

# No Simple Answers for Kids and Screens

*The instinct to regulate children's digital consumption is admirable.  
But what if tech isn't the bogeyman we think it is?*

**By SARA KONRATH**



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*Research on the effect of social media on kids' mental health is mixed, with some saying it may increase empathy.*

**C**HANCES ARE, YOU'RE reading this on a screen. Maybe it's first thing in the morning after your phone alarm rings, in the moments before the hectic battle to get the kids ready for school. Or perhaps it's when you're trying to turn off your mind after a long day of juggling the demands of parenting, work, and household chores. Or maybe it's during that one peaceful hour of the day at your child's soccer practice.

These are typical scenes in the daily lives of American parents. Parents are so stressed that in 2024, the U.S. Surgeon General issued an advisory about it. The report found that 48 percent of parents said the stress they feel is overwhelming on most days; this share was more than 1.8 times higher than it was among other adults. Main sources of stress included rising financial strain and increased time demands. So, if you're using your phone to relax, self-regulate, learn something new, or stay connected, then as a fellow parent,

an educator, and a social scientist, I'm OK with that.

But according to a new book, *10 Rules for Raising Kids in a High-Tech World*, by Jean M. Twenge, you (and your kids) won't understand or remember this review as well if you read it on a screen as opposed to on paper (and there's some evidence for this). If you're one of the only 16 percent of American adults who reads for pleasure each day, should you read this specific book? My research examines topics related to youth, digital tech, empathy, and burnout, and I also understand firsthand how complex today's digital environment is in our homes and classrooms, which is why I was excited to read it.



### **10 Rules for Raising Kids in a High-Tech World**

by Jean M. Twenge

Atria Books / Simon & Schuster, 2025, \$27, 224 pages

The book is organized around 10 rules for children that are supposed to help parents protect them from the dangers of digital technology by simplifying decision-making. They are:

- Rule 1: You're in charge.
- Rule 2: No electronic devices in the bedroom overnight.
- Rule 3: No social media until age 16—or later.
- Rule 4: First phones should be basic phones.
- Rule 5: Give the first smartphone with the driver's license.
- Rule 6: Use parental controls.
- Rule 7: Create no-phone zones.
- Rule 8: Give your kids real-world freedom.
- Rule 9: Beware the laptop—and the gaming console and the tablet.
- Rule 10: Advocate for no phones during the school day.

Twenge, a professor of psychology at San Diego State University, justifies these rules in part by documenting a few major trends that afflict today's young people: increases in mental health symptoms, declining sleep and time with friends, and delayed milestones like getting a driver's license, working, and dating. She asserts that these trends are all due to the rise of social media and smartphone use since around 2010.

I've co-authored two scientific papers with Twenge on narcissism trends among American youth, so I am familiar with her work on generational changes in the United States. But I don't think it's that simple: Some of the trends (sleep, getting together with friends, milestones) appear to have started long before smartphones were in virtually every pocket, while others (declining mental health) appear to align with the wide adoption of these devices.

With cultural trends, it's tempting to zero in on one specific cause (the phones in young people's hands) and ignore others (the phones in adults' hands, and the reasons we turn to them). It's impossible to know

for sure why these changes have happened. The year 2010 followed a major global recession, which put long-term economic strain on all except the richest of us, with associated demands on our time. Yet Twenge and I found that narcissism—which had been rising in American youth from the 1980s on—began declining around 2009. With another research team, I found that empathy showed a parallel trend, declining in American youth after the late 1970s, then rising after about 2009.

This prompts the question: Based on these trends (which are not mentioned in the book), did the rise in digital-tech use among kids also cause narcissism to decrease and empathy to increase? Again, we can't know this for sure. However, research that followed teens over time found that those who used social media more often grew more in their empathy over the next year. And my research has found that smartphones can be used to increase empathy and generous behaviors among youth. This, along with increases in empathy since 2009, suggests that digital tech may have some benefits—or at least, that it may not be as uniformly harmful as Twenge argues.

Yet isn't digital tech to blame for the rise in youth mental health symptoms? The wealth of research on this topic has often found mixed or no effects from social media. Some evidence suggests that taking a break from devices can bring benefits, yet even this conclusion applies only for some outcomes and not others. At the same time, certain apps can help to reduce stress and promote better mental health, and smartphones are now regularly used as part of mental health treatment. Beyond the many tools and programs that now exist in this space, the effects of typical daily use on mental health and well-being likely depend on many things: who is using it, for what reason, how they're using it, for how long, and so on.

When we listen to teens talk about how digital tech or social media affect them, they say that it's complex: They don't think it's as unilaterally harmful as *10 Rules* suggests, and they feel that sometimes it can be helpful. That's why I love the book *Behind Their Screens: What Teens Are Facing (and Adults Are Missing)*, by my colleagues Emily Weinstein and Carrie James, co-founders of the Center for Digital Thriving at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. Drawing on teens' voices, it challenges beliefs adults have about how teens use screens, offering nuance and complexity about both the benefits they gain and the difficulties they face in their constantly online world. Rather than creating a standoff between adults and youth, this book helps adults see teens' world empathically, so they can provide appropriate guidance.

After they wrote that book, Weinstein and James continued to listen to teens, and we worked together to develop a "Tech with Care Index" to understand how teens were successfully using digital tech to take care of themselves and others. Tech with Care involves being thoughtful and deliberate in using digital tech, to purposely enhance one's own and others' well-being. We found that teens who scored high on our index had better mental health and used technology in more compassionate and kind ways. In *10 Rules*, Twenge calls these kinds of approaches "squishy" and advocates for clear rules. While I'm not opposed to offering guidelines and brainstorming helpful ideas, I think such practices pair well with having a clear north star of values guiding us, which is what Tech with Care can facilitate. If it's not helping yourself and others, it's probably not a good way to spend your screentime.

So if digital technology is not the main cause of these troubling mental health trends in youth, what could be contributing to them? In a 2024 report I co-authored with Weinstein and James in partnership

with Common Sense Media, we found that a majority of American teens said they were facing “Game Plan” pressures to have their future path figured out and “Achievement” pressures to be exceptional and impressive. Teens said that the pressures were coming from many sources and that adults in their lives, including parents and educators, played a key role. Although social media contributed to some pressures, especially “Appearance” pressures to look their best or present themselves in a certain way, teens shared a nuanced role in which social media at times also *reduced* their pressures.

This aligns with a 2024 Pew Research report that compared parents’ and teens’ responses about why teen life is harder today than it was 20 years ago. More parents (41 percent) than teens (25 percent) said social media was responsible. And tellingly, more teens (31 percent) than parents (16 percent) said teens have it harder today because of increased pressures and expectations. Both parents and teens agreed that digital tech could also make things easier today compared to the past.



Jean M. Twenge

*10 Rules* offers some commonsense guidelines, a few of which I already follow in my home. While reading, I was actively taking notes and talking with my family about how we might apply them. It’s a great resource for practical, step-by-step advice if you agree with a guideline and want to try it out. I’m grateful for the practical tips to deal with what feels like an onslaught of information in a complex parenting environment. (And this book doesn’t even touch AI.) But although it’s useful, the book at times has the tone of a “no-nonsense net-nanny,” with the potential to induce even more anxiety and guilt among already stressed and stretched-thin parents. There are reasons that parents are giving their kids phones, and it’s worth considering the fraught context of modern parenting. I agree with Twenge that since tech companies and regulators are not taking responsibility, parents ultimately have to make these tough choices at home. Yet some of the suggestions are only possible for a privileged few with extra time and money on their hands, such as sending your child on unaccompanied flights to teach them independence (an application of the book’s Rule 8).

If you’re looking for thoughtful, scientifically based advice on parenting and digital tech, psychologist Jacqueline Nesi’s *Techno Sapiens* Substack provides a great resource. Reading Nesi’s charming weekly newsletters feels like having the first groggy-eyed coffee of the morning with your best friend—if your best friend were one of the world’s leading scholars on youth digital-tech use. The key difference is empathy: Nesi makes readers feel like she’s walking beside us, not imposing a list of strict rules. Andrew Przybylski, director of research at the Oxford Internet Institute, is another trusted global expert in this space. Both of them, along with James and Weinstein at the Center for Digital Thriving, share the more nuanced and scientifically accurate approach, as reflected in these words on the center’s homepage: “Technology is both . . . helpful and harmful, exhausting and energizing, connecting and dividing.” The view presented in *10 Rules* is more one-sided. Even though the book doesn’t incorporate the latest science (and its nuances) on digital tech and youth, it could still provide a shortcut to helpful ideas to try in your family. **E**

*Sara Konrath is the director of the Interdisciplinary Program for Empathy and Altruism Research at Indiana University's Lilly Family School of Philanthropy and University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research.*

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