

Kids' Screen Myths and Facts

(plus guidance about the lives kids need)

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Myths About Emotional Health, Family, & Screens

Myth: Smartphones, social media, & video games make kids happy.

FACT: Studies consistently show that the more time kids spend with screens the less happy they tend to be.¹ And the more time kids—especially teen girls—spend with social media or smartphones and other digital devices the more likely they are to be depressed or have suicide-related behaviors such as cutting.²

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: The two most important connections that support kids' emotional well-being have nothing to do with technology, and instead are their connections with family and school.³ And helping kids form ties with family and school is best accomplished away from the distractions of screens and phones.

Myth: Giving kids devices fosters their connection with family.

FACT: Research shows that the more time kids spend on the internet the less time they have with their parents,⁴ likewise, the more time kids spend playing on the computer or watching TV the less attached they are to their parents.⁵

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: Children's and teens' attachment (or bond) with their parents and other loving caregivers is the single most important environmental factor driving their happiness and success.⁶ Building such connections is best accomplished while engaging in “old-school” activities such as a walk or meal shared together—preferably when distracting devices are put away.

Myth: Giving kids smartphones encourages their independence.

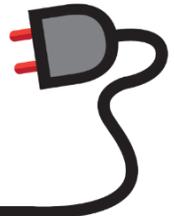
FACT: Kids' smartphone use is connected with lower academic performance⁷ and more emotional struggles⁸—two problems which hurt kids' ability to gain independence.

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: Ironically, kids gain the ability to think and act for themselves by having a close bond with family. This gives them the self-confidence they need to take independent actions, such as trying a new activity or getting a volunteer job.

Myth: Preteens and teens should be given free rein with smartphones in order to foster their peer relationships.

FACT: Sure, it's great if kids have friends. But even preteens and teens need a close connection with family to be emotionally healthy.⁹ Unfortunately, the obsessive smartphone use of preteens and teens is pulling them away from the family connections they need.

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: We help kids by pushing back the age when they get smartphones for as long as possible. And, when kids do get phones, strong limits are needed. This helps promote kids' connections with family and other caring adults, such as teachers, which are vital to their well-being.



Myths About School Success & Screens

Myth: Giving kids phones or computers improves their school success.

FACT: Unfortunately, kids tend to use computers, phones, and other digital devices primarily for entertainment, not learning purposes.¹⁰ So, it's not surprising that the more time kids spend using screens or phones—including computers, the internet, TV, video games, social media, or texting—the lower their academics grades.¹¹ In fact, after about 30-45 minutes of total screen and texting time per day, kids grades start to suffer.¹² High-school age kids who spend 4 or more hours with screens per day have grades that are a full grade point lower, e.g., A- to a B-, than kids who spend 30 minutes or less per day with screens.

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: Children's engagement with reading and books is a powerful predictor of their school success,¹³ so expose kids to books early and often. And, as kids get older, help them study away from the distractions of computers, screens, and phones. If kids need to use computers for school, help them stay on track by having kids use them in a common area rather than their room.

Myth: Allowing kids to use smartphones during the school day promotes their academic success.

FACT: Students in high school who are allowed to use phones during the school day tend to receive lower test scores than students who aren't allowed to use phones during the school day.¹⁴

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: Many private schools, recognizing the profound distraction of smartphones, don't allow students to have phones out during the school day. And, with an increasing number of public schools acknowledging that smartphones hurt kids' ability to focus, many public-school students are also now required to not use phones during the school day.¹⁵

Myth: Kids generally learn better using technology than “old-school” methods such as paper and pencil.

FACT: While many claim that immersing kids in technology improves educational outcomes, most objective studies show that technology either has no effect, hurts kids' learning success, or that limited tech use has better outcomes than tech immersion.¹⁶

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: Many “old-school” learning methods help kids learn better than electronic devices. For example, evidence shows that print books teach kids to read, and read better, than the electronic versions.¹⁷ Limited use of certain technologies for older children, e.g., teaching a coding class in high school, makes more sense.

Myth: Boys' long hours spent playing video games helps them become successful.

FACT: Boys' greater use of video games, as compared with girls, is hurting their chances of being successful, as evidence shows it contributes to boys' much lower rates of college admission (as boys game more than girls¹⁸ and gaming hurts academic performance¹⁹). In fact, this generation of boys is struggling to make it to college: a full 56% of college admissions are granted to young women compared with only 44% to young men.²⁰ And the National Bureau of Economic Research shows that many young men are choosing to play video games rather than join the workforce.²¹

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: We need a concerted effort to engage boys in the learning skills that colleges use to gauge admission—including the ability to read, write, and solve math problems. Essentially, parents should do all they can to limit boys' engagement with gaming, which is distracting them from acquiring the skills they need for their future.

Myths About Digital-Age Success, the Digital Divide, & Screens

Myth: For kids who want to grow up to work in the high-tech field, it's best to turn them loose with their devices.

FACT: Kids have a much better chance of becoming a computer programmer or joining other high-tech disciplines if they obtain a college or advanced degree.²² And to obtain such degrees, kids will need to do well in high school, which is best accomplished when parents set strong limits on kids' screens and devices which tend to distract from school success.²³

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: To help kids obtain a college degree that kids often need to work in the high-tech field, parents will want to help their kids do the hard work of learning the reading, writing, and math skills that colleges use to decide upon admission.

Myth: A harmful digital divide exists because less advantaged kids don't have the same tech access as more advantaged kids.

FACT: Less advantaged kids now have about the same access to technology as more advantaged children, and it hasn't helped close income and racial achievement disparities.²⁴ In truth, it's increasingly recognized that the truly harmful digital divide is the one describing the greater entertainment screen and phone use of low-income and black children as compared with higher-income and white kids.²⁵ I believe this to be a powerful factor for the lower levels of academic achievement in less advantaged as compared to more advantaged children.

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: Less advantaged children need opportunities to learn important school skills away from the distractions of screens and phones.

Myths About Addiction, Parenting, & Screens

Myth: Technologies such as video games, social media, and smartphones aren't addictive.

FACT: The world is waking up to the addictive potential of certain technologies, e.g., China, Japan, and South Korea consider internet and gaming addictions as an actual psychiatric diagnosis. And the World Health Organization recently named *Gaming Disorder* as an official diagnosis, putting it in the category of “disorders due to addictive behaviors.”²⁶

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: It's vital that we recognize children are highly susceptible to device addictions, and therefore need to be protected from early exposure to video games, social media, and smartphones.

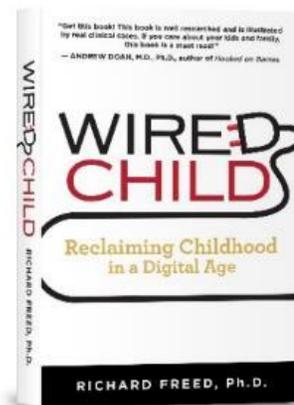
Myth: Kids can learn to set their own screen and phone limits.

FACT: Children and teens don't have the brain development or ability to limit themselves from the seductive power of today's technologies.

WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: While admittedly challenging for parents, setting limits on kids' media has been shown to have powerful positive effects, such as improving kids' school performance and sleep.²⁷

Myth: The happiest children and teens are those whose parents turn them loose with tech.

FACT: Research shows that the happiest, healthiest, most successful children and teens are raised with *authoritative parenting*,²⁸ which involves parents being *highly responsive* (engaged, loving) and *highly demanding* (setting high expectations and limits to back those up). For parents to be highly responsive and demanding is best achieved when families set strong limits on kids' screens.



WHAT KIDS REALLY NEED: Interestingly, leading tech executives appear to provide their own children the benefits of authoritative parenting. Steve Jobs is on record as strongly limiting his kids' access to technology and instead emphasizing family activities such as dinners.²⁹ Likewise, Bill and Melinda Gates pushed back the age when their kids got smartphones until 14, and otherwise set strong limits on their kids' use of screens.³⁰

For more information, visit RichardFreed.com

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