"Teens & Screens: Finding Balance in the New Normal"

B-PEN's recent "Teens & Screens" events offered Brookline families two opportunities for insight and advice on helping teens balance use of their digital devices, which have become not just a social lifeline, but often an academic necessity and primary source of entertainment.

Complementing a free on-demand stream of the eye-opening documentary "LIKE" (follow-up materials available at https://watch.eventive.org/indieflix/play/623a07d6f95a210071566756), a virtual event addressed how families can establish healthy but realistic goals for navigating busy digital lives. Led by pediatrician Dr. Michael Rich (The Mediatrician), the presentation included a panel of experts and student Peer Leaders sharing concrete advice and strategies, plus a Q&A with parents. (Link to zoom forum recording - https://brooklinema.zoomgov.com/j/1604024456)

KEY TAKEAWAYS

BHS Peer Leader insight

Kids getting phones in middle school or earlier may need some monitoring – social media can create a distracting amount of FOMO (fear of missing out) and kids that young don't understand how skewed perception can be. Kids may also be drawn into unhealthy phone use. However, this is an opportunity to build trust, so when kids prove they can use devices responsibly, give them some space. It can be healthy to have family limits on phone use at night for better sleep.

Ways to self control include:

- Minimizing amount of apps on phone, deleting those used too frequently for too long
- Going on a social media "diet" periodically
- Using grayscale so phone is not so visually compelling (alerts NOT in red)
- Consider programs that monitor how much time you spend on screens - encourages mindful, intentional usage
- Put limits on each app that you need a hard-to-remember password to undo so discourages reflexive use

Dr. Michael Rich (*Director of Digital Wellness Lab, Boston Children's Hospital*

- Technology is here to stay, but we should treat phones as tools, not toys, and reinforce use that is responsible and kind.
- Reframe perspective – all our devices and platforms offer access to a very big world. Don't give to kids until they have a need and can handle responsibly and respectfully.
- Reframe idea of limits – it's less productive to limit time we spend ON screens than to assure we have minimum NON-SCREEN time to do fun real life activities away from devices. Using screen time as forbidden fruit creates conflict and constant pushback.
- Social media – all media are social, but interactive components, like with instagram, snapchat, etc., add many more layers of complicated connections. We aren't interacting in real time and don't get to see someone's immediate response, facial expression, etc. That makes it feel safe to be edgy and seek attention in risky ways for likes, reposts.
- Kids often define privacy as "hide from mom and dad." Concerned parents go into police mode. Instead of assuming the internet is unsafe and parents need to limit, talk together about the internet as another kind of environment to navigate in a smart way. Create a supportive rather than adversarial relationship.

- Model responsible use of technology, and look for moments of digital engagement as a family. Tap into their enthusiasm and expertise – ask adolescents why and what they use their devices for and talk about that.
- Also talk about what they *shouldn't* use it for - sexting, porn, cyberbullying, etc. Be explicit, acknowledge it can be scary, but reassure you can always talk about it. It's not about how much time kids spend on screen but what they do on screen.
- Middle school especially is a time of intense self-consciousness – changes in body and brain. Social comparison becomes an issue. Help kids move from marketing themselves to the world to feed that need to be complimented toward being truly authentic – online and offline.

Dr. Matt DuBois (**PSBMA Assistant Director of Guidance, Clinical Services, and Social-Emotional Learning)**
- Adolescent use of social media can have a significant impact on mental health.
- Kids often believe that positive mental health is an absence of challenging emotions.
- Seeing curated experiences online leads them to think all their friends go around feeling great. So "something must be wrong with me." It's important to reinforce to kids that they are experiencing an inaccurate or incomplete picture of their peers' emotional lives.
- We all experience challenging feelings and working through them is an important part of growing up. Positive mental health isn't always feeling happy, but rather when feelings match the situation that we are in and we can adapt to meet the demands of the moment. We can't prevent all negative emotions but we learn to navigate them.
- Social media is sometimes an escape, a way of avoidance – kids need to practice being away from that, create space to practice and learn other skills. They will push back and catastrophize (FOMO), but will realize the value of authentic experience, that nothing bad happened during the time they weren't checking their phone every moment.
- Try to really support no phone use at school – don't text them during the school day unless it's an emergency.

Dr. Keneisha Sinclair-McBride (Attending Psychologist at Boston Children's Hospital and an Assistant Professor of Psychology, Department of Psychiatry, at Harvard Medical School)
- Talk about balanced, positive use of technology by being authentic about your own use. To reduce use, do it together.
- Be curious. Ask kids questions – they love to explain things,
- Ask about what gives them joy and what brings them down. Hold space to deal with difficult things and develop resilience.
- BUT if having problems, get professional help, and normalize that. They are not alone. (They will see a lot of mental health discussion on TikTok.)

From Parent Questions -
Q: My child interacts nicely on screen playing games, but seems to be on for too long, and it seems like an addiction to me. She is also very quick to anger during and soon after she stops using screens. Can you tell me what is going on, and how to address this?
A: Kids get caught down the rabbit hole of information/entertainment binging. There's always more to see. This spiked in year of remote learning, but kids missed a year of social emotional learning. That mostly took place online via games like Fortnite, as a way to hang out with friends. But online platforms are built to draw you in and keep you playing, promoting FOBLO (fear of being left out) that something will happen after sign-off, which can cause some anxiety.

We're quick to jump to the addiction model, but this is not like using a substance with measurable physiologic changes. Try finding the underlying issue that is being soothed by online behavior. For example, for a kid wit social anxiety – online provides a place that's easier to control. For a kid with ADHD, hypervigilance allows mastery in gaming, so it becomes one place they feel in control, as

opposed to school. Also, in gaming, behavior is more competitive, aggressive, promotes language they don't use in real life, but that can be turned toward family after sign-off.

Q: I have a 10 year old and 13 year old. My concerns are about the misinformation they are seeing and the mimicking of negative behavior they are seeing on YouTube andTikTok. How would you recommend we frame those conversations?
A: Online, kids will see kids mimicking tics and other behavior, and it is not uncommon as it gets and gives reinforcement. But you can help them find a reputable source to explore these issues together – parents are their kids' greatest influence, so have conversations every day, not just a single chat. Ask your kids to question the purpose and value of any video they watch – is it education/factual or is it entertainment?

Q: How do you limit time on phones and encourage kids to be present without "policing"?
A: It will feel less like policing if you lead by example. What message are we sending if we are on phones all the time? Consider the "Killer B's" - be balanced, be mindful, be present.

Q: How should parents of very young children help them learn to use technology in a healthy way?
A: Start early and keep at it – modeling, keeping track of what's out there, examining how to use it for good, mindfully, intentionally, and to connect with people.

Q: Thoughts about Life360 or Find my iPhone?
A: If you're transparent and honest, framed as helping support healthy decision-making, knowing where a younger child is, it can be OK. But it also allows unhealthy helicopter parenting. Keep in mind – kids need a little freedom to be out on their own without surveillance to support independence. We learn by trying things out, making mistakes.

Q: Thoughts on using the phone as an alarm clock?
A: When phone or any screens are in the bedroom, kids get to sleep later. They've often been staring into blue light, suppressing melatonin, and stimulated by content, affecting quantity and quality of sleep. Kids sleep lightly, semi-alert, and don't get to deep REM sleep where learning is consolidated. Be neutral and reframe this as an issue of physical, mental, and social health – based on facts, not values. Get an alarm clock or clock radio.

Additional Resources

B-PEN.org - https://www.b-pen.org/social-media-technology--gaming.html

Digital Wellness Lab - https://digitalwellnesslab.org/

New Digital Wellness Lab Guide
https://digitalwellnesslab.org/parents/family-digital-wellness-guide/

Clinic for Media and Interactive Disorders https://www.childrenshospital.org/programs/clinic-interactive-media-and-internet-disorders-cimaid

Common Sense Media - https://www.commonsensemedia.org/

www.B-PEN.org

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