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Teens and Technology

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The proliferation of electronic devices such as cell phones, tablets, computers, and video game consoles makes technology nearly an everyday fact of life for teens in the Western world. The vast majority of teens report accessing the Internet at least once per day and nearly a quarter of all teens said they are online "almost constantly," according to data gathered by the Pew Research Center. A 2015 study by Common Sense Media reported that when screen time with mobile devices, computers, video game consoles, and televisions is combined, 18 percent of the surveyed teens spend ten or more hours a day in front of a screen.

Critical Thinking Questions

Critical Thinking Questions

- How do teens use technology?
- How might technology affect social interaction?
- What problems might arise from technology use?

Where Teens Spend Tech Time

According to a 2015 Pew report, 92 percent of teenagers in America say they are online every day. More than half go online multiple times per day. This level of frequency is largely attributable to the availability of cell phones. According to the Pew report, nearly 75 percent of those between the ages of thirteen and seventeen own or have access to a smartphone, and 94 percent of these teens said they are online more than once per day. About 12 percent of teens say they do not have a cell phone of any type. However, even including those without mobile access, 68 percent of all teens log on to the Internet at least once per day, the Pew study found.

The ways teens use technology span the full range of available methods. Ninety percent of the teens who reported having a cell phone or having access to one said they use the devices to text; on average, teens send and receive thirty texts per day, according to the Pew study. Social media is another popular way teens use technology, with nearly three-quarters of all teens using more than one site such as Facebook, Instagram, or Snapchat. The study found some gender-related differences in how teens use technology for social connections. While girls ages thirteen to seventeen reported to Pew they are more likely to use social media sites to stay in touch and share information with their friends, boys in the same age group more frequently connect with their friends through video game consoles. These gaming relationships also help widen teens' social circles. The Pew study found that while 89 percent of gamers play with friends they know from elsewhere, 54 percent play with others they known only through the game and 52 percent play with people they would not otherwise consider friends.

Connecting with friends and family is one of the biggest reasons teens use technology, but they also access it for informational and educational purposes. Teens frequently turn to search engines and online sources to look things up for personal and school-related needs. They also use computers and mobile devices as study tools by downloading applications, known as apps, that can quiz them on subject matter, generate flash cards, help them record and share information from classes, organize schedules and research materials, provide study aids such as charts and graphs, and provide other resources to help them study and prepare for classes.

Some schools are encouraging this in various ways, such as distributing tablets for student use for school purposes, using electronic textbooks, and having teachers administer quizzes and tests in online formats. Some have begun offering course material in technology ethics and behavior. Experts project that as new teachers who grew up using technology take their places in the classroom, the impact of technology on learning will increase dramatically.

Drawbacks of Teen Technology Use

As technology use became more widespread, some made dire predictions about how it could have a negative impact on youth. It was feared that technology would absorb time that should be spent learning and interacting with others, and that teens brought up using technology would not be as smart or social as earlier generations. Some studies conducted at the University of California–Los Angeles (UCLA) have indicated an increased likelihood that some children who use technology extensively may miss out on the conversation, eye contact, and human interaction necessary for healthy mental development. These adolescents might be more likely to be diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), attachment disorders, depression, anxiety, and obsessive-compulsive conditions, these studies found. Researchers speculate that technology use would not cause conditions such as ADHD, but could exacerbate the effects.

Social media use in particular seems to increase the risk of adverse fallout for teens. The sense of anonymity and lack of direct feedback when comments are posted can make it easier for harsh and unkind comments to be made. This can embolden the poster to bullying behavior while also damaging the psyche of the person on the receiving end. Cyberbullying can be so serious that it has resulted in teen suicide; as a result, all fifty states have laws making it illegal to bully someone and in most states it is illegal to bully someone online.

Technology use by teens and adults has been blamed for increased incidents of automotive accidents. According to the National Safety Council, at any given moment in the United States, 7 percent of drivers are using cell phones. New technology in vehicles, such as dashboard text and social media, have contributed to distracted driving. The National Organization for Youth Safety reports that 58 percent of teens involved in car crashes are distracted.

Privacy is another concern, especially with cellphones. Parents are often concerned about who their children are communicating with online. Some individuals have created fake social media accounts to lure teens into dangerous situations or obtain images of nudity. Sometimes teens are victims of sexting, in which a nude or revealing image is shared multiple times or used to embarrass the subject. Social media and the Internet have made widely sharing such images almost effortless.

Benefits of Teen Technology Use

While some of the negative predictions of teens adopting technology have proven true, experts say there are a number of benefits as well. They cite the fact that teens largely continue to do what teens have always done—socializing, connecting, playing, studying, listening to music—but now use technology to aid in those activities. While some teens may be adversely affected by the lack of personal contact, experts say many more are helped by the ability to navigate the difficult challenges of teen relationships with less embarrassment because of technology.

Teens can take advantage of technology to carefully think out a communication, helping them develop better social skills. The ease of communicating through texting and quick phone calls can also help teens stay better connected to their friends than in the days before this technology was available. Many experts say these new methods of communication help teens form and share their identities and remain in contact with their friends, parents, and peers.

Common Teen Uses for Technology

Common Teen Uses for Technology

According to the Pew Research Center, teens use their mobile devices, most specifically cell phones, for accessing the Internet, posting photos, listening to music, watching videos, and playing games. Of all teens surveyed, the following are the most common reasons teens use their mobile devices.

- Accessing the Internet: 94 percent
- Texting: 90 percent
- Taking and sharing photos: 80 percent
- Playing games: 72 percent
- Visiting social media sites: 71 percent
- Listening to music: 60 percent
- Watching videos: 32 percent

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