

## **Powerful Parenting for September 21, 2022**

We hope you find this information useful, inspiring, challenging, helpful, sobering, insightful, etc. If you want to be added or taken off this list, just let us know. If you know someone who could benefit from it, pass it along. If you have any comments, concerns, want to be added or deleted from this list, e-mail [david@claytonbaptistchurch.com](mailto:david@claytonbaptistchurch.com).

### **Why Are American Teenages So Sad and Anxious?**

The United States is experiencing an extreme teenage mental-health crisis. It is one of the most troubling social phenomena in the country today. From 2009 to 2021, the share of American high-school students who say they feel “persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness” rose from 26 percent to 44 percent, according to a new CDC study. This is the highest level of teenage sadness ever recorded. So why? What is the mechanism?

To be fair, we have freaked out about technology basically every time there’s new technology. Plato said writing was bad for us. Trithemius said that the printing press was bad for us. What is social media doing to teenage minds that is having this negative effect?

Teen girls will say, “Oh, look at everyone else’s perfect life.” They have filters and they only pick their best moments. And of course, your average is always worse than their best. So we all know about that. The social comparison, that’s a big process. But the most poisonous, dangerous, damaging process is you post photos of yourself, your body, your face for strangers to rate ... and then the pain you feel when people make a critical comment, or when they say nothing at all.

So what we have here is a platform that is unsafe at any speed. People talk about how to tweak it. “Well, let’s hide the ‘like’ counter,” is what Instagram tried. There is no way, no tweak, no architectural change that will make it OK. We didn’t know this in 2012. We thought, “Oh, what a great outlet for creativity.” But now we do. We have this mental health catastrophe unfolding, there is no other explanation.

Another explanation is that the rise of youth sadness has something to do with the decline of social life for teens. And that has to do with the fact that social media use has a displacement effect. Teens spend, according to some surveys, between five and seven hours a day on their phones, most of which is spent on social media. And that’s 40 percent of their waking hours. It’s displacing time with friends and family. But it’s not just displacing, it’s more than that.

So to talk about this one, here’s where we have to talk about normal mammal development, because mammals have this unique life plan. We have big brains, we’re very social, and we have live birth, a huge investment by the parents. But there’s a long period of childhood play; puppies and kitties play a lot. And human children play a lot for many, many years. Humans have this really interesting pattern where our growth actually slows down between around age 7 and 12, and then we hit a growth spurt. And this is kind of a timeout period of physical growth to allow for cultural learning. So all over the world, once kids reach around the age of 7, they can take the cattle down to the river, they can scavenge and scour and learn hunting, they’re copying adult behavior patterns, but they’re still very, very playful.

This is a crucial period of brain development and social development, age 7 to 12. If you were born before 1982, most kids went out to play with no adult supervision around 6, 7, or 8 years old. There was a lot of crime in the ’60s, ’70s, and ’80s, but kids went out and played unsupervised. And then all of a sudden in the ’90s, we freak out about child abduction, even though the crime rate is plummeting.

We say, “It’s too dangerous for you to go out.” Now they can be on television, they can be on computers. But then when the iPhone comes in and social media comes in, now this is so fun and so addictive, and there’s kind of a reinforcement pattern with the touch screen that is much more addictive than anything on a computer, which is not a touch screen, or on a television screen, which is not responsive at all. It’s like kids need millions of experiences of conflict, getting lost, struggling with something, failing in a low-stakes environment. That’s what play is all about, play is what develops our brain. But what we did beginning around 2009 was we put all of our kids on experience blockers.

That is, we said, “All that experience that you’re supposed to be getting, going out with your friends, and making a fort in the woods, and learning how to shoplift or not shoplift,” whatever it is, “all the experience that kids are supposed to get, let’s just stop that.” This is all backed by data. Compared with their counterparts in the 1990s, early 2000s, today’s teens are less likely to go out with their friends by their own admission. This is the CDC asking kids, “How much time are you spending with your friends?” That has gone down. The share of kids getting driver’s licenses has gone down. The share of kids participating in youth sports—this isn’t in self-reports, these are the youth sports leagues saying how many kids are signing up for youth sports—that has declined as well.

So you have less sociality, you have less going out, and you have less literal play. It’s not just displacement, it’s also displacing sleep. The share of high school students who say they get eight or more hours of sleep per night declined 30 percent between 2007 and 2019. It’s like dominoes falling.

Like being around people, play teaches you resilience, of course, but it’s also like a social tonic, it’s a social medicine. We all have sad moments in life. What makes most people happy is being around people that they love the most. So if you live in a stressful world, and growing up is so stressful—it will always be filled with ennui, there’s no innovation that can get us around that. But if we take away sociality, if we take away hanging out with people in person, then you keep the disease and you remove the social tonic, you remove the medicine of just being with the people that you love. And that’s the part that is really concerning about youth being sucked and funneled into the screen of a phone.

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### **Majority of Teens and Preteens Are Self-Conscious About Their Appearance**

The majority of teens and preteens are self-conscious about their appearance, a new national poll suggests. Nearly two thirds of parents who responded to the poll said their child was insecure about some aspect of their appearance, while one in five said their teen avoided certain situations, like being photographed, because they feel too self-conscious, according to the C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital National Poll on Children’s Health at University of Michigan Health.

For the most part, the findings in teens weren’t surprising, said the report’s coauthor Dr. Susan Woolford, an associate professor and co-director for the Mott Poll at the University of Michigan C.S. Mott Children’s Hospital. What did surprise Woolford was that body image issues showed up in younger kids, too, she said. “We found that negative messages were getting even to the younger children,” Woolford said. “One would hope that it would be possible to enjoy childhood without a negative body image.” Negative body images can have a broader consequences. “We do know that having a poor self-image can affect self-esteem and can ultimately impact emotional well-being,” Woolford said.

One way parents can help is by telling children that who they are inside is much more important than how they look, Woolford said. Some parents may be inadvertently sending their kids the wrong message by complaining about their own external appearance, obsessing about weight, wrinkles or even the odd unexpected pimple.

To take a closer look at how teens and preteens view their bodies, Woolford and her colleagues queried 1,653 parents who had a child between the ages 8 and 18 in April of this year. The most common causes of a negative body image were: weight (31%), skin conditions such as acne (32%) and hair (27%). A smaller number of parents listed height (17%) and facial features (12%) as what their children were most insecure about. Nearly one in five parents of girls also said their child was self-conscious about their breasts.

Parents of teens were more likely than parents of younger children ages 8-12 to report their child had body image issues: 73% of teen girls and 69% of teen boys compared to 57% of younger girls and 49% of younger boys.

Poor body image can affect kids' lives, the researchers found. Among parents who said their children were self-conscious about their looks, 27% said they felt it had a negative impact on their child's self-esteem and 20% said it affected their child's willingness to participate in activities, with 18% avoiding being photographed. Some parents (8%) said they had noticed their child restricting what they were eating because they felt self-conscious about their bodies. Nearly one-third of parents (31%) said they had heard their child making negative comments about their own appearance. One in three parents said their child had been treated unkindly because of their appearance: 28% by other children, 12% by strangers, 12% by other family members, 5% by teachers, and 5% by healthcare providers.

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