

Teenage Cell Phone Addiction: Are You Worried About Your Child?

At what point does reliance on and use of cell phones and the Internet turn into an addiction? What you can do to help your kids avoid developing an addiction

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It's no big secret that teens have a complex relationship with technology. They are expected to use technology both in and out of the classroom to make the grade, they manage their social lives through various apps and social media platforms, and they use technology to stay organized and on top of their many, many activities. Today's teens face intense levels of pressure. Sometimes their phone use is tied to recreational activity and can help them relieve stress, but other times they use their phones to keep up with their busy lives. Ensuring that kids' technology use doesn't result in more stress for them isn't an easy task; there's no clean-cut way to delete stressful technology activity. So how can parents, let alone kids themselves, navigate the often stressful world of tech?

Although there isn't a recognized "smartphone addiction" diagnosis, it's natural for parents to wonder if a teen's apparent obsession with a smartphone qualifies as addictive behavior. After all, it can be incredibly frustrating to attempt to hold a conversation with someone when they can't peel their eyes away from their phone.

Teen Cell Phone Addiction: The Stats

As it turns out, parents have reason to worry. Results of a [2016 Common Sense Media Report](#) found that 50 percent of teens "feel addicted" to mobile devices, while 59 percent of parents surveyed believe that kids are addicted to their devices. This survey also showed that 72 percent of teens and 48 percent of parents feel the need to immediately respond to texts, social-networking messages, and other notifications; 69 percent of parents and 78 percent of teens check their devices at least hourly.

A [2018 Pew Research Report](#) showed that 45 percent of teens said they use the Internet “almost constantly,” and another 44 percent said they go online several times a day. According to this report, 50 percent of teenage girls are “near-constant” online users, compared to 39 percent of teenage boys. 95 percent of teens have access to a smartphone.

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Worried you may be suffering from Internet Addiction Disorder?

Take our FREE Internet addiction quiz to see if you may benefit from further diagnosis and treatment.

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Given that teens use their smartphones for a variety of reasons, both personal and

academic (often simultaneously), it helps to focus less on counting the minutes of use and more on *how* they use their smartphones. Parents hear a lot about the importance of teaching balance, but part of evaluating for a healthy balance lies in understanding how teens actually use their phones and what purpose that use serves them. YouTube, for example, can be both recreational and academic.

Recognizing the Symptoms of Cell Phone and Internet Addiction

A 2016 report published in [Frontiers in Psychiatry](#) suggests using the DSM-5 criteria for compulsive gambling and substance abuse to measure problematic smartphone use. While problematic smartphone use is not defined as an addiction, it can be evaluated as a behavioral disorder.

Using this model, potential symptoms might include the following:

- Conscious use in prohibited contexts or potentially dangerous situations (e.g. texting while driving)
- Excessive use that causes conflicts with family; withdrawing from family or shared events in favor of smartphone use
- Negative effects on school, family, social, or emotional functioning
- Continued excessive use despite negative effects
- Impulsive, frequent, constant checking of phone, even in short bursts (feels strong need to check every few minutes)

- Insomnia or sleep disturbances related to frequent checking
- Excessive urgency or need to be connected
- Increase in use to achieve satisfaction or counteract dysphoric (sad) mood
- Need to respond immediately to messages and alerts
- Increased anxiety and/or irritability if phone is not accessible
- Feelings of unease when unable to use the phone

It can be difficult to distinguish between normal (or slightly elevated) daily use and problematic use. It helps to ask yourself the following questions:

- Does my teen become angry, irritable, anxious, or even violent when the phone is taken away or unable to be used?
- Does my teen skip or avoid social events or extracurricular activities to use the smartphone instead?
- Is my teen's personal care (hygiene), friendships, family relationships, or school work negatively affected by smartphone use?
- Does smartphone use interfere with my teen's normal sleep routine?
- Are there any major changes in my teen's eating habits that can't otherwise be explained?
- Are there any major changes in mood that can't otherwise be explained?

How to Help Teens Overcome a Smartphone Addiction

Believe it or not, smartphone use can be beneficial for teens. Teens use smartphones to connect with peers, seek help on school assignments, and they can even use apps to help them get organized. Although it might seem like teens are constantly connected, many use their devices within healthy limits.

It's important to empower teens to take control of their own use of smartphones and create and maintain a healthy balance. This isn't a one-time conversation. A few things you can do help provide guidance and support include the following:

- **Educate:** Talk openly about the benefits and potential pitfalls of screen time. Lecturing rarely yields positive results, but asking your teens for input about the pros and cons

can spark lively conversations. How does too much screen time affect us physically, emotionally, academically, and socially? What can we gain from using our smartphones responsibly?

- **Make a plan:** Talk about setting healthy limits and boundaries for the family and what checks and balances you can use to stick to them, like not allowing phone use during dinner. Remember, teens aren't the only ones prone to overuse. What happens if parents are pushing the family screen time limits?
- **Monitor use as a family:** Teens look for workarounds when they feel like they're being watched. Make monitoring a family goal so that teens own up to their usage and behavior online. There are several apps available to monitor how and when your teens use their phones. The iPhone now has a "screentime" setting. You can use this to track usage and set healthy limits for specific apps (e.g. xx hours per day for social media) and to shut down apps at a certain time. Talk with your teens about healthy and realistic limits.
- **Create a check-in policy:** Phones, tablets, and laptops should be removed from the bedroom at night to curb sleep disturbance and insomnia. Create a plan to check devices in at a certain time in the evening and out in the morning.
- **Establish screen-free zones:** Meals, family outings, and social gatherings are examples of times when frequent checking negatively affects relationships. Set boundaries for screen use in these settings and stick to them.
- **Model healthy boundaries:** When parents are glued to their phones, teens learn that this is appropriate behavior. Stick to the limits and boundaries you set.

What do I do if my teen can't stop using the phone?

If you suspect that your teen is "addicted" or smartphone use is negatively affecting your teen's daily functioning, get help.

- **Cognitive Behavior Therapy** can help your teen change maladaptive thoughts and behaviors into healthy and positive ones.
- **Individual process therapy** can help teens recognize and work through feelings and experiences that contribute to problematic use.
- **Download apps** designed to help curb use (e.g. Breakfree and Mental)
- **Practice mindfulness** to curb urges.

- **Practice adaptive coping strategies** like exercise, deep breathing, and progressive muscle relaxation.

It's smart for parents to keep tabs on levels of smartphone use among teens, as mindless scrolling and viewing can waste hours of time and affect daily functioning. With healthy limits in place and frequent conversations, families can establish digital diets that work for the whole family.

Last Updated: Jan 15, 2019