

The impact of technology on our village

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Since the mid-2010s, alarming trends have emerged regarding the mental health and wellbeing of our nation's youth. In the most recent nationwide Healthy Youth Survey, nearly half of high school students reported feeling that their life was not useful and that they couldn't seem to do anything right. Locally, two-thirds of area high school students on the same survey reported feeling consistently anxious, nervous or on edge, with an alarming number reporting suicidal tendencies.

It's important to recognize that these troubling trends began long before COVID-19, and the crisis is not tied to any single demographic; it spans wealth, race and geography. In fact, these statistics are mirrored across the globe, from Europe to Asia to Australia.

In 2017, Dr. Jean Twenge published "iGen," a groundbreaking book examining the recent decline in youth mental health. Her research revealed a disturbing correlation: the sharp rise in mental health struggles coincided with the moment smartphones became commonplace in the hands of young people.

But it's not just the presence of phones. Many of us grew up with telephones — though ours were corded and attached to the kitchen wall, requiring us to stretch the cord down the hall for privacy. The difference today? Smartphones provide untethered access to social media, infinite YouTube and TikTok videos and manipulated selfies showcasing a world where everyone appears happier, prettier and more successful. Unlike the corded phone that required negotiation with parents and



Dreamstime, TNS

An Apple iPhone X in November 2017.

siblings, these devices are always within reach, unchecked and unrestricted.

In a 2023 Gallup study, 95% of all teens reported owning a smartphone, with nearly half saying they are online "constantly." The average teenage boy spends five hours a day on his phone. The average girl? Even more.

While some benefits are realized with this technology, they have come at the cost of something far more important — our village. Our "village" — the deep, real-world connections with our local community — has eroded. Just a generation ago, it meant cul-de-sac barbecues, adult softball leagues and weekend game nights with friends. Just like the rotary phone we all once used, these experiences, once woven into daily life, have all but disappeared for many of us.

And for today's youth, picnicking with neighbors at the park, hanging out at the mall or spending time at Skate World with friends

are as foreign to them as a "please be kind and rewind" sticker on a beta max tape.

Instead of face-to-face interactions, many of our kids now spend their free time scrolling through curated social media feeds, comparing themselves to people they will never meet. The village is vanishing — and with it, the sense of community, belonging and real human connection.

Jonathan Haidt, in his recent book "The Anxious Generation," presents overwhelming data demonstrating that smartphones are not just correlated with rising youth mental health issues — they are a primary cause. Many social scientists now conclude that the replacement of real-world relationships with shallow, screen-based connections is directly impacting the well-being of our children.

While limiting phone use and supporting face-to-face engagement during schools may help, if our children simply return home,

close their door and endlessly scroll media feeds by themselves in their bedroom, little progress will be made.

So, where do we go from here? We can't undo technology, but we can take steps to restore balance in our children's lives.

Model healthy habits

Let's be honest — many adults are just as addicted to their phones as teenagers. We must put devices away during meals, road trips and family gatherings, prioritizing face-to-face conversations.

Create real-world opportunities for connection

Encourage kids to engage in activities that require in-person interaction. Support clubs, sports and outdoor play. Let them walk to school with friends or ride the bus to foster peer connections.

Delay the smartphone

If possible, hold off on giving your child a smartphone for as long as possible. If they do have one, set clear boundaries — no devices in bedrooms at night, no mindless scrolling during homework time and designated phone-free times.

Build a parent coalition

If only one child in a friend group has phone restrictions, they may feel left out. But if multiple families unite, setting similar boundaries, kids are far more likely to accept and embrace boundaries.

This transition won't be easy, but we must act. Our children need us to step in. This will take all of us. Yes, a village. And the time to act is now.

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