ARE THE KIDS ALRIGHT?

HOW TEENS ARE STRUGGLING WITH LOSS AND THE LIMITS OF LIVING ONLINE

CHILD MIND® INSTITUTE

California Partners PROJECT

MATERIAL+

CONTENTS

GENERATION SCREEN
Our research draws on in-depth interviews with 46 teens aged 14–17 from across California (including 14 with a diagnosed mental health condition), and week-long diary entries recording activities and mood from the teens and their parents.

Social Isolation and Screen Saturation

UNDERSTANDING ADOLESCENTS' LOSS AND HOW THEY ARE COPING

Jennifer Siebel Newsom   **Lisa Ling**

In Alameda County, a teen helps her younger sister with homeschooling as her dad looks for work. In Sonoma County, an athlete wonders if he can still get a college basketball scholarship without a high school season. In Orange County, a girl simply misses her friends. These real-life accounts, shared in the California Partners Project's latest report, *Are the Kids Alright? How Teens are Struggling with Loss and the Limits of Living Online*, reveal just how much California's teens have lost while sheltering in place.

The pandemic has also turned up the heat on a simmering problem: devices fill the space that used to be occupied with laughter and the general excitement of youth. As these adolescents fall asleep with their phones under their pillows, tragically their sadness, anxiety, and despair are mounting – as is their dependence on the devices themselves.

As working moms – First Partner and mother-of-four Jennifer Siebel Newsom and journalist and mother-of-two Lisa Ling – we have our own stories of life in quarantine. While we're grateful for the technology that

connects our kids to school and friends, we're dealing with the consequences. There's the exposure to inappropriate content on TikTok, the near-obsession with video games, the emotional breakdowns when they have to give up their devices, and the physical inertia from sitting in one place for so long. We also understand that kids and families across our state are experiencing this moment in vastly different ways. And for many families, screen overload is a less urgent worry than the economic and health concerns brought on, or exacerbated by, the pandemic.

At the same time, our hearts ache for all kids whose lives have suddenly been forced online. As a cultural-change documentarian and an investigative journalist, we're outraged that California's families find themselves in this position when there are still so many unanswered questions about the risks technology may pose to kids' brain health and bodies. The teens in our diaries named social media as a reliable mood booster – but also one of the top culprits for their feeling down. They rely too much on it, and that can be detrimental in ways their ever-plastic brains aren't developed enough to manage. As one boy told us, "My use of social media is to numb my feeling, not feel something else." We simply can't leave the fate of their well-being up to devices, apps, games, and social media.

Well before the pandemic, troubling national statistics were climbing at the same pace as teens' use of smartphones – or, more accurately, palm-sized supercomputers. For the past decade, we've seen alarming increases in diagnoses, Problematic Internet Use, gaming addiction, other behavioral issues, and even youth suicide. Now we're learning from documentaries like Netflix's *The Social Dilemma* how much Big Tech intentionally manipulates our attention. If we adults feel powerless against these techniques, our kids are even more vulnerable.

Our partners at the Child Mind Institute have helped us to understand sleep and exercise as pillars of teens' well-being. The daily diaries teens and parents logged for our report show that device use is a true sleep disrupter, and exercise is unfortunately way down as a result of the pandemic. In order to solve for this, we must first acknowledge that our teens are being assaulted by both social media and devices.

WHEN ASKED "HOW DID YOU FEEL WHILE SPENDING TIME ON SOCIAL MEDIA TODAY?" A TEEN RESPONDED:

DAY 1: *"Fine because I only used it to communicate with friends/ family rather than looking at peoples' posts."*

DAY 2: *"Most times I felt okay, but I wasn't feeling great today and communicating with people and watching TikToks did not help."*

DAY 4: *"Often, I checked it for no reason and I would be disappointed every time nothing had changed when I clicked on the apps."*

DAY 5: *"I felt okay but when I was away from my phone, or did not have internet or service connection, I felt anxious as if I was missing something."*

As moms, we know that many of us blame ourselves for the daily struggles our kids are experiencing, so we want to call attention to practical recommendations for parents, caregivers, teachers, and other adults in kids' lives in our report, *Are the Kids Alright?* Included are tips to support kids right now, such as helping them recognize the warning signs of too much time online and ways to check in about their feelings and moods.

Finally, we see this report as a call to action for tech manufacturers. And we believe California has not just an opportunity, but a moral obligation, to lead the nation on these issues. Given the real world's dependence on the virtual world, the tech industry must take responsibility for its impact.

We're inspired by the young voices on these pages of kids who are doing their best to adjust to tough circumstances. And we owe it to them to act now – before it's too late. There is too much at stake, and we can't afford to lose a generation to the mental, emotional, and physical health pitfalls of too much time spent on social media and video games.

Jennifer Siebel Newsom, *First Partner, State of California and Co-Founder, California Partners Project*

Lisa Ling, *Journalist and California Partners Project, Board of Directors*

Teen Mental Health

AND SOCIAL EXPERIENCE DURING THE PANDEMIC
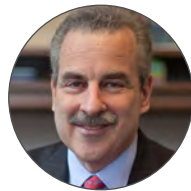
Dr. Harold Koplewicz, MD, Child Mind Institute

The coronavirus pandemic comes with a host of stressors that we have all had to learn how to live with: incredible loss of life, impossible compromises, isolation, fear, and anxiety. But it has been clear from the beginning that our teens, by virtue of their developmental stage and the specifics of life in the pandemic, are going through something unique.

Time passes differently for teenagers. If time feels more precious to them, that's because in many ways, it is. The developing brain in adolescence is not geared towards future planning and reflection – it's about the present moment and heightened experience.

They are more likely to take drastic actions to address their feelings – whether it's spending all night online, picking up a drink, or even making a suicide attempt. They are more likely to pick up bad habits or develop mental health symptoms because of the plasticity of the brain during development.

The hyperresponsiveness of the teen brain extends to their social experience. That's why peer pressure works during regular times – and why they respond so dramatically to social distancing. They are learning about the kind of person they are and developing social skills, values, and talents. Spending time with peers is critical to this development.

All of these factors make up the unique experience of teenagers during the coronavirus pandemic, which is what the study from the California Partners Project set out to understand. The teens who participated in the study give a poignant and perceptive window into their experience. A 16-year-old girl says she misses seeing classmates in the hallway and notes it's important to have passing acquaintances. Why? "Because you learn how to speak to different people in different ways."

From my perspective as a child and adolescent psychiatrist, the biggest takeaways of this study are:

- Our teens' feelings of loss for their social lives are real, deep, and significant
- Adolescents are very aware that they are missing a key phase of identity development
- Seeking to meet their social needs, they have turned to social media
- The "all-online, all-the-time" world of the pandemic means that parents and caregivers are more distracted themselves and less likely to accurately assess teen behavior

> **In the absence of the friends, sports, and other in-person activities that normally filled their days before the coronavirus, the thing we heard about most frequently was a deep reliance on social media and gaming.**

In the absence of the friends, sports, and other in-person activities that normally filled their days before the coronavirus, the thing we heard about most frequently was a deep reliance on social media and gaming. While these can be excellent ways to feel connected to friends, the teens told us their time online wasn't always helpful. They would scroll mindlessly out of boredom – long past the point of enjoyment – and at the expense of sleep and physical activity, two things that we know are essential to staying mentally and physically healthy. They knew the coping mechanism wasn't working for them, but they didn't have a better alternative.

As this report notes, several participants used the word "addicted" to talk about their app use. And they rationalize their behavior: "I know it's bad, but everyone's doing it." This should illustrate for parents how critical

it is for teens to be able to depend on them as role models, as protectors, and as trusted confidants during this unprecedented time. This report has several valuable suggestions for how parents, teachers, and other concerned adults can step up and help teens navigate this present and the uncertain future:

• Acknowledge what has been taken away
• Don't blame teens for their coping mechanisms
• Know the signs of depression and anxiety
• Be aware of the behavior you are modelling

We shouldn't blame kids for their time spent online – who hasn't scrolled longer than what was good for them? – but we can try to help them become more mindful users of technology. We can model better tech usage for our children. We can help them become more attuned to how they are feeling and how their activities directly affect their thoughts and emotions. We can recognize that our children are looking for ways to build their identities and shore up their self-esteem, and we can offer support.

> **The most important recommendation in these pages is this: "We need to help ourselves and our teens recognize the warning signs and consciously choose healthier alternatives."**

The most important recommendation in these pages is this: "We need to help ourselves and our teens recognize the warning signs and consciously choose healthier alternatives."

Accompanying this report is a toolkit with ideas for parents and teens on how to set healthy boundaries and prioritize wellness. I hope the advice will serve you well during the pandemic and long after it is over.

As a final note, I was heartened to learn that several of the teens in the study who had been diagnosed with a mental health disorder were able to fall back on the techniques they learned in therapy and found they were well prepared to cope with the challenges presented by COVID-19. Treatment can truly be transformative in the lives of children. If you think your teen might need extra support during this time, please don't be afraid to reach out for help.

THE COVID-19 CONTEXT

In March 2020, schools across California and the nation abruptly closed in response to COVID-19 and shelter-in-place requirements. Since that time, the lives of adolescents have been disrupted and reshaped in rapid and unprecedented ways. The internet and electronic devices emerged as the platforms where social, educational, professional, and developmental activities take place.

Even before COVID-19 struck, 95% of teens had access to a smartphone device and typically spent multiple hours a day on a screen[1]. The fallout from a global pandemic has highlighted the extent to which online existence is embedded and enmeshed with teens' experiences IRL.

Parents know that the daily rhythms of life have altered in unimaginable ways for adolescents in California. Our study aims to help caregivers, educators, and adolescents themselves understand what is happening beneath the surface so they can support and navigate the healthiest possible response and adaptations to the loss and changes of the COVID-19 era.

While surveys from organizations as varied as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), Common Sense Media, and the 4-H[2], among others, have demonstrated the general impact of COVID-19 on adolescents, this study explores more deeply, in conversation directly with teens, how they are coping with the disruptions, disappointments, and deficits they continue to face seven months into an altered reality. Guided by

> Our study aims to help caregivers, educators, and adolescents themselves understand what is happening beneath the surface, so they can support and navigate the healthiest possible response and adaptations to the loss and changes of the COVID-19 era.

mental health experts at the Child Mind Institute and researchers at Material, this study explores how teens are coping under COVID-19 restrictions and the impact of increased technology dependence on their mental health and general well-being.

The emerging field of Problematic Internet Use and digital addiction remains under-researched and worthy of increased attention in the United States. The World Health Organization (WHO) has been convening experts since 2014 to examine the global health implications of excessive use of electronic devices. In 2018, the WHO led the way in recognizing gaming disorder, evidenced by addictive behaviors, in its International Classification of Diseases.

This year, scholars suggest it is important for pediatricians to under-

stand how to screen their patients for Problematic Internet Use with a screening tool that broadly categorizes concerning behavior in three ways: Social Impairment, Emotional Impairment, and Risky/Impulsive Internet use.[3] The screening tool, the Problematic and Risky Internet Use Screening Scale (PRIUSS), may comprise some behaviors that parents are all too familiar with now that teens spend such a large percentage of their waking hours on digital devices.

The unprecedented nature of this time, including remote learning and the necessity of technology and virtual connectivity for teens to complete their schoolwork, make it critical that parents, educators, and policymakers understand how teens are coping with these uncharted realities.

THE TEENS IN THE STUDY

Our findings are based on in-depth interviews between researchers and 46 teens, ages 14–17 who currently live in California, and complemented by diary responses from these teens documenting daily behaviors such as sleep, exercise, internet use, and corresponding mood.

Of the teens we spoke to, 39% self-report as White, 15% as Black, 10% as LatinX, 18% as Asian, and 18% as mixed race. They live in 11 counties throughout California in both suburban and metropolitan areas.

Emphasis was placed on recruiting participants who met a wide range of criteria, including varied household size and financial income, race and ethnicity, gender identity, and location. Although we were unable to match every metric to reflect the population of California, we aimed to capture the diversity of experiences of today's teens.

> There may be a connection between teens with diagnosed mental health challenges and increased risk for unhealthy tech habits. For this reason, we oversampled teens who have a diagnosed condition to understand if these individuals were experiencing the disruptions of COVID-19 differently than their peers.

Even before the pandemic, the CDC reported that nearly one-in-five youths suffered from a mental health disorder; these rates have increased over the past decade. Experts have noted that there may be a connection between teens with diagnosed mental health challenges (e.g. ADHD, depression), and increased risk for unhealthy tech habits[4]. For this reason, we oversampled the teens who have a diagnosed condition to understand if these individuals were experiencing the disruptions of COVID-19 differently than their peers. Of the 46 teens we interviewed, 14 have a diagnosed mental health condition.

In an effort to understand how parents and guardians perceive the well-being and behavior of their teens, we also had one caregiver of each teen participant complete a week-long diary, and we compared the adult reporting with the reported lived experience of the teens.

KEY
FINDINGS

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1 Teens are experiencing a tremendous loss due to school closure and social isolation

2 There's limited opportunity to do the "work of adolescence" and form their identities

3 Social media and gaming have become the main way to meet their social needs

4 The extent of tech use and its impacts aren't obvious, even to those closest to teens

What many teens initially embraced as a short, unexpected school break has become an extended trip to new territory, with no return ticket. It is a trip that requires navigating friendships, family, school, media, social media, and self-identity without a compass to guide them. And it's a trip that is plagued by loss.

■

Teens are responding in the best ways they know how. With limited access to friends, sports, and activities that in-person schooling typically facilitates, they are increasingly turning to social media and gaming to avoid feelings of boredom, sadness, and depression. That's not surprising, since studies from such organizations as Common Sense Media have shown the benefits technology can provide: when teens engage with peers on social networks or play multiplayer video games, they often feel socially connected and like part of a community. The teens in our study identified scrolling through social media as a reliable mood booster. But those same diaries also identified social media use as a top contributor - second to online school – of negative moods.

Our teens are coping, but we can help them do so even more. This study points out lessons we can learn, and we follow the findings with suggestions for where we can go next. With the right tools, parents and teens can positively impact teens' social and emotional development during this critical time in their lives.

1. TEENS ARE EXPERIENCING A TREMENDOUS LOSS DUE TO SCHOOL CLOSURE AND SOCIAL DISTANCING

School acted as a stabilizing force with structure and social aspects that are no longer available. Teens missed milestones that they'll never get back. When they talk about these losses, teens describe an evolution of feelings since March, including denial, anger, depression and, for some, finally the acceptance that this is the way it's going to be for a long time.

STAGES OF GRIEF
1. Denial
2. Anger
3. Bargaining
4. Depression
5. Acceptance

RECOMMENDATION: WE NEED TO GIVE THEM SUPPORT, AKIN TO SUPPORTING THE STAGES OF GRIEF.

"I definitely miss being able to be at school. And seeing not just friends but acquaintances. I think there is a level of importance in having acquaintances because you learn how to speak to different people in different ways." *~Age 16, Alameda County*

2. THERE'S LIMITED OPPORTUNITY TO DO THE "WORK OF ADOLESCENCE" AND FORM THEIR IDENTITIES

Sports, clubs, theater, and arts provide kids the ability to find and indulge passions, meet different people, and develop new friend groups as a way to build identity. The cancellation of these activities has left behind a deep loss of both the day-to-day experience of these activities and the expected life-defining moments they often provide.

RECOMMENDATION: WE NEED TO HELP THEM DIFFERENTIATE AND DEVELOP IDENTITIES WHILE IN ISOLATION AND ONLINE.

TYPICAL WORK OF ADOLESCENCE
Asserting and exploring their independence and developing individual identity

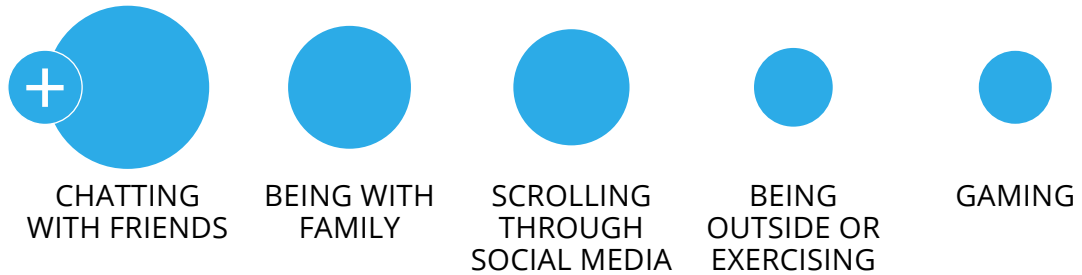# 3. SOCIAL MEDIA AND GAMING HAVE BECOME THE MAIN WAY TO MEET THEIR SOCIAL NEEDS

TEENS' MENTAL HEALTH TOOLKITS INCLUDE:
• Social media
• Gaming
  (mostly boys)
• Texting/
  FaceTiming
  with friends
• Cooking
• Sleeping
• Being active
  outside
• Painting, sewing,
  drawing
  (mostly girls)

Each teen has their own way of dealing with their emotions in the time of COVID-19. They have built toolkits for dealing with this crisis and those toolkits are mostly filled with tech. Social media, texting, and video chats with friends were mentioned by everyone we talked to; however, most say that it doesn't replace in-person connection.

Others, especially those who have been diagnosed with a mental health condition, are finding non-tech ways to feel better or fight off their boredom, like hiking/walking, creating art, and cooking. And sleeping – lots of sleeping (especially for girls and diagnosed teens). In some ways, teens who have been in therapy may be better equipped to recognize and respond to acute emotional challenges.

What Contributed to Teens' Positive Mood

| CHATTING WITH FRIENDS | BEING WITH FAMILY | SCROLLING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA | BEING OUTSIDE OR EXERCISING | GAMING |

What Contributed to Teens' Negative Mood

| SCHOOL, ONLINE OR IN-PERSON | OTHER | SCROLLING THROUGH SOCIAL MEDIA | BEING WITH FAMILY | GAMING |

SOURCE: Child Mind Institute/MindLogger. A total of 42 teens and 33 parents completed the survey. The graphics in this report aggregate their responses.

Teens check their apps for any new "news" and then find themselves mindlessly scrolling, no longer engaged, but unable and unwilling to stop. TikTok is the go-to as it's the online version of what they're missing offline – it's part entertainment, part community/support, and part education/news… and it has a seemingly endless supply of content.

"I've been using TikTok a lot recently because it's mindless and you can scroll through it for hours without feeling like you've been there for more than 15 minutes." *~Age 15, San Francisco County*

Even as they say they suffer headaches, poor sleep, and exhaustion, teens feel the consequences of being "addicted" to their phones and social media as too mild to matter or warrant a change in behavior. However, these times of instability and emotional frailty can be breeding grounds for the development of destructive habits.

"Sometimes the phone hits me in my face so I must fall asleep with it in my hand." *~Age 15, LA County*

RECOMMENDATION: WE NEED TO HELP OUR TEENS RECOGNIZE THE WARNING SIGNS OF TECH OVERUSE AND CONSCIOUSLY CHOOSE HEALTHIER ALTERNATIVES.

4. THE EXTENT OF TECH USE AND ITS IMPACTS AREN'T OBVIOUS, EVEN TO THOSE CLOSEST TO TEENS

Teens are spending more time online than ever, and parents' restrictions and monitoring hours, during which teens are simultaneously gaming and posting or scrolling on social media, are confounded by the fact that many of these hours are spent in class and doing homework.

RECOMMENDATION: WE NEED TO PROVIDE PARENTS WITH TOOLS TO EASILY AND ACCURATELY UNDERSTAND TEENS' ONLINE BEHAVIOR.

DETAILED FINDINGS

For many, the idea of no more school was like a dream come true: no more getting up early, no more long commutes to school by public transportation or shared ride, no more homework, no more teachers. But the novelty wore off quickly.

1. TEENS ARE EXPERIENCING A TREMENDOUS LOSS DUE TO SCHOOL CLOSURE AND SOCIAL DISTANCING

The appearance of the virus meant not only no more school, but no more physical interaction with people outside their households. Teens' visions of hanging out with friends whenever they wanted vanished. Though many are valuing their parents and siblings for the physical contact they offer, they sometimes long for a little less togetherness with them and more contact with friends.

Some of the teens we spoke to also mentioned family members and friends of the family who had become sick or lost their jobs. For those whose home life is less stable, the pandemic has strained their sense of security and comfort. However, they were reluctant to discuss economic or health impacts, even when pressed, focusing instead on missed milestones and school.

"At first, it was this cool thing. We aren't going to school. I remember the first few days I was still seeing people. I'm not going to get the virus from these people. It was such a far-off thing in my community."
~Age 17, Sonoma County

Predictably, teens miss the social interaction they got from actually being in school, but most feel they are staying in contact with their closest friend groups through text, social media, or video chat. What is surprising to teens is how much they miss the serendipitous encounters with classmates, saying hello to people whose names they may not know but who they see at every passing period in the school hallways.

"When it first started, when I heard we were not going back, it was pure shock. We were not able to see friends and go certain places and travel. It ruined my summer. With anger comes sadness."
~Age 16, Sonoma County

And, as appealing as "no more teachers, no more books" is, the reality of a less rigorous curriculum concerns students. Teens worry their educa-

tional opportunities are being forfeited. Juniors and seniors wonder if their classes will be valid for college credits if they are online, how spring semester 2020 pass/fail grades will affect their GPAs, and whether they will miss out on scholarships. Many are concerned that when they do go back to "real" school, their academic muscles may have atrophied during shelter-in-place, making learning and schoolwork much harder.

"I'm learning a lot less. It doesn't bode well for the future, but I just do the best I can." ~Age 15, San Francisco County

As the teens talked about their emotional journeys since March, it sounded a lot like the stages of grief: denying the virus was "that bad," feeling angry they were missing events they were counting on, and being depressed about lost experiences and time. Teens with better mental health toolkits seem to reach acceptance sooner – often they are older, have been to a therapist, or have had to shoulder family burdens at a young age, giving them experience with hardship. (Though bargaining is one of the stages of grief, it wasn't raised by any of the research participants and so is not addressed here.)

Denial was observed across the board. It was easy for some because they weren't personally affected by the virus; it seemed to be happening to others. Even for kids whose parents or family members lost jobs or were sick, or whose homes were overly cramped with everyone vying for space to work or go to class, the impact wasn't discussed, even when prompted. Given that the teens we talked to had different family situations and responsibilities, could it be that the changes due to COVID-19 were relatively manageable compared to what they are used to dealing with? Or that their family systems do not allow for complaining about circumstances?

But for others, there was no denying the fragility COVID-19 revealed. Some teens who suffered from depression and anxiety before the virus struck found their usual toolkits of coping skills, like getting together with

CAPTURING THEIR MOOD
Teens were shown a series of emojis and asked to circle which ones best described how they are feeling.

family and friends, taken away. Opportunities to clear their heads by observing people being happy, interacting with others, and having activities that allowed them to focus on things other than their own worries were no longer available.

While all the teens in the study felt some level of anger, it was most sharply felt by those for whom missed milestones meant missed opportunities: not getting a driver's license, no Homecoming dance, no sports seasons (meaning potentially lost scholarships for college), and no concert or theater performances to show off all their hard work. Even those finding some freedom in household duties being lighter were angry because they finally have time to be teenagers and there is no one to hang out with and no place to go.

> **"I was angry that sports and my whole life stopped with the pandemic… It's our junior year in high school and that's one of the most important, especially for sports. We haven't been able to go to tournaments. College coaches are not traveling."** *~Age 16, Sonoma County*

Depression – expressed as being sad, bored all the time, or feeling really lonely – is common among both teens diagnosed with depression or anxiety and those without a formal diagnosis. Teens cite sleeping more and scrolling endlessly on social media, even while they are attending online classes, essentially being half-absent from school due to multitasking. Every day is the same. There's nothing to look forward to.

> **"I started getting into art again and going back to painting and drawing was really good."** *~Age 15, Orange County*

For some teens, moving on to acceptance is positive and reflects hope. They are finding new hobbies, keeping better sleep schedules, and discovering they enjoy having a schedule when it is self-set. Several of these teens were those diagnosed with mental health issues who found they are able to use some of the techniques learned in therapy to make this time one of self-growth and self-discovery. These teens also tend to be older and have a keener sense that short-term milestones won't affect long-term plans.

Other teens also got to acceptance, but instead of being a positive step

forward, it represents resignation. They are waiting out the virus and have created a space at home where they can make their environment comforting until the all-clear is sounded. These teens seem more fearful of the virus, though few expressed any direct personal experience that made them so. They are aware of current events and feel pessimistic about the direction in which the U.S. is going in terms of getting COVID-19 under control or calming the political furor they see on the news.

"But once this started to happen, I kind of accepted that it's kind of just another year of school and it's going to be different and more difficult in some ways and easier in others." *~Age 15, San Francisco County*

Each teen we spoke to was at a different place on this emotional journey. Those stuck in the earlier stages are usually younger teens whose vision of what high school would be has not been realized. Some are freshmen who feel little difference from being in 8th grade because school is online, and they haven't physically attended class in high school yet; or, they are sophomores who were looking forward to using this year to rebrand themselves from who they were as freshmen, but are unable to do so because school isn't in-person. These short-term goals were dreams for the younger teens, and they are having a difficult time getting to acceptance.

New-Found Distractions	Missed Milestones
➕	➖
WALKS/HIKES	SCHOOL DANCES
PAINTING, DRAWING, WRITING	DRIVER'S LICENSE
SEWING, COOKING	ARTS PERFORMANCES
FOOTBALL, TENNIS	SPORTS TOURNAMENTS

SOURCE: Child Mind Institute/MindLogger

2. SOCIAL MEDIA AND GAMING HAVE BECOME THE MAIN WAY TO MEET THEIR SOCIAL NEEDS

Many teens were looking forward to a year of defining themselves through the sports they play, academic achievement, current friend groups, and activities they participate in. With these elements of school taken away, they have lost opportunities that would help shape their identity as they grow into themselves.

> **"[I miss] making new friends, because my sister and I went to a new school so I was focused on meeting new people, but we didn't get to do that."**
> *~Age 15, San Francisco County*

The theater kid who had finally landed the lead role in the school play is no longer performing. The aspiring soccer player, hoping to get a scholarship as a way to go to college, is left in limbo. Students who had strived to make great grades are now uncertain about the impact of those grades given the lack of standardization and are wondering how they will further distinguish themselves. The teen mourning his daily positivity infusion can no longer start the day at "the coolest lunch table."

These are supposed to be the years during which teens are asserting their independence and developing individual identities. Instead, they are swimming in a sea of screens and sameness.

Teen Multitasking During Online Learning

All respondents said they used other apps and devices while in class. Here's what they did.

INSTAGRAM   SNAPCHAT   TEXTING   OTHER CLASSWORK   TIKTOK   OTHERS

GAMING

FACETIMING

ONLINE SHOPPING
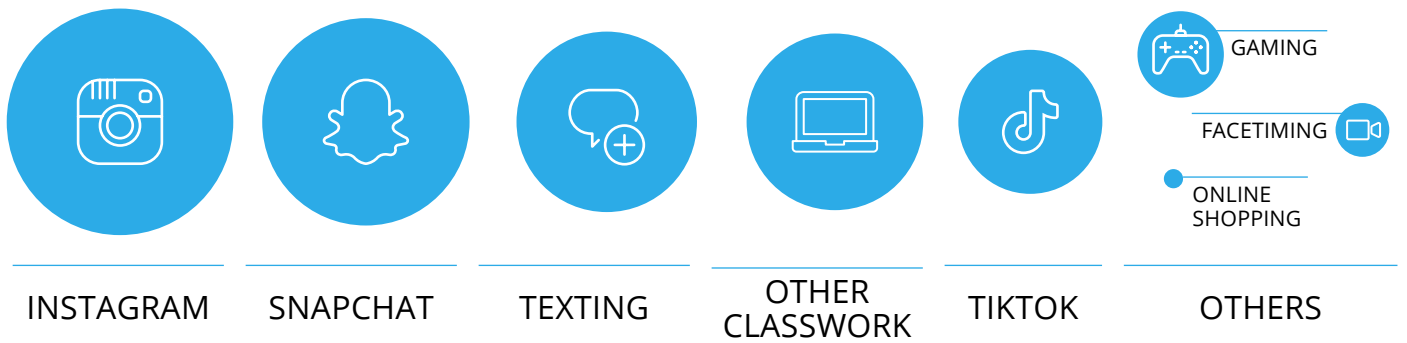
SOURCE: Child Mind Institute/MindLogger. Based on daily diary entries by 42 teens.

TEENS ARE CREATING THEIR OWN MENTAL HEALTH TOOLKITS – AND SOME ARE HEALTHIER THAN OTHERS

Prior to COVID-19, many teens relied on friends they saw in person to stay on an even mental health keel. With the emergence of COVID-19 in their lives, teens' primary go-to tool for helping them feel better needed to be adjusted. They have built toolkits to help them deal with this crisis, but their tools of choice mostly consist of devices. When we dug into the different devices they were using, phones were reported as widely available. Not all of the teens had access to a private laptop, which created a disadvantage: school-owned laptops tended to have firewalls, which limited their access to many apps and sites.

> **"My friends were my solvers. I'd go to them and they'd be so supportive. When I asked for something one of my friends would have it. If I was sad and wanted chocolate, they'd have it and know exactly what to do. They make me happy."**
> *~Age 14, Orange County*

Teens began using different social media apps to fill the void of being without friends. If they need a quick laugh, they go to TikTok; if they need to feel connected, they Snapchat or text their friends; if they want to get lost in a storyline, they'll binge-watch a favorite TV show or play a video game. What teens have in their toolkits often varies by gender, girls tend to reach out via text to connect with friends, whereas boys' tendencies lean to getting absorbed in activities to keep their thoughts in check.

> **"Being out in public and around other people every day, I think that would positively affect my mood. Since COVID we've been quarantined and not been able to be around strangers. That's the main thing that's affected me. The social aspect of everything."**
> *~Age 17, San Mateo County*

Though teens use technology to ensure they are rarely ever out of reach of their friends, they still prefer to see them in person. Even the teens who aren't eagerly anticipating physically going back to school want to choose when and how they see their close friends.

As with casual school encounters, teens look forward to being able to

move about with the flow of people in their neighborhoods and cities, and just enjoy being a part of humanity. They are free to observe people and feel connected to and be inspired by them, even if they don't know them. The randomness of meeting new people with different experiences to share has been taken away and replaced by mostly curated "For You" experiences from apps like TikTok, Instagram, and YouTube. Teens miss this type of exposure to diverse people as it served to recharge them in a way being with friends and family doesn't – there is no commitment required.

"TikTok is a good pass time, but it definitely doesn't make quarantining better, I'd rather be with my friends." *~Age 17, Alameda County*

On the occasions when their consciences – or their parents – tell them to get off their devices, teens (especially those who have not been diagnosed with a mental health condition) are finding that walks outside, creating music, and making art let them escape from feeling too wrapped up in their anxious or depressed thoughts. Many of the teens in the study diagnosed with mental health issues have been keeping up with their therapy appointments virtually and are using the skills taught there to help keep their anxiety down. Teens are working on keeping themselves stable by grounding themselves through activities such as touching their own arms and setting and adhering to alerts that remind them to put down their phones.

"A walk is for my mental health and taking a breath and relaxing." *~Age 17, Alameda County*

Families are also playing a larger role in how teens are feeling and dealing with the pandemic. For teens in financially stable homes, spending more time with their parents for meals, movie nights, games, and discussions about what is happening in the world – from COVID updates to election news – are occurring on a regular basis. These teens often have their own rooms to be in and feel like their homes are safe spaces.

For those whose home life is less stable, the pandemic has strained their sense of security and comfort. These teens are attempting to maintain a feeling of normalcy while things around them are off-kilter: parents are

online trying to find jobs, working from the same table where a child is doing homework; a parent who works at a grocery store tells stories about customers who yell at her because they have to wear a mask; or they're changing homes in the middle of the pandemic. For teens in these circumstances, trying to find some time away from family is often a goal.

TEENS' ENGAGEMENT WITH TECHNOLOGY AND SOCIAL MEDIA IS A CONSTANT SEDATIVE

When teens first reach for their phones, they are prompted by a desire to to see what new thing has been posted on TikTok, communicate via text, Instagram, and Snapchat, or to find a half-hour of content to keep them entertained as they wait for something else to happen. But when asked what keeps them scrolling mindlessly on their phones, their answer is "boredom." They readily admit they are not paying attention as they scroll through post after post, but many

"TikTok is the one I spend the most time on because it has stuff I actually want to watch. If I don't have anything to do, TikTok's the obvious place to go."
~Age 14, San Mateo County

view the only alternatives as either taking a nap or going to sleep earlier at night. (Sleeping is mentioned more by girls and diagnosed teens.) With other options rarely on the table, social media scrolling is the default.

Amount of Physical Activity Reported Over One Week

8%
VIGOROUS

28%
MODERATE

65%
LITTLE TO NONE
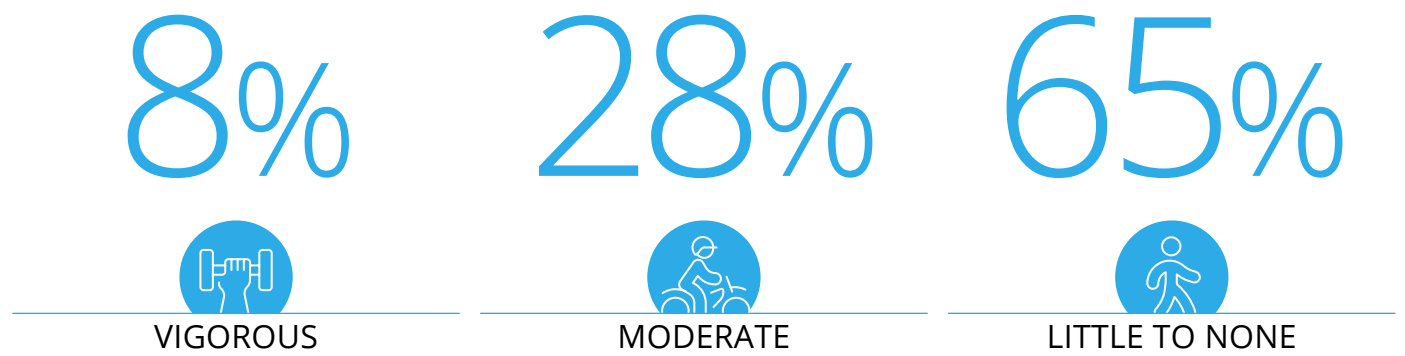
SOURCE: Child Mind Institute/MindLogger. Based on 265 responses by 42 teens.

Teens' emotional engagement curve when they open an app starts high and then quickly descends to a long flatline of boredom. Similarly, teens reported they felt connected when actively texting or chatting with someone, but that sense of connection steeply dropped off to become one of feeling lonely when the exchange ended. The satisfaction achieved by logging in or communicating online is short-lived.

The go-to app, especially for girls, is TikTok. It's the one they check in the morning to see what they missed overnight and the one they go to when online class isn't holding their attention. Teens turn to TikTok when they need a quick "hit" of funny, want to see what's trending, or get inspiration from the community.

TikTok's "For You" section gets teens caught up in its personalized stream of entertainment. Whereas other apps let users know when they're up to date, TikTok provides them with endless content. **Teens are fully aware the content is geared to keep them "on," but they don't care, even when the app tells them they should take a break. If TikTok has the content, they will consume it.**

TEENS RECOGNIZE SOME OF THE ADVERSE EFFECTS OF TECH OVERUSE, BUT DON'T SEE A NEED TO CHANGE HABITS

Several teens proactively used the word "addicted" when they talk about their relationship with technology and apps, and they speak like addicts rationalizing their needs: "I could quit, but I don't want to" or "I know it's bad, but everyone's doing it." In fact, everyone in their lives is on a device, so it's hard to change habits when those behaviors are reinforced around them.

Some teens have set alerts on their phones to let them know when they've been on long enough. While some abide by their self-regulations, most ignore them and just keep on scrolling.

Some go so far as deleting their social media apps every day to keep their parents' prying eyes away or because they aren't supposed to have them, but most add them right back the next day. So, though they have mechanisms to help monitor their screen usage, they don't want – and are not compelled – to do it.

"I get the notification and think I really should stop being on the Internet and give myself screen breaks a lot more. I get a notification telling me how much screen time I've been on for the week and it tells me I need to get off." *~Age 17, Orange County*

Teens have heard that spending so much time on screens is bad for them. When prompted, they'll tell you about some of those negative effects: they speak of feeling beat up when they wake after a long day and night of screen time and of headaches after staring at the phones. They mention exploring blue-lens glasses to help with headaches and burning eyes. But in the end, they believe the stakes are low and the consequences are minimal, so they go back to their screens as soon as they get the urge.

A Majority of Teens Reported Poor Sleep Patterns

SLEEP WITH MY PHONE IN THE ROOM	SOCIAL MEDIA IMPAIRS MY ABILITY TO SLEEP	I GO TO SLEEP LATER THAN PRE-COVID-19	STAY ON PHONE ONE+ HOURS AFTER BEDTIME
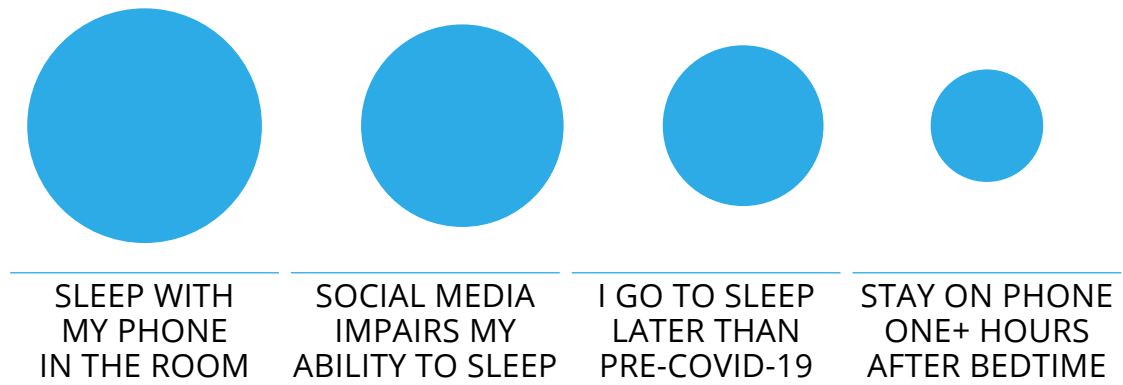
SOURCE: Child Mind Institute/MindLogger. Based on daily diary entries by 42 Teens.

4. THE EXTENT OF TECH USE AND ITS IMPACTS AREN'T OBVIOUS, EVEN TO THOSE CLOSEST TO TEENS

For many parents, monitoring and limiting screen time may feel hypocritical. Their teens may even tell them it is. A study by the Pew Research Center[5] shows that 68% of parents say they sometimes feel distracted by their phone when spending time with their kids – so teens multitasking is something they see as fairly natural.

Additionally, in our study, parents reported their teens' screentime, and teens self-reported the same information with significantly different results, reinforcing the notion that parents are out of touch with how much time their kids spend online. This isn't a judgment; far from it. These days, it's nearly impossible to distinguish between when kids are online for good reasons and when screens are being used as a digital pacifier.

PARENT DIARY RESPONSES

"We need help!"

"I get worried about how to keep her entertained and not rely on social media for entertainment."

"He plays a lot of video games and claims the games make him happy. [He's] just on-line school, game, TV, eat… days after days."

"I worry – he stays in PJs and seems generally unenthused about everything except food and video games. I told him to get half an hour of sun and he jokingly said, 'it's scary outside.'"

"He is playing games with his friends online – I HATE IT – but he is a social kid and he seems to never tire of it."

"Online school continues to be a high concern, filled with negative comments and slight frustration with the current school system."

"We keep imploring him to get out, get sun and Vitamin D and exercise. I don't get a ton of support from my husband on this, so I'm the 'NAGatha' but we do try to do this at least once a week together."

FOOTNOTES

1. **Pew Research Center**, May 2018, "Teens, Social Media & Technology 2018" https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2018/05/31/teens-social-media-technology-2018/ This captures data for ages 13-17.
2. **CDC**: https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/covid19/pulse/mental-health.htm
   Common Sense Media: https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pdfs/2020_surveymonkey-key-findings-toplines-teens-and-coronavirus.pdf
   4-H: https://4-h.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/4-H-Mental-Health-Report-6.1.20-FINAL.pdf.
3. **D'Angelo J, Moreno MA**, May 2020 "Screening for Problematic Internet Use." Pediatrics.145(Suppl 2):S181-S185.
4. **Kimball, H. and Cohen, Y.**, 2019. Children's Mental Health Report: "Social Media, Gaming and Mental Health." New York: Child Mind Institute. https://childmind.org/downloads/2019_Childrens_Mental_Health_Report_Full.pdf
5. **Pew Research Center**, March 2020, "Parenting Children in the Age of Screens." https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/07/28/parenting-children-in-the-age-of-screens/

EXPANDING YOUR TOOLKIT

A GUIDE FOR TEENS
BUILD BETTER HABITS WHILE LIVING ONLINE: SLEEP, PHYSICAL ACTIVITY, AND MINDFULNESS

Daily exercise and achieving a good night's sleep are interconnected. The challenge of disconnecting from tech is real. It requires patience without self judgement. Building up the skill of staying in the moment will help you manage your mental health. You can do this!

SLEEP

PRIORITIZE SLEEP. You should get at least nine hours of sleep every night, but many teens are sleep-deprived. Getting enough sleep improves your ability to concentrate, maintain a good mood and healthy weight, and even improves the quality of your skin. Sticking to a bedtime routine that is screen-free, and staying away from devices overnight, promotes a sense of peace and calm in your life and lets your brain fully recharge.

If you have difficulty falling asleep, try this:

- Aim for consistent sleep and wake times
- Keep your room a comfortable temperature
- Keep lights lowered during the evening
- Avoid sugary drinks, caffeine and heavy meals near bedtime
- Exercise each day; even 10 minutes of physical activity a day boosts deep sleep

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

KEEP MOVING. Try to engage in an hour of moderate physical activity every day to keep your mind and body feeling good. If going to the school gym, swimming or playing with your sports team are not possible during COVID-19, let's get creative! Find new ways to be active with a friend, or better yet just get off the couch and get moving.

There are a ton of free and fun lessons online to keep you active. Here is a sampling of dance and workout videos to get you started:

▶ Hiphop ▶ Bollywood ▶ African Dance

▶ KPop ▶ Reggaeton ▶ Home Workout

EXERCISE AND SLEEP GO TOGETHER

"For athletics, six hours of sleep or less decreases your time to physical exhaustion by 10–30%, relative to eight hours of sleep (e.g., if you trained for a 10K run, you're done by 7K, rather than 10K). A lack of sleep decreases aerobic output and decreases peak muscle strength, including jump height and running speed. Additionally, a teenager is 30% more likely to get injured during a sports season when they are not getting the recommended amount of sleep each night."
~Dr. Matthew Walker, Professor of Neuroscience and Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and Founder and Director of the Center for Human Sleep Science
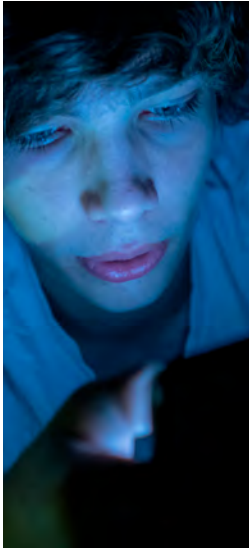
MINDFULNESS

IF SPENDING TIME ONLINE IS CAUSING YOU STRESS, the usual advice is to unplug. While that's good advice, it's not very realistic, especially during a pandemic when we are all doing a huge amount of our socializing on screens. Jill Emanuele, PhD, a Child Mind Institute psychologist, recommends trying mindfulness to make the time you spend online (and offline) happier.

Mindfulness is a technique for living in the moment, without judgment. It helps you become more aware of what is happening around you and how you feel. It also gives you a way to reflect on what you're doing, which can be hard when you're scrolling around online. You can use mindfulness as a tool to manage your emotions and your stress levels.

NOTICE YOUR THOUGHTS AND FEELINGS. Take time to consider how you feel and what you think when you're using tech. Dr. Emanuele recommends asking yourself: How am I doing right now? How is this app making me feel? How did that picture make me feel? If something is consistently making you feel bad, practicing mindfulness can help you identify that and figure out if there is something you can do that might help. Maybe you'll want to unfollow an account or spend less time on a certain app.

Taking the time to notice – and respect – how you are feeling is an important skill that will make you happier and more confident in all areas of your life, not just when you're online.
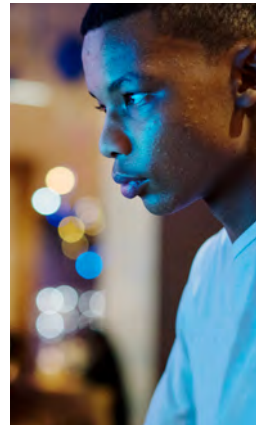
DO A MINDFUL REALITY CHECK. People often try to use social media as a way to cheer up when they're feeling down or bored. For example, if you're feeling bad about yourself, you might post something that's totally opposite, like a cute selfie or a picture of your friends. Sometimes putting out a different image and getting compliments online can get you out of the funk. But that happiness doesn't always last, and you can find yourself feeling like you're just fooling everyone with posts that don't match your real life.

If you notice that you actually feel worse after you post, know that this is common, and look for more reliable ways to improve your mood.

USE TECHNOLOGY. It might sound surprising, but using technology is also a great way to become more mindful. Download one of the apps that are designed to help you track how you use your phone. "Do an experiment to see how much time you actually spend on certain things," says Dr. Emanuele. "When you're on it, what are you actually doing? What are your emotions like?" Likewise, mood-tracking apps and diaries remind you to take time to check in with yourself. They also create a record of how you've been feeling which you can revisit later and use to make different choices going forward.

If you want to learn more about mindfulness, there are also apps that guide you through the basics of how to practice mindfulness. Headspace, Calm, and Smiling Mind are three popular ones.

TAKE BREAKS. The best way to get a little perspective is to take occasional breaks from tech. Make sure you get enough exercise (one hour a day) and sleep (nine hours a day) to maintain your health and wellbeing. Do yoga, go for a run, or hang out in nature. Whatever it is, doing things in real life can be a big stress reliever.

Try to practice mindfulness during offline activities, too.

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS
HELP TEENS BUILD BETTER
HEALTH HABITS WHILE LIVING ONLINE

Many of the behaviors teens describe in *Are the Kids Alright?* are unhealthy, and they know it. They talk about the headaches, eye strain, lack of sleep and, often, lack of enjoyment that comes with heavy tech use – but they are also struggling to set good boundaries.

SLEEP

SUPPORT SLEEP. Teens are not getting enough sleep and this impacts everything from their grades to their moods to their long-term health. Blue light from devices can alter the body's natural circadian rhythm and disrupt sleep. Even as teens develop more independence they still benefit from a sleep schedule.

Helpful tips:

- Support regular bedtimes, even on the weekends
- Make sure your teen isn't consuming caffeine within four hours of bedtime or eating large meals late in the evening
- Commit the family to screen-free time - especially within an hour of bedtime - and device-free zones. It's a family affair!
- Keep in mind that achieving a good night's sleep and daily exercise are interconnected

"Pulling an all-nighter will shut down the memory centers of the brain, leading to a 40% decrease in the ability to learn new facts (i.e., the difference between acing the exam and failing it miserably!) In contrast, a full night of sleep helps hit the save button on new memories so that you don't forget (30-50% benefit in remembering, relative to remaining awake)."

~Dr. Matthew Walker, Professor of Neuroscience and Psychology at the University of California, Berkeley, and Founder and Director of the Center for Human Sleep Science

PHYSICAL ACTIVITY

ENCOURAGE EXERCISE. Yes, it is a challenge more than ever to 'keep it moving'. Still, teens need at least one hour of moderate exercise a day to promote restorative sleep and to aid their overall health. Help teens reach this goal by taking a walk together, or finding a local park or neighborhood to explore each week. Suggest tai chi, yoga or dance videos teens can do with friends – or better yet, join the action with a family dance party.

There are free and fun lessons available online to inspire you and your family to keep moving. Here is a sampling of dance and workout videos to get started:

▶ Tai Chi   ▶ African Dance   ▶ Irish Dance

▶ Salsa   ▶ Cowboy Boogie   ▶ Hula Dance
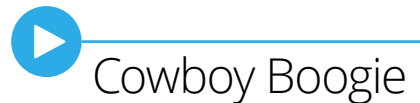
HERE ARE SOME OTHER WAYS TO HELP TEENS

BE A ROLE MODEL. The best way for parents to promote healthy screen use is to model it themselves. Try designating special screen-free times of the day (like during dinner and an hour before bed) or rooms of the house and stick to those rules yourself. Always make a point of putting down the phone when you're having a conversation with your child. Find a designated location in your home for everyone's digital devices during the night.

You want to share your values about how tech should (and shouldn't) be used, and you also want to show them that you aren't setting up a double standard something teens are particularly sensitive to.

BRAINSTORM ALTERNATIVES. Teens (and adults) know it is easy to turn to tech automatically during free time, and it can be hard to pull yourself away once you've started scrolling. Stephanie Lee, PsyD, a psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, recommends encouraging teens to develop an "activity menu" that lists their preferred non-screen activities.

**That way, when they're feeling bored or overwhelmed, they know they have easy non-tech choices at the ready.**
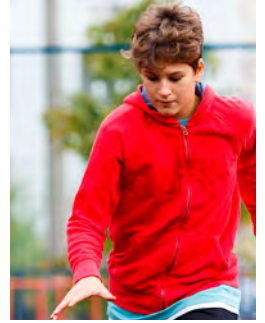
KEEP TO A SCHEDULE. Another way of thinking about screen time is to look at how your child is spending their time in general. If teens are spending enough time taking care of themselves, screens are less likely to be a problem. Parents can help by setting expectations for how days at home should be structured.

Teens do better when they are getting adequate sleep, eating healthy meals, and exercising regularly.

ENCOURAGE TECH MINDFULNESS. Alex Hamlet, PsyD, a psychologist at the Child Mind Institute, recommends that parents encourage teens to become more mindful about why they use their phones – and model doing this, too. "Before you pick up your device, understand why you're picking it up. What emotional state are you in? Are you anxious? Picking up that phone to check to see what's on social media is probably going to heighten that anxiety.

The same with sadness. It's just going to make it worse."
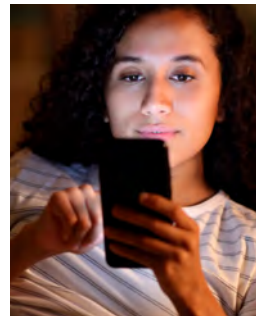
SUPPORT TEENS' OTHER INTERESTS. Make sure kids are continuing to work on their hobbies or talents during COVID-19. This is important to maintaining their self-esteem and sense of identity, which is especially crucial during adolescence. Even if kids want to do something in theory, it may be easier for them to turn to TikTok out of inertia, so parents can help by trying to eliminate any barriers.

Making sure they have the materials they need in an accessible location, helping them set aside time during the day for practice, and letting them know that you take them and their interests seriously can all go a long way.

WHAT TO LOOK OUT FOR

Remember that this is a difficult time for many teenagers. Here are some signs that your child might need professional mental health support:

- Feeling very sad or withdrawn for two or more weeks
- Intense worries or fears that get in the way of daily activities
- Severe mood swings that cause problems in relationships
- Drastic changes in behavior or personality
- Severe, out-of-control behavior
- Repeated use of drugs or alcohol

If you notice any of these signs in your child, talk to your pediatrician, the school psychologist, or a mental health specialist.

APPENDIX

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Debra Abbaszadeh, Marjorie Swig, Lisa Stone Pritzker, Cinny Kennard, Abby Porth and the countless other partners in this work – thank you for your ideas, suggestions, and faith that together we can do better by our kids.

The California Partners Project is buoyed by an absolutely stellar Board of Directors.

Our leader and Chair, Elizabeth Gore, along with Reveta Franklin Bowers, John China, Janet Keller, Lisa Ling, Olivia Morgan, Joyce Newstat, Norah Weinstein, and Tom Willis – thank you for empathizing with California teens and their parents' well-being during these unprecedented times. Most of all, we are grateful that you saw the urgency of capturing teen experiences in this moment.

We are honored to be in partnership with you all.

With gratitude,
The California Partners Project

Jennifer Siebel Newsom
First Partner of California,
and Co-Founder

Olivia Morgan
Co-Founder and
Executive Director

Laura Sanders Morris
Director, Policy and
Programs

ABOUT THE ORGANIZATIONS

The California Partners Project promotes gender equity, and ensures the state's media and technology industries are a force for good in child development. Our vision is a more equitable California, harnessing the ingenuity of all its people to lead the nation and the world in addressing the challenges of gender equity and the impact of media and technology on child development. We believe that Californians will thrive economically, socially and individually when women have access to the same leadership roles as men. That the technology and media that drive our economy and shape our future can and should be a force for good. And that industries, institutions and individuals have a moral obligation to consider how their actions impact others, especially children.

The Child Mind Institute is an independent, national nonprofit dedicated to transforming the lives of children and families struggling with mental health and learning disorders. Our teams work every day to deliver the highest standards of care, advance the science of the developing brain and empower parents, professionals and policymakers to support children when and where they need it most.

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