

Parent Update on “Teens & Screens”

B-PEN’s recent showings of the documentary **“Screenagers”** at Coolidge Corner Theatre and the Heath School “sold out” within hours, reflecting how concerning the issue of adolescent digital screen overuse is for Brookline students and parents. The humorous but sobering 68-minute movie by physician/filmmaker Delaney Ruston examines the impact of the time the average kid spends each day looking at screens NOT including homework – a whopping 6.5 hours – as well as the way screen use is affecting concentration, development, and family relationships. Each screening was followed by a discussion, giving audiences ideas, strategies, and resources.

“SCREENAGERS” SUMMARY

Using her own family as a starting point, Ruston and an impressive group of teachers, authors, psychologists, and brain scientists paint a troubling picture of common family struggles over the use of digital devices, from the decrease in person to person interaction caused by social media and video games to the negative impact on academic learning and internet addiction. Catalyzed by her 12-year-old daughter’s desperation for a smart phone (“really a mini-computer”), Ruston explores the science behind the lure of screens – the inability of the adolescent brain to resist the impulse to self-distract, the release of dopamine at each “seek and find” reward online (which, by the way, adults are not immune to, either!). Experts caution how screens can impede social development -- the ability to make eye contact, to form trust, empathy. They warn of the potential for video games to create such powerful universes that kids are drawn in and don’t want to come out for hours, adding that violent video games (originally designed to desensitize soldiers before entering combat) foster “moral disengagement.” Social media, especially for young girls, has evolved into a competitive playground focusing on “how you look” and the number of “likes” each selfie attracts, providing an easy forum for bullying behavior.

The upshot of too much digital activity can be an overstimulation of the brain, causing a negative impact on cognitive abilities. Our culture’s tendency toward “multi-tasking,” which is actually just the brain oscillating back and forth very quickly and ultimately inefficiently, is making permanent changes in the development of the adolescent brain. Internet addiction is now a recognized problem among adults and adolescents alike, with rehab centers devoted entirely to the problem (<https://www.netaddictionrecovery.com/>).

Strategies suggested by the documentary focused on encouraging parents to be mindful of their own screen use and be good role models. Set appropriate limits on

screen usage, including: keep all screened devices out of bedrooms at night; have family dinners with no phone use; agree on a reasonable amount of extracurricular screen usage (smartphone, tablet, computer, video games); advocate downtime and find regular non-screen activities to do as a family; consider a contract or list of rules/guidelines that parents and adolescents create and agree on together. (Through a letter to her young son, author Janell Burley Hofmann offers a dynamite list of guidelines for adolescents with new phones - <http://www.janellburleyhofmann.com/the-contract/>)

POST-SCREENING DISCUSSION WITH BHS PEER LEADERS

Following the Coolidge Corner Theatre showing of “Screenagers,” BHS social work intern Chris Andrew led a discussion with the audience and five BHS Peer Leaders, who shared advice and insight into adolescent screen use. They outlined the obvious benefits of digital connectivity, including facilitating organization and more access to information, as well as connecting with people you don’t see everyday. But, they caution, always having a phone at hand means any noise alert (or even anticipation of a new text message coming in) can be stressful and pose a tempting distraction, making it hard to concentrate “It’s always on your mind, and it’s hard to self limit.”

Peer Leaders assert that screen usage affects social development, including a noticeable lack of concentration and some memory loss. Phones also provide an easy way for kids in a group to ignore each other instead of talking to one another, making it hard to learn to communicate effectively in person. One Peer Leader noticed that while a counselor at a summer camp that made phones inaccessible, the kids happily learned to do other things, interacting in person, stepping outside their respective comfort zones.

The students believe the real addition to screens begins in Middle School, with the abundance of “virtual friends” and the validation of social cache through “likes.” Middle School girls are especially vulnerable to the social media vortex and need to cultivate other expressive outlets (sports, arts, etc.) as well as solid friendships to be resilient. For boys, gaming often ramps up in Middle School. But as teens mature through high school, they tend to self-limit frivolous usage. At BHS, some teachers are very strict about phone use, and most students consider keeping their phones out as rude and unproductive to the learning environment.

PEER LEADER STRATEGIES FOR TEENS AND FAMILIES

- Consider apps that temporarily lock the internet so a student can focus on what’s at hand.
- Ask for parents’ help – let them hold the phone while homework or a specific task is being completed.
- Be aware of usage and try keeping track of how much time you actually spend on a screen. For phones, the app “moment” can track hours of phone use per day and shut down if you program limits. It can also track the percentage of time a user is on different social media sites.

- Set your own mental boundary by making access harder -- put the phone on airplane mode or turn it off while you're trying to focus on something.
- As a family at night, put all phones aside to charge at the same time and do work together. It's a good way to be together with space for casual chat in real life.
- Share what you are posting on instagram and facebook – consider if it reflects your true self.
- Parents, older siblings – be good role models. Don't text and drive, and take regular time to put phones away and *really* connect.
- Nurture friends who push you to do better, and find activities that make you feel your best and truest self.
- Students - find diverse role models and non-parent adult mentors – at BHS, advisors and favorite teachers can be very helpful.

USEFUL ONLINE RESOURCES

www.B-PEN.org

www.commonensemedia.org

www.screenagersmovie.com

www.janellburleyhofmann.com

BHS Policy on Devices from the Handbook:

RULE 1.4: The Policy on Personal Electronic Devices Brookline High School recognizes the pervasiveness of technology in today's world. We also highly value a school culture that prioritizes human interaction and the establishment of strong human relationships. To account for both of those realities, we believe in SMARTS:

Students: Students may use technology at BHS
Manners: Students will graduate from BHS with good manners around technology
Availability: Students must be available to others
Respect: Students must be respectful when using technology
Teachers: Teachers decide if and how technology is used in their classrooms
Silence: All use of technology must be silent

A personal electronic device is a wireless and/or portable piece of equipment that is capable of storing, processing, or transmitting information. These devices include, but are not limited to, cell phones, pagers, smartphones/PDAs, computers/tablets, MP3 players and other handheld entertainment systems, and AV recording devices or cameras. The use of technology and personal electronic devices is a privilege and should not disrupt the flow of school nor affect the learning in the classrooms. Therefore, to adhere to the respectful use of technology, here are the limits:

CELL PHONES: NO talking on phones anywhere in the building, including in the quad. This rule is in effect from 8:15 to the end of the school day. Talking on cell phones is only permitted in the vestibule outside the atrium at the main entrance.

HEADPHONES: Students may not wear headphones (on neck or in ears) in the building, including in the quad. Headphones are allowed in classrooms only when a teacher or librarian has given permission for their use. This rule is in effect from 8:15 to the end of the school day.

CLASSROOM ELECTRONICS USE: Students will be informed, in writing, of each teacher's policy on technology as part of the class syllabus or class expectations. In addition, the SMARTS poster shall be displayed in a visible place in every classroom.