

How to manage conflicts and set examples when parenting your teenagers in a digital era

July 31 2024, by Wendy Ellis and Lynda Hutchinson



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Teenagers' needs for independence and privacy increase dramatically during adolescence. Today, many parents struggle with concerns about

their teens' screen time and digital safety, and for good reason. There is widespread opinion that technology and social media use is [harmful for young people](#).

However, as many parents will know, getting teens to reduce their screen time is often far easier said than done. Conflict often results when parents voice their concerns and [institute their authority over teens](#). Our [research](#) team has been examining the role of the [family](#) and [technology](#) in adolescent development over the last 20 years.

[Our research with Canadian parents and youth](#) has indicated that 85 percent of parents say that conflict with their teens over technology use negatively impacts the whole family. Teens are likely to shut down or hide their activities from [family members](#). We found that 70 percent of teens admitted to keeping secrets about their online behavior.

This cycle of family conflict and teen secrecy plays out in households around the country and parents are unsure about how to protect teens from online harms and maintain open family communication.

Teen tech use

Almost 95 percent of adolescents have smartphone access, and about 50 percent of teens say they use the internet ["almost constantly."](#) During the early teen years, when the brain is going through rapid transformations, children seek more freedom, belongingness with peers and self-discovery, and they tend to take more risks.

Unlike any generation before, 21st century teens may be trying to fulfill these developmental needs using technology. [This was especially true during the pandemic](#), when Canadian teens were forced to connect to others online, with both positive and [negative consequences](#) for well-being. To date, we do not fully understand how pandemic restrictions

have impacted teens. We also do not know how technology affects teens in the long-term.

However, some experts have warned that everyday technology use and screen time alone [does not indicate a teen is experiencing dysfunction](#). Instead, specific behaviors and motivations for teens' technology and [social media use](#), including [cyberbullying or problematic and deceptive uses](#), may provide a better understanding of negative consequences.

[Research has found that parents' and teens' online behavior patterns are similar to one another](#). In our research, presented at the 2024 Canadian Psychological Association in Ottawa, we found parents who spend more time online have teens who spend more time online. Parents who reported experiencing addictive online behaviors had teens who also reported similar levels of addictive online behaviors. Teens who reported more pressure to gain likes and followers had parents who reported similar levels of social [media](#) pressure.

This indicates that online behavior may be modeled intergenerationally. Parents model online behavior that their teens are likely to emulate, and vice versa. It also means that if parents are more aware of their own technology and social media use, they can model balanced online and offline engagement.

What can parents do?

Parents have been given many recommendations to help their teens. At present, there is [mixed support](#) that any specific parental practices [can mitigate problematic technology use during adolescence](#)

However, [cultivating family warmth, cohesion and communication helps teens manage their social media and technology use](#). Our research shows that high levels of parent-child communication, strong parent-child

relationships and [self-regulation](#) corresponded with lower levels of problematic social media use and less secrecy between parents and teens.

To support teens' autonomy, families that foster open dialogues about online activities, and establish trust and rules about social technology, are likely to alter the negative impacts on teens.

Together, parents and teens could [discuss their perspectives on this topic](#). [Here are some questions](#) to ask yourself and your teens about their behavior and move beyond simply checking in on [screen time](#):

How do I/my teen spend time online?

Genuine and positive interactions with others online can be beneficial for well-being. However, teens who spend long periods of time scrolling through social media might engage in [negative social comparisons](#) or enact [false self-presentations that can lead to insecurity](#).

What am I/my teen doing online?

Spending time online to maintain [close relationships](#) and inspire creativity (in person or digitally) appear to be adaptive motives for engaging with social technology. But motivations to engage with it stemming from anxiety, fear of missing out, or addiction tend to be maladaptive. Motives to [increase perceived social status](#) and seek attention [can also be harmful](#).

Who am I/my teen spending time online with?

Are you or your teen spending time online alone, with friends or strangers? Are you watching content together? While spending time online together can be fun and a great conversation starter, [co-using](#)

[media may also be associated with problematic use](#), possibly by encouraging more time online.

Reflecting on our own technology use as parents, and encouraging our [teens](#) to do the same, can enhance self-regulation, communication and cohesion within the family and, in turn, increase digital well-being.

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