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Creating space for phone-free conversations

By Susan Salcido, Santa Barbara County Superintendent of Schools

2017 marked 10 years since Steve Jobs and Apple first introduced the iPhone.

This one device has transformed how we obtain information, how we learn, and how we interact with others. As many have noted before, smartphone users have more computer processing power in their pocket than NASA computers did during the Apollo mission to the moon.

While the upsides to smartphones are well known, some researchers are now beginning to count the societal costs of these devices, particularly as they pertain to children. One such researcher, Dr. Jean Twenge, professor of psychology at San Diego State University, wrote a book entitled *iGen*, which compiles sobering statistics on changes to children's habits and mental health over the last 10 years. The book has generated important discussions among parents, educators, and mental health professionals.

Twenge's studies indicate that more children today are feeling "sad, hopeless, useless... that they can't do anything right." Her studies indicate a 50% increase in a clinical level of depression between 2011-15, along with higher rates of feeling lonely or left out.

Professor Twenge's contention is that these marked increases in alarming warning signs coincide almost perfectly with smartphones' 50% market saturation rate among adolescents in 2011-12. She posits that we are experiencing the world's worst mental health crisis in decades.

Twenge isn't alone in noting these troubling trends. Occupational therapist and author Victoria Prooday's findings confirm an alarming increase in rates of children's mental health issues as well.

According to both researchers, however, parents can take solace in knowing that conscious efforts can combat these trends. Both Twenge and Prooday offer suggestions to help children and adolescents improve their physical and mental well-being, and to help promote positive, healthy family dynamics. Suggestions include having children spend plenty of time outdoors: biking, hiking, going to the beach, or just simply playing. Fortunately, in beautiful Santa Barbara County, the outdoor options are many.

When families turn off their devices, everyone can become emotionally available to connect. Families can prioritize having a daily, technology-free family dinner. Familial bonds can truly have life-changing impacts. These bonds are invariably strengthened at home, where everyone can be attentive and engaged. Dinner is an opportune time because families often congregate together and can engage in phone-free conversations.

When we turn off our phones, we send powerful messages about how we value what is happening in each other's lives, that we are concerned about anyone's feelings of loneliness, and that we recognize the need for improved self-confidence. Through those efforts, we build authentic relationships with one another, which are foundational to emotional health. In so doing, we benefit our children, and we help ourselves as parents—and as a society. It's not always easy, but it's worth the effort for all involved to put down the phone and create the space for important connecting conversations.

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