

Smartphones, Social Media, and Overnight Summer Camp

A national survey of 11- to 16-year-olds

June 2019



**Screen
Education**



JCC Association
of North America

Stark Statistical
Consulting



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Researchers and Partners



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Background

Screen Education has been conducting research on smartphone addiction since 2016. Its research has involved children, parents, teachers, corporate employees, schools, and overnight summer camps.

Overnight summer camps, in particular, offer a rare opportunity to research smartphone addiction because many of them do not permit smartphones. This means children and teens who are accustomed to having their smartphone with them at all times suddenly are placed in a situation where they are without it for a period of one to eight consecutive weeks.

Screen Education's research with teens attending smartphone-free overnight summer camps has found that this experience yields profound psychological benefits, and allows them to gain striking new insights into how their smartphones negatively effect them in their everyday lives.

One of the overnight camps with which Screen Education conducted research is Camp Livingston in Bennington, Indiana. Camp Livingston is one of 24 summer camps affiliated with JCC Association of North America. After learning of Screen Education's collaboration with Camp Livingston, JCC Association of North America reached out to Screen Education to explore the possibility of expanding this research beyond just one camp to conduct a large-scale survey of camps nationwide. As a thought leader in the camping and youth development spaces, JCC Association saw an opportunity to learn more about how camps can maximize the opportunities afforded by working with young people in a smartphone-free environment.

Excited by the opportunity to explore the idea in more depth, Screen Education and JCC Association began collaborating in the winter of 2018. Stark Statistical Consulting joined the team shortly after to ensure statistical accuracy and optimal data value.

Participating Camps

While this study was conducted by JCC Association and Screen Education, an invitation to participate was extended on social media to a broader cross-section of camps beyond the JCC Association camping network. Campers from the camps listed below participated in the survey.

Akiba Summer Camps	Camp Seneca Lake
Beber Camp	Camp Tevya
Berkshire Hills Eisenberg	Camp Wise
B'nai Brith of Ottawa	Camp Yavneh
Bold Earth Adventure Camps	Camp Young Judea Texas
Camps Airy & Louise	Capital Camps
Camp Anokijig	Eden Village Camp
Camp Barney Medintz	Emma Kaufmann Camp
Camp Blue Ridge	French Woods Festival of Performing Arts
Camp Chi	Gindling Hilltop Camp
Camp Daisy and Harry Stein	Herzl Camp
Camp Galil	NJY Camps
Camp Havaya	Perlman Camp
Camp Interlaken	Ramah California
Camp JCA Shalom	Ramah in New England
Camp Kingswood	Ramah in the Rockies
Camp Livingston	Tamarack Camps
Camp Mountain Chai	URJ Camp Coleman
Camp Moshava Ennismore	URJ Camp Harlem
Camp Moshava I.O.	URJ Eisner camp
Camp Nock-A-Mixon	URJ OSRUI
Camp Ojibwa	URJ 6 Points
Camp Pathfinder	Young People's Summer Stock
Camp Sabra	

Survey Details

Objective

The survey objective was to better understand the psychological benefits teens derive from living without their smartphones at smartphone-free overnight camps.

Method

The study comprised two data collection phases. Phase 1 consisted of a series of focus groups conducted at smartphone-free overnight summer camps around the United States. Phase 2 consisted of fielding an online survey between Oct. 2–22, 2018.

Data were collected using a 29-question questionnaire fielded via Survey Monkey. The initial nine questions of the survey qualified respondents to take the survey or collected demographic information.

Participation

Camps were invited to participate in this study by JCC Association. Those camps that chose to participate notified their campers’ families of their involvement and distributed the survey to their summer 2018 campers who at that time were ages 11–16. A small cross-section of camps also hosted on-site focus groups during the 2018 summer. In October, the survey link was shared on social media, welcoming any teen who attended any smartphone-free overnight camp in 2018 to participate in the survey.

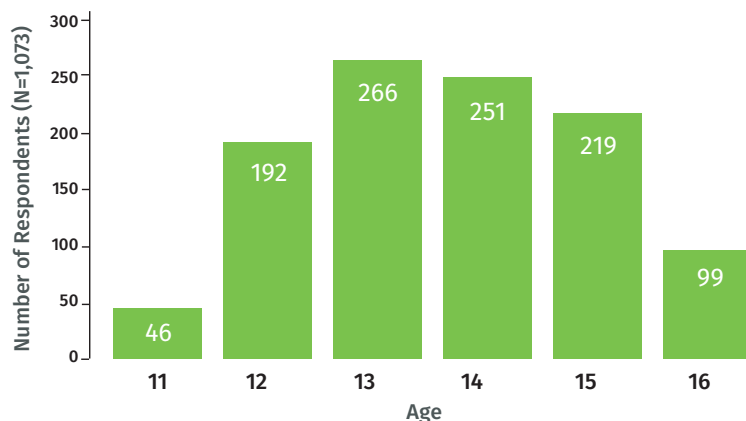
Survey Sample Profile

The sample consisted of 1,073 11- to 16-year-olds who attended 46 different summer camps in the United States, with a small number from Canada. All respondents were required to be between the ages of 11 and 16 while they were at camp during the summer of 2018. The number of respondents from each age are summarized in the graph below.

The genders of the respondents were split, with 60% self-reporting as “female,” 39% self-reporting as “male,” and 1% self-reporting as “other.”

Female respondents reported attending camp for an average of 4.2 weeks, which is not significantly different from the average of the male respondents, which is 4.3 weeks. In other words, findings that show differences related to tenure at camp are real differences and not due to sampling bias.

This sample size is sufficient for all statistics using the full sample to have margins of error of 3% or less. All 1,073 respondents completed the entire survey.



Executive Summary

The participants in this survey exhibited a high degree of dependence on their smartphones, with 50 percent reporting compulsive smartphone use every day. Participants are frustrated by their smartphone dependence; over two-thirds would be happier if they could spend less time on their smartphones.

Given this high level of smartphone dependence, it is not surprising that participants derive tremendous psychological benefits from an extended period of time without smartphone access while at overnight camp. For example, respondents almost unanimously said they got to know others better because they didn't have their smartphones. They felt less anxious and stressed because they didn't have to keep up with social media. They experienced a much healthier, less toxic, social environment—one with less “drama”(exaggerated importance of problems or situations), gossip, and bullying. They almost unanimously said they became more independent from their parents because they weren't able to call their parents for help resolving challenges they faced at camp. A strong majority felt they are less smartphone-dependent than their friends who don't attend overnight camp as a result of their extended time without their smartphones.

Because they derive these tremendous psychological benefits from smartphone-free overnight camp, participants recognized the value of this experience; they enjoyed it, and they appreciated the benefits it provided them. For example, they reported their magnitude of gladness from not having smartphone access as being four times greater than any frustration they felt. They were nearly unanimous in saying they were relieved to escape social media as a result of not having their smartphones. And nearly two-thirds said their camp experience would have been worse if they had brought their smartphones, with only a small number saying it would have been better.

The implications for this research are numerous, especially in an era when our society is grappling with how to mitigate the tremendous toll tech addiction is taking on our children.

As one of the only experiences available to children and teens that removes them from their smartphone for more than a day or two, smartphone-free overnight camp should be viewed as providing a necessary mental health benefit, rather than simply providing a fun experience.

Key Highlights

Respondents are highly dependent on their smartphones.

50% of respondents find themselves wanting to stop using their smartphone, but don't, every single day in their daily lives back home.

Respondents are frustrated by their smartphone dependence.

69% of respondents would be happier if they could spend less time on their smartphone in their daily lives back home.

Respondents are gladdened by overnight camp smartphone bans.

On a scale of 0-100, respondents rated their magnitude of gladness at lacking smartphone access while at camp at **82**.

On a scale of 0-100, respondents rated their magnitude of frustration at lacking smartphone access while at camp at **20**.

Respondents formed better relationships without smartphones.

92% of respondents got to know people better because they didn't have smartphone access.

Respondents were relieved to escape social media.

93% of respondents were relieved to have a break from social media while at camp.

Respondents were less anxious without social media.

80% of respondents felt less anxious and stressed at camp because they didn't have to keep up with social media.

Respondents experience a less toxic social environment.

51% of respondents witness less social drama at camp than they normally witness back home because they lack access to social media.

44% of respondents witness less gossip at camp than they normally witness back home because they lack access to social media.

57% of respondents witness less bullying than they normally witness back home because they lack access to social media.

Respondents become more independent from parents.

90% of respondents felt they became more independent as a result of not being able to communicate with their parents immediately, and having to handle situations on their own.

64% of respondents felt the inability to communicate with each other was harder on their parents than on themselves.

Respondents believe smartphones would degrade the camp experience.

72% of respondents said their camp experience would have been worse if they had brought smartphones.

Respondents believe smartphone-free overnight camp reduces smartphone dependence.

62% of respondents believe they are less dependent on their smartphones than friends who don't attend camp because of their extended smartphone detox.

Findings

Respondents use their smartphones compulsively in their everyday lives.

The researchers wanted to include in the survey a measure of the level of smartphone addiction among survey participants. However, no standard measure of smartphone addiction yet has been established. As a result, researchers have used a variety of survey questions to measure the level of smartphone addiction among survey participants. For example, in a 2016 national survey of teens, Common Sense Media measured the level of addiction among respondents by asking them whether they felt addicted to their smartphones. Fifty percent (50%) of respondents reported they did.

This was a very effective measure of smartphone addiction in 2016. However, the term “smartphone addiction” has since acquired pejorative connotations. Consequently, children are less willing to report themselves as feeling “addicted” to their smartphones.

While children are avoiding applying the label “addiction” to themselves, they are openly reporting that they engage in what essentially are addictive behaviors, such as compulsively using their smartphones despite wanting to stop. Therefore, the researchers decided to measure the level of addiction among survey respondents by asking them to self-report how often they use their smartphone compulsively—how often they find themselves unable to stop using their smartphone even when they want to stop using it. Fifty percent (50%) of respondents said they find themselves wanting to stop using their smartphones every single day, but can’t.

Thinking about your normal, daily life back at home, how often did you find yourself wanting to stop using your smartphone, but you couldn’t?



Respondents would be happier if they could spend less time on their smartphones in their everyday lives.

Sixty-nine percent (69%) of respondents said they know they would be happier if they could spend less time on their smartphone in their everyday lives at home.

Would you be happier if you could spend less time on your smartphone?



This level of frustration with their compulsive smartphone use approximates similar measures of frustration Screen Education found in its Teen Smartphone Addiction National Survey (2018). That survey revealed that 65% of teens wish they had a greater ability to self-limit their screen time, and 68% had attempted to reduce their screen time.

Campers are four times happier than frustrated by overnight camp smartphone bans.

Screen Education’s prior research revealed that when children and teens attend smartphone-free overnight camps they simultaneously experience contradictory feelings—they feel both frustration and happiness at not being able to use their smartphone for an extended period of time

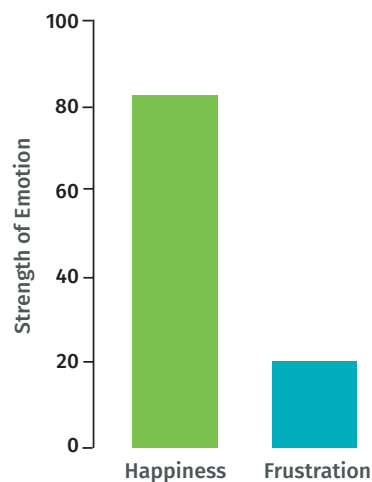
They experience frustration over their loss of connection to the outside world—over their inability to communicate with friends and family, and to access news. However, in focus groups conducted in this study almost every camper cited the lack of access to their music as their main source of frustration by not having their smartphone.

They simultaneously experience gladness at not having smartphone access because they are relieved to escape the stress and anxiety that their smartphones can generate.

What was remarkable, however, was the degree to which the gladness they experienced as a result of not having access to their smartphones was so much greater than the frustration they experienced.

On a scale of 0-100, campers rated their magnitude of gladness at not having smartphone access at 82, and their magnitude of frustration at 20. Basically, their happiness was four times (4X) greater than their frustration. Campers essentially are saying they are thrilled to escape their smartphones for a few weeks.

Respondents were four times happier than frustrated at their camp’s smartphone ban

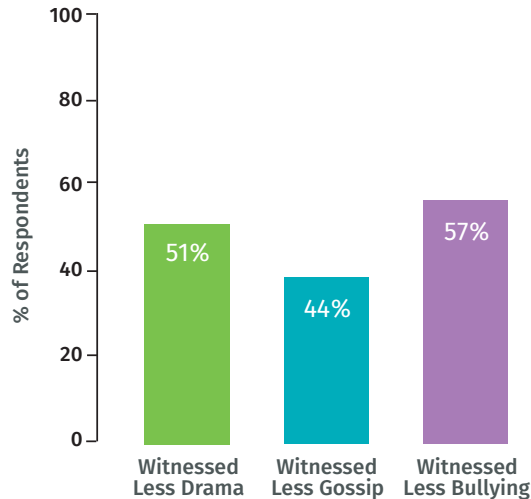


No access to social media reduces the emotional toxicity of the social environment at camp.

Social media usage can create a toxic social environment—one that is replete with gossip, social drama, and bullying. This toxicity burdens children and teens emotionally—42% are fearful of being gossiped about online, 57% are disturbed when they witness someone being gossiped about, and 89% are upset when they witness someone being cyberbullied (Screen Education, 2018).

Not using social media while at camp reduces the emotional toxicity of the social environment. As a result of not having access to social media while at camp, 51% of teen campers report witnessing less drama, 44% report witnessing less gossip, and 57% report witnessing less bullying than they witness when they have access to their smartphones.

Percentage of campers who witness less gossip, drama, and bullying at camp because they lack access to social media



In focus groups, campers described an intense and stressful social environment at home that no longer slows down at the end of the school day. Rather, it ramps up as teens return home after school and turn to their smartphones. Uninhibited by the anonymity and lack of face-to-face accountability, teens report experiencing and witnessing unhealthy and stressful social dynamics online that feels worse to them than what they experience in person.

Campers almost unanimously say they are relieved to escape social media while at camp.

Ninety-three (93%) of respondents are relieved to have a break from social media while at camp.

Were you relieved to escape social media while at camp?



Teens report relief from the toxic social environment and relief from the need to compete and compare themselves to others' online presence. They reported feeling pressure and anxiety about the number of "likes" they receive for anything they post online, and in focus groups, participants discussed the impact "likes" have on social status and popularity in school. They reported feeling overwhelmed by the need to keep up with their own social media presence, and some teens reported that their parents were maintaining their social media presence while they were away at camp, so they would not be "forgotten."

Campers nearly unanimously say smartphone bans allow them to get to know others better.

Screen Education's previous research revealed that smartphones prevent children from getting to know each other and forming friendships. Roughly one-third (1/3) of teens said they spend more time socializing with close friends by smartphone, rather than in person, and 69% wish they could spend more time socializing with close friends face to face, and less time online (Screen Education, 2018).

Yet even when children spend time physically together, smartphones still interfere with their ability to make deep social connections. For example, 52% of teens say that when they are together with close friends they spend extended periods of time silently sitting together on their smartphones (Screen

Education, 2018). In focus groups for this study, teens reported concern that if smartphones were allowed, despite knowing the downsides, they would be on their smartphones whenever possible.

This study confirms that communicating with others in person contributes to the positive reaction respondents have to the experience of attending smartphone-free overnight camps. It allows them to satisfy the deep need to connect with others directly rather than virtually through screens. Campers report having deeper friendships with even their new camp friends than with their friends at home, simply because they are communicating face-to-face.

Ninety-one percent (91%) of respondents report that they got to know other campers better because they didn't have their smartphones at camp.

Do you feel you got to know other people at camp better because you didn't have your smartphone with you?



A strong majority of respondents say attending smartphone-free overnight camp reduces smartphone dependence over time.

When children attend smartphone-free overnight camp, the experience of going without their smartphones awakens them to the benefits they derive from reducing screen time (Screen Education, 2018). This awareness motivates many campers to reduce their smartphone use over the long term after they leave camp and return to their daily lives. Sixty-two percent (62%) of respondents believe they are less smartphone-dependent than their friends who don't attend camp.

Do you think you're now less dependent on your smartphone than your friends who don't attend overnight camp due to the time you spent at camp without it?



Campers nearly unanimously say that not being able to communicate with parents fosters greater independence.

One of the goals of overnight camp is to develop independence and sound judgment with respect to handling daily challenges and decisions. Attending smartphone-free overnight camps facilitates the development of this independence because children aren't able to immediately turn to their parents for support, judgment, and advice.

Ninety percent (90%) of campers felt more independent as a result of not being able to communicate with their parents immediately through their smartphone. This resulted in their learning to handle issues on their own, and how to seek out support from friends, counselors, and other adults at camp there to provide support. Respondents report a change in their level of independence when they return home from camp, and more confidence in making their own decisions and advocating for themselves.

Did you become more independent at camp as a result of not being able to communicate with your parents immediately, and having to handle situations on your own?



Being unable to contact parents is harder on parents than on campers.

In focus groups, campers talked about how parents were not prepared to lose communication with them while they were at camp and wanted them to have access to their smartphones. They shared examples of anxiety-ridden parents creating systems to communicate directly through hand signals in camp photos, messages passed through camp visitors, or requests from parents to their older children on staff to sneak their smartphones to their younger siblings. By contrast, campers talked about being ready to unplug from their parents while at camp without their smartphones. It therefore was not surprising to find that sixty-four percent (64%) of respondents felt their inability to communicate with their parents because they didn't have smartphone access was harder on their parents than it was on them.

Was the fact that you weren't allowed to bring your smartphone to camp harder on you, or on your parents, because of your inability to communicate with each other?



A very strong majority of respondents feel less anxious at camp because they don't have to keep up with social media.

Screen Education's prior research revealed that campers felt less stressed at camp as a result of not having to engage in the toxic environment found on social media. This survey echoes this finding, with seventy-nine percent (79%) of respondents reporting feeling less anxious and stressed at camp because they don't have to keep up with social media.

Do you feel less anxious and stressed at camp because you don't have to keep up with social media?



A strong majority of respondents say having smartphones at camp would degrade the camp experience.

Respondents overwhelmingly report a desire for their camp to remain smartphone-free, with 72% saying their camp experience would be worse with smartphones, and 8% said their experience would have been better (primarily as a result of having access to their music). In focus groups, campers said that if they had been allowed to have smartphones, they would not get to know each other, they would not talk face to face, and they would spend most of their time in their cabins on their smartphones.

Please indicate how your camp experience would have been impacted if you had been permitted to bring your smartphone to camp.



Implications

Smartphone-free overnight camp is the only societal institution providing children with an extended and intentional digital detox experience.

Over the last two years, the news media has reported with increasing frequency on the “digital detox” as being an effective antidote to smartphone addiction and its negative mental health consequences. A digital detox involves spending an extended period of time—typically days or weeks—without screen access. A digital detox helps one regain a more natural state of mind, and put into perspective the impact screens have on one’s daily life. Overnight camps that ban smartphones essentially are the only societal institution offering children this highly-recommended, highly-valued digital detox experience.

Children appreciate the digital detox experience that overnight camp provides.

This survey confirms teens are very frustrated by their smartphone overuse, they enjoy their time at no-smartphone overnight camps, they are conscious of the benefits the digital detox experience affords them, and they are glad their camp does not permit smartphones. As one camper said in a focus group, “At camp I can focus on living my own real life, but at home I spend all my time following other people’s fake online lives.”

Smartphone-free overnight camps should maintain their no-phone policies.

This study is testament to the fact that young people derive tremendous psychological benefits from having time away from their smartphones while at overnight camp. They feel less stressed and anxious, experience a less toxic social environment, form deeper relationships, and become more independent from their parents. Unfortunately, some camps are feeling pressure to reverse their no-smartphone policies and to permit campers to permit smartphones. Given the findings of this research study, smartphone-free overnight camps should not succumb to any temptation or pressure to eliminate their no-smartphone policies. They should recognize the very unique and highly-valued experience they are providing by giving children this rare digital detox opportunity.

Smartphone-free overnight camp should be accessible to every young person.

Given that overnight camps are essentially the only societal institutions providing children with an extended digital detox experience, it would be beneficial to provide as many children as possible—ideally, every child—with the overnight camp experience.

Smartphone-free overnight camps should communicate to the public the mental health benefit their smartphone-free experience provides children.

Given the tremendous benefits children know they derive from being smartphone-free while at camp, overnight camps should communicate to the general public this mental health benefit through their marketing, publicity, and promotional initiatives. By promoting these mental health benefits summer camps will be educating families who otherwise wouldn’t know that overnight camp is a place where their children can experience a beneficial digital detox experience.

Barriers to participating in smartphone-free overnight camps should be eliminated.

In order to provide more children with the beneficial digital detox experience that overnight camps provide, barriers to participation should be eliminated. The most significant barrier to participation today is cost. Therefore, further efforts are needed to increase the amount of financial assistance available to families and to explore smartphone detox camp experiences at a lower price point.

Adults and families can benefit from a digital detox too.

Camps are increasing the number of family camp programs they offer, and they are reporting increases in the number of families participating. These programs could be an opportunity for camps to introduce a digital detox to parents as well as their children, as most camps say they do not enforce no-smartphone policies at their family camp programs.



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