

Screen Damage & Life-Giving Alternatives

Children (Approx. Ages 3–11)

What Screens Do

Children’s brains are highly plastic. Screens—especially fast-paced, highly stimulating content—can shape attention, emotional regulation, and imagination before these capacities are fully formed.

Commonly Observed Harms

- Shortened attention span
- Increased irritability and emotional dysregulation
- Reduced imaginative and symbolic play
- Sleep disruption
- Delayed social skill development

What Screens Replace

- Unstructured play (critical for cognitive growth)
- Reading and being read to
- Outdoor exploration
- Boredom (which fuels creativity)



Life-Giving Alternatives

- Free imaginative play (blocks, drawing, role-play)
- Reading aloud daily
- Nature walks and outdoor play
- Music, singing, movement
- Simple participation in household tasks

Practical Tips for Reducing Screens

- Replace screen time with something specific (not “nothing”)
- Establish predictable daily rhythms
- Avoid screens before bedtime
- Adults model limited phone use

Research & Resources

- American Academy of Pediatrics – Media & Children <https://www.aap.org/en/patient-care/media-and-children/>
- Christakis, D. (2019). The Importance of Play (JAMA Pediatrics) <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamapediatrics>
- Hirsh-Pasek et al., Becoming Brilliant <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/becoming-brilliant-reimagining-education-for-our-time/>

Teens (Approx. Ages 12–19)

What Screens Do

Adolescence is a period of identity formation. Social media and constant connectivity amplify comparison, anxiety, and emotional volatility during a vulnerable developmental stage.

Documented Psychological Harms

- Increased anxiety and depression
- Fear of missing out (FOMO)
- Body image distortion
- Sleep deprivation
- Heightened social comparison

What Screens Hijack

- Self-worth and identity formation
- Time for reflection and solitude
- In-person friendships
- Risk-taking that builds resilience

Life-Giving Alternatives

- Physical challenge (sports, hiking, training)
- Creative skill development (music, art, writing)
- Service and volunteering
- Journaling and reflection
- Face-to-face community

Practical Tips for Pulling Away

- Phone-free bedrooms at night
- Scheduled offline blocks
- Accountability with peers
- Replace scrolling with purposeful effort

Research & Resources

- Twenge, J. (2017). iGen <https://www.jeantwenge.com/igen-book>
 - Haidt, J. – Social Media and Mental Health <https://jonathanhaidt.com/social-media/>
 - CDC Youth Risk Behavior Survey <https://www.cdc.gov/yrbbs>
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20-Somethings (Emerging Adults)

What Screens Do

This life stage is meant for formation—vocational, relational, and moral. Constant digital consumption fragments attention and replaces agency with passive stimulation.

Common Harms

- Doom-scrolling anxiety
- Chronic comparison
- Decision paralysis
- Loneliness despite connectivity
- Reduced spiritual attentiveness

What Is Lost

- Deep work and mastery
- Long-term habits
- Vocational clarity
- Embodied community
- Silence and reflection

Life-Giving Alternatives

- Skill-building hobbies
- Reading long-form books
- Mentorship relationships
- Faith practices (prayer, Scripture, reflection)
- Physical routines

Practical Detachment Tools

- Delete apps (not accounts)
- Turn phone grayscale
- One screen-free evening per week
- Replace consumption with creation

Research & Resources

- Newport, C. (2016). Deep Work <https://www.calnewport.com/books/deep-work/>
- Turkle, S. (2015). Reclaiming Conversation <https://www.mit.edu/~sturkle/>
- American Psychological Association — Stress in America™ 2017: Technology and Social Media (PDF) <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2017/technology-social-media.pdf>
- APA Monitor on Psychology (2022) — Media overload is hurting our mental health <https://www.apa.org/monitor/2022/11/strain-media-overload>

Adults (Including Midlife and Beyond)

What Screens Do

Screens often dominate leisure time, offering escape without restoration. Over time, this leads to distraction, emotional numbing, and loss of depth.

Psychological & Spiritual Costs

- Chronic distraction
- Anxiety cycles from news feeds
- Passive leisure replacing active rest
- Reduced prayer, reflection, and presence
- Emotional fatigue

What Screens Crowd Out

- Wisdom and contemplation
- Meaningful rest
- Deep relationships
- Attentiveness to God and others

Life-Giving Alternatives

- Reading and writing
- Walking and time outdoors
- Prayer, meditation, Scripture
- Hands-on projects
- Intentional service

Sustainable Changes

- Weekly screen sabbath
- Evening device cutoff
- Silence instead of background noise
- Choose one intentional leisure practice

Research & Resources

- Ward et al. (2017). Brain Drain (Journal of the Association for Consumer Research) <https://www.journals.uchicago.edu>
- Newport, C. – Digital Minimalism <https://www.calnewport.com/books/digital-minimalism/>
- Pew Research – Technology & Life <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/>

Closing Note

What we repeatedly attend to shapes what we love—and eventually who we become.

Not calling for less life, but for better life: more present, more purposeful, more faithful, and more human.