promoting material that is inappropriate for children.

Alyssa, the mom we met from Utah, said she noticed that whenever she opens the Apple App Store for her ten-year-old, it tells him that his must-have apps are Tinder, TikTok, Hinge, and Bumble. She has her child's device set up to allow him to have only apps rated nine-plus.

And scarily enough, it's working. According to one study, a quarter of pre-teen boys say they've been on a dating app. Yes, you read that correctly. One in four nine- to twelve-year-old boys reported they've been on an online dating app.<sup>32</sup>

Inappropriate ads aren't confined to app stores. Parents also say ads promoting sexual content are showing up *inside* apps intended for children.<sup>33</sup> It doesn't matter if a parent uses the device's parental control settings to restrict available apps to a certain age rating if inappropriate ads can be shown in any app. Even parents who pay for the ad-free version of gaming apps rated twelve-plus have been alarmed to see their children prompted to view mature or explicit ads in order to earn more tokens or points in the game.<sup>34</sup> What child can resist clicking yes to earn more tokens?

### Thrust into an Adult World Without Adults

A parent used to be able to poke their head into the basement or step outside to check on what their kid was doing with friends. They didn't need to monitor a child's behavior constantly, but they could keep an eye out, and there was an expectation on the child's part of accountability, knowing that

# Adult Content

Mom or Dad was nearby and could pop in at any minute. Not so in the online world.

Miriam Cates, a former member of Parliament in the UK, has been a champion of online safety legislation. She tried to paint a picture of the dire reality of the online world in a speech she gave to Parliament: "Imagine if our streets were so lawless that it was unsafe for children to leave their homes. Imagine if, on their daily walk to school, our children had to witness the beheading of strangers or the violent rape of women and girls. Imagine if, when hanging out in the local park, it was normal for hundreds of people to accost our child and encourage them to take their own life. Imagine if it was a daily occurrence for our children to be propositioned for sex or blackmailed into stripping for strangers. Imagine if every mistake that our child made was advertised on public billboards, so that everyone could laugh and mock until the shame made life not worth living. This is not a horror movie or some imaginary wild west; this is the digital world that our children occupy, often for hours a day."<sup>35</sup>

Without real parental control over smartphones and social media, children are thrust into a virtual adult world without any adults to guide them or look out for them there. And they don't know how to handle it. How could they? They're children.

One frustrated mom, Kathleen Linder, got tired of hearing that parental controls are an effective way to protect kids on social media, so she wrote a letter to the editor in *The Wall Street Journal* to push back on this argument. She explained how she'd tried parental controls, which didn't work, and

myth. From the age of twelve, his video game use only kept getting worse, to the point where at age eighteen he dropped out of college because video games had destroyed his life and he couldn't function or live on his own as an adult.<sup>4</sup>

These screen-induced problems that start in childhood don't go away on their own. And they lead to the exact opposite of what parents hope for their grown children.

Adam, now free of his addiction, thanks to going through a total screen detox program known as boot camp when he joined the U.S. Army, encourages his mom to tell other parents that they have to (figuratively speaking) rip the screens out of kids' hands.<sup>5</sup> There is no pulling the Band-Aid off slowly. A total detox is needed to get the screens out of kids' systems.

Dr. Victoria Duncley, whose work we looked at in chapter 1, confirms this. After helping more than five hundred children, teens, and young adults detox from screens to address the overstimulation and hyperarousal of the nervous system characterizing their symptoms, she shares that "even small amounts of gaming or computer play often renders the Reset useless." The reset program she outlines in her book has parents eliminate *all* interactive screen time, no exceptions.<sup>6</sup>

After learning from her own experience with her son Adam, Melanic founded an organization called ScreenStrong and now has a second career in helping other families deliver their children from the destructive virtual world back into the real world. Melanic and ScreenStrong walk parents through how to detox their children from screens and set up a family lifestyle without addictive screen technologies.<sup>7</sup> They give parents a playbook for a thirty-day digital detox. Both Dr. Duncley's and ScreenStrong's detox plans start with a set of ground rules.

## Detox Ground Rules

A few basic rules make up a digital detox:

- no video games
- no iPads or other tablets
- no smartphones
- no social media
- no TV (except for family movies)
- school screens for homework only

In sum, a digital detox means total abstinence from addictive screen technologies (social media, smartphones, video games, tablets) and extremely minimal use of other screens (TVs and computers).

## Prepare

Before you dive into a detox, you should first prepare yourself, your spouse, a plan, and your house and family.

## Yourself

The first step is preparing yourself as a parent. To make a detox successful, parents should educate themselves on the harms of screens to shore up their resolve and to help them