

EDUCATOR DISCUSSION GUIDE

ABOUT THIS GUIDE

This Educator Discussion Guide is intended to support you in your classroom as you review *Screenagers* and discuss its impact with your students. The guide contains a synopsis of many of the film's **main stories**, references to **research studies** featured in the film, and sample **discussion questions**.

ABOUT THE FILM

Runtime: 68 minutes. **Directed by:** Delaney Ruston, M.D.

Screenagers is about the impact of the digital age on children and how to help families minimize harmful effects and find balance. After seeing the film, people tell us that they feel more confident and better equipped to establish balance around screen time.

OPENING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

- What scenes or moments in the film stand out in your mind as significant? Why?
- What did you learn from this film?
- If you could ask anyone in the film a question, whom would you choose and what would you ask him or her?

FEATURED PEOPLE, RESEARCH AND DISCUSSION PROMPTS

1. Teachers and Students Discuss: How do personal digital devices affect school life?

There is no agreed-upon “best practice” policy among school administrators and teachers regarding the use of personal digital devices, especially smartphones, at elementary, middle and high schools. Schools, students and teachers have varying perspectives on how best to address this issue.

Screenagers features conversations with the teachers and students at Roosevelt High School, where cell phone policies are up to the teacher’s discretion in each classroom. Student comments range from, “Sometimes I’m so distracted by my phone it’s hard to listen to a teacher and even understand what they’re saying...” to “We don’t need so many rules. If you want to waste class time for yourself while other people are learning, that’s your choice.”

One teacher advocates returning repeatedly to the same question to encourage students to take responsibility for their own behaviors: “Are you using your time wisely?” He notes that in the work world, distractions such as cell phones are also everywhere.

In New York City, schools instituted a ban on having cell phones on campus. But it was so difficult to enforce, the ban was ended.

Some schools have decided to provide every student with a digital device to use at home, with varying degrees of success. Los Angeles Unified School District, for example, was one of the first districts to implement a one-to-one program like this, and after significant investments in it, recently announced that it will abandon the program.

Information Resources:

Multitasking — In the film, MIT psychology professor Sherry Turkle reports, “What’s extraordinary about the studies on multitasking is that when you multitask, even though you’re doing worse and worse on everything you’re doing, you feel as though you’re doing better and better.”

Seattle Children’s Hospital pediatrician Dimitri Christakis explains in the film, “The brain isn’t actually capable of multitasking. It comes at a cost. Overstimulation tires the brain and it tends to function not as well.”

Discussion Questions:

- What is your school’s policy on personal digital devices on campus and in the classroom?
- What is the purpose of the school policy? Do you think the policy is effective?
- Does your school provide or have a plan to provide every student with a digital device to use at home?
- How do you think a one-to-one device program would affect the students at your school?
- How do you feel when students around you are on their phones, in class and outside of class?
- Should class time be used to look up data and information online? Do we need answers to be found right away to inform our in-class discussions?
- Should classrooms mirror a workplace setting, where you always have access to your cell phone and people rely on them as work tools?
- Have you noticed whether multitasking affects your ability to focus or complete tasks?
- What are examples you’ve experienced or heard about of teachers using tech tools in a creative way to enhance a class experience?

2. Social Media Pressures: How does social media affect our relationships?

In the film, high school student Hanna sends a photo of herself in her bra to a boy. It gets shared around the school and she receives a lot of negative comments online from other students, making her feel disliked and depressed. Although she initially does not want to disappoint her mom by revealing her situation, she eventually does, and they work on addressing the issue together.

Girls discussing social media in the film say, “It’s like a competition, how pretty you are, what the guys think of you. It’s a competition you can’t win. There’s no finish line.” And, “You’re so constantly worried about what other people think of you and how you look, you don’t really see other people. It just happens.”

In the film, filmmaker Delaney talks with her daughter Tessa about her online life, and says she realizes that there was a lot of talk about appearances in the online interactions. “But,” she adds, “there was also a lot more positive communication than I had expected.”

Information Resources:

Usage realities — According to a 2015 Common Sense Media census, teenage girls spend an average of 1 ½ hours a day on social media, while boys spend about 50 minutes. (See <http://www.screenagersmovie.com/latest-usage-research/>)

Effect on empathy — There is concern among psychologists that too much time online may erode our capacity for empathy. MIT psychology professor Sherry Turkle explains in the film, “The research that shows human resiliency gives me hope. Children for even five days without their devices, in tech-free camps, on measurable tests, have restoration of the capacity for empathy.” (The UCLA study can be found at <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0747563214003227>.)

Discussion Questions:

- How much time do you spend a week on social media?
- Does your school have rules about online behavior? Does it enforce the rules?
- Do you post comments online that you would not say in person?
- Is a person’s social media identity more important than who they are in person?
- Do you know people who “touch up” the photos of themselves that they post online?

3. Growing Up Healthy: How does screen use affect children's development?

In the film, LA high school student Excel shares how the computer distracts her from school-work: "When I was smaller, I would love building Legos and have books and build a utopian society with my dolls.... I wanted to be an engineer for NASA. The school gave me a Chromebook. Hours spent on social media affects my grades a lot.... But when it's there, how can I not use it?" Her mother Maria describes how Excel went from being a straight A student to getting Cs and Ds.

Filmmaker Delaney explains, "I used to think kids' ability to self-regulate was determined at birth. But I learned that given the right guidance, kids can greatly increase self-control over time...that this ability is more malleable than even IQ."

When Delaney asks students in the film whether they are glad that their parents have rules about screen use at home, several nod, smiling, "Yes. You would never stop if you didn't, until your phone dies."

In addition to being a hard-to-resist distraction, there is also the issue of whether too much screen time actually impairs our cognitive abilities. New studies suggest this may be the case, primarily in young brains.

Information Resources:

Brain health — In the film, Seattle Children's Research Institute brain scientist Nino Ramirez describes a study of how rapid stimulation affects the brain: "We exposed young mice to switching sound and lights to mimic the situations that children face when they switch from one screen to another. Afterward...it took the young mice three times longer or more for them to learn how to go through a maze than it took for the non-exposed young mice."

Perhaps even more alarming was this observation: "Once we stopped exposing the young mice to the screens, the reduction in the production of nerve cells that control learning and memory persisted throughout their lives. The changes were permanent." We have yet to discover if the same could be true of human brains.

Self-control — "If there's a single trait that is good to have in this world, it's strong self-control," says Temple University psychology professor Laurence Steinberg in the film. "From hundreds of studies, we know that kids who have strong self-control do better in school, have better relationships; they're happier. It's actually a better predictor of success in school than intelligence is." Evidence indicates that self-control can be learned.

Psychologists have observed in studies that parents can help children strengthen their self-control “muscle” through practice. Children benefit from having consistent adult support in learning self-control, as young brains “have not fully developed to resist the impulse to self-distract,” explains California State University psychology professor Larry Rosen. “Kids are constantly distracted. It’s not their fault.”

Inhibiting social development — University of Washington professor of psychiatry Laura Kastner notes in the film that screens can provide a refuge during adolescence, when social situations are often awkward. Unfortunately, they may make it easier for teens to miss opportunities for personal growth: “If you’re looking at screens, you can avoid some of the adversity that comes with having a conversation, looking into the face of somebody you might have a crush on and putting a sentence together. Adolescence is very anxiety-provoking. Why not hide out instead?”

Discussion Questions:

- What is your reaction to the study about the young mice that are exposed to screen-like stimulation and suffer permanent reduction in brain cell growth?
- Do you have screen time guidelines in your family? If yes, are they enforced? If no, do you think guidelines could be helpful?
- Do you notice peers using screens to avoid socially awkward situations?

4. Video Game Addiction and Violence: How vulnerable are we?

In the film, Andrew and his family share their story of how he became addicted to playing video games, and though he had been a good student through high school, he had to drop out of college in his first year after failing all his classes.

Internet and video game addiction is a growing phenomenon worldwide. Andrew’s college education was disrupted by it, and his whole family was affected. “One of my regrets is the fact that I’ve been playing piano for 12 years and I never felt like I really achieved my full potential. If I had dedicated all my computer time to mastering an instrument or reading or exploring things, I would be way above where I am now,” reflects Andrew in the film.

Cosette Rae, the co-founder of the addiction rehabilitation program that Andrew later attends, explains, “The same neural pathways are activated when you ingest a chemical as when you are playing video games.” The addiction is powerful, with effects similar to substance addictions.

Do violent video games rule the gaming scene? “All media are educational. The question is, what are they teaching?” notes pediatrician Dimitri Christakis in the film. “Children imitate

what they see on screen, good and bad. There is a lot of evidence that educational games have value, teaching strategies, cooperation, concept-building.”

On whether violent video games change our reaction to violence, Christatkis says “Yes. These games were developed by the military to desensitize soldiers to violence before going to war.”

Information Resources:

Usage realities — A 2010 Kaiser Family Foundation survey found that boys spend about 1 ½ hours a day playing video games, while girls spend on average about 40 minutes a day.

Addiction — California State University psychology professor Larry Rosen explains in the film, “Someone addicted to video games shows similar brain patterns as someone addicted to drugs, gambling, all sorts of substances.”

Can you recognize signs of gaming addiction? You can find an online addiction test on the Screenagers website at <http://www.screenagersmovie.com/articles/internet-addiction-survey>.

Violence affects aggression — “There’s no question from a scientific standpoint that playing these games decreases empathy, decreases sensitivity and increases aggressive thoughts and actions,” says Seattle Children’s Hospital Director of Child Development Dr. Dimitri Christatkis in the film.

These were the top 10 selling video games in 2015.

1. Call of Duty: Black Ops III
2. Madden NFL 16
3. Fallout 4
4. Star Wars: Battlefront
5. Grand Theft Auto V
6. NBA 2K16
7. Minecraft
8. FIFA 16
9. Mortal Kombat X
10. Call of Duty: Advanced Warfare

By contrast, pro-social video games involve characters that help and support each other without aggressive actions. Some studies suggest a correlation between pro-social gaming and pro-social behaviors. You can find recommended pro-social games on the Screenagers website. You can also find alternate suggestions to violent video games at Common Sense Media online.

Discussion Questions:

- How much time during your week do you spend playing video games?

- Can you identify which of the top-selling video games have violent content?
- Have you tried any pro-social video games?
- Define addiction. Have you experienced or encountered addiction among people you know?
- Do you think children are more at risk for addiction once they move away from home?

5. Screens and People: How can we achieve balance in our lives?

In the film, Chris’s grandma is concerned that he spends too much of his time playing video games, and she finds it difficult to get him to reduce his playing time. She consults a counselor about this struggle and learns that it is actually helpful to set limits and boundaries, recognizing we all live with boundaries as adults too. The counselor also encourages them to explore other activities and interests, which they do together.

Staying focused on schoolwork while so much enticing online activity is pulling at our attention is clearly not easy to do. Students in the film share some of their personal “screens-off” strategies, such as, “I actually use an app that blocks me from using certain websites,” and “I gave my friend my Facebook password and made her change it, so I can’t go on Facebook right now.”

The filmmaker Delaney uses her own family as an example of the struggle many parents and children face around finding balance in their lives between screen activities and other pursuits. At first, her daughter Tessa resists the idea of limits around screen time, saying, “I think the rules should be there are no rules. It’s addicting, but there’s no downside. We’re overthinking it.” Other families in the film also share their frustrations and experiences attempting to set and enforce limits, including a mom who says, “She still wouldn’t answer me, so I took the phone away and threw it out the window.”

Ultimately, Delaney and her family implement multiple strategies, including creating a Screen Time Contract together with Tessa, keeping violent video games out of the house, and making sure both children spend time on other interests. They also resolve to meet weekly for short conversations about how technology fits into their lives, discussing both its positive and challenging aspects.

Information Resources:

Screen time balance — The Screenagers website contains many information resources about making a plan for better screen time balance in our lives.

Family conversations — You can subscribe to Tech Talk Tuesdays at www.screenagersmovie.com for weekly ideas on topics for short family conversations around technology.

Non-screen activities — According to the Afterschool Alliance, 40% of children in the U.S. do not have access to afterschool activities. In these situations, downtime can easily become screen time. Meanwhile, extracurricular activities are associated with better academic performance, better behavior and improved self-esteem. This lack of access may disproportionately affect lower-income families.

Digital citizenship — Digital citizenship programs at schools teach students strategies around the safe and ethical use of technology. Find links to digital citizenship curriculum programs in the Resources section of the Screenagers website.

Discussion Questions:

- Do you feel you have a healthy balance in your life around screen time?
- Do you have strategies or apps you use to keep you from being distracted by screen entertainment when you need to focus on homework?
- What do you think about the way the adults in your life use their screen time?
- How much do your parents know about your online activities?
- Do you think students have enough access to afterschool activities?
- Does your school teach digital citizenship?

Appendix / Some References to Key Studies

1. Multitasking erodes performance on individual tasks.
2. Teenage girls spend an average of 1 ½ hours a day on social media. Boys spend about 50 minutes. (2015 Common Sense Media census)
3. Too much time online may erode our capacity for empathy, but perhaps it can be restored by reducing screen time. (UCLA study published in Computers in Human Behavior, Oct. 2014)
4. Young mice exposed to “screen time” permanently inhibited brain cell growth affecting learning and memory. (ongoing Seattle Children’s Hospital Research Institute study cited by Dr. Nino Ramirez)
5. [preschooler study shows screen time erodes cognitive performance]
6. Good self-control is shown to be a better predictor of success in school than intelligence is. (studies? Stated by Temple University’s Dr. Laurence Steinberg)
7. Self-control can be taught and learned, given consistent adult support and practice. (study? Stated by California State University’s Dr. Larry Rosen)
8. Boys spend about 1 ½ hours a day playing video games. Girls spend about 40 minutes. (2010 Kaiser Family Foundation survey)

9. Playing violent video games decreases empathy and sensitivity, increases aggressive thoughts. (study? Stated by Seattle Children Hospital's Dr. Dimitri Christakis)
10. Pro-social gaming positively influences pro-social behaviors.
11. 40% of U.S. children do not have access to afterschool activities, yet extracurricular activities are associated with better academic performance. (source: Afterschool Alliance)