

Tech/Life Balance: Helping Families Thrive in a Digital World

SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL HEALTH REPORT





Letter From Our Co-Founder



As parents, we expect to face challenges — from teaching our kids to drive to discussing responsible choices in the face of peer pressure. Yet, the digital world has presented an even greater, more daunting obstacle. Despite the longing for simpler times before social media and smartphones, the integral role of technology in our lives is undeniably here to stay. So, how do we navigate this with our kids?

Clashes over screen time disrupt nearly half of all families,¹ a tension that strains family dynamics and deeply affects household harmony. With digital media and screens everywhere, no one is immune — not even my own family. Parents are left feeling anxious about how to help their children who are grappling with the social-emotional consequences of constant connectivity.

Post-pandemic, this struggle has only intensified. It is clear that our children are not alright, and caregivers are overwhelmed and burnt out. We heard from one parent who captured this feeling: “When my kids finally get off their devices, they lash out, making it seem like it’s my fault.”

Parents and caregivers shoulder the responsibility of shaping society’s future leaders. In California, a mere 55% feel confident in their parenting.² Constant online access creates a social pressure cooker, leading to superficial connections and making it more challenging to understand and monitor our children’s interactions in the digital world.

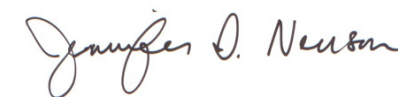
As one mom wisely stated, “We have to adapt to what’s coming.” This adaptation requires caregivers to acquire new knowledge and

skills to effectively navigate the digital age of parenting and make informed choices for our families. This is why we want to provide tools — in California and beyond — that give families the building blocks for healthy communication with the kids in their lives.

Reflecting on the enormity of this issue brings me back not just to my family but to all of California’s children. This is the reason behind my work and why I co-founded the California Partners Project: to amplify California women’s voices and address the impact of media and technology on the mental health and well-being of our young people.

Women and caregivers are the backbone of our society, our economy, and our families, and strong, nurturing relationships are the heart of thriving families. That’s why our report focuses on the profound ways social media and digital devices are shaping childhood today, from brain development to how kids relate to each other and manage their emotions.

By tapping into our collective inner strength as caring adults and leaning on each other for support, I’m confident we can guide our kids in building the emotional resilience they need. Together, we can restore balance to our homes and foster a future where digital and real-world experiences coexist harmoniously.



Jennifer Siebel Newsom

First Partner of California
Co-Founder of the California Partners Project



Letter From Dr. Mark Ghaly

Being both a pediatrician and a father of four, I am not only acutely aware of the unique challenges and opportunities digital technology presents to families today, but I am also knee-deep in struggling to manage these nuances with my 16-year-old, my 8-year-old, and the two kids in between. And yes, on many days, the challenges seem to dwarf the opportunities — these are tough problems to figure out. Our rapidly evolving digital world continues to transform how our kids interact, learn, and grow, offering remarkable benefits and significant hurdles. I'm not sure how you feel, but many days, I can hardly keep up.

At home and in my role as Secretary of the California Health and Human Services Agency, I have seen how crucial it is to cultivate environments where children can develop robust social-emotional skills and be seen and appreciated for who they are. These skills are foundational for their academic success, relational health, and overall well-being. Yet, the omnipresence of digital devices undermines these skills, leading to superficial connections and increasing feelings of isolation and anxiety.

For over two decades, I have observed the far-reaching impact digital media can have on young minds and the stress it can create inside a family. Technology connects us in ways we

never imagined, but it also brings challenges that demand our urgent attention.

Young people experience so many pressures in our modern world, many of which are amplified by the uninterrupted stream of information from our devices. I see my own kids trying to cope, and other families frequently share their struggles with me, too. These are not isolated issues; they reflect a broader, shared experience that necessitates collective action and support. For me, knowing that so many parents and caregivers are hungry, just like I am, for tools and strategies to support their children's ability to navigate digital technology is both comforting and builds my enthusiasm for the work of the California Partners Project.

This report is a direct response to these concerns. To really understand what's happening inside families, we need to listen, and that's exactly what the California Partners Project has done. Built on extensive research and insights from caregivers across the state and experts in the field, this report provides a deep understanding of how our children's interactions with themselves, others, and the world around them have evolved with the rise of digital technology. It underscores the need for balanced digital use and the importance of face-to-face interactions in developing healthy social-emotional skills.

We stand at a pivotal moment. I know it's not easy raising kids today. It can be really hard to hold a boundary or make time to hear your children out after a long day. These technologies will only get more complex, and it is our responsibility to prepare our children for this new world.

It is crucial that we stay informed. This is serious, but we're not helpless. Our approach must recognize the whole person and whole community, understanding that children are part of families and that technology impacts individuals and the entire family unit. It helps shape the mood in the room and the mood in our homes.

By embracing informed and mindful approaches to technology use, we can equip our children with the resilient, adaptable skills they need to thrive. As a public health leader and a fellow parent, I am eager to join forces with you to ensure a healthier, more balanced future for all our children.

Dr. Mark Ghaly

Former Secretary of the California Health and Human Services Agency

Today's rapidly evolving digital world is an intricate and uncharted landscape for parenting. Children are grappling with the challenges posed by smartphones, social media, and gaming, all now inextricably woven into their lives. Parents and caregivers are navigating new and thorny complexities as they work to nurture and safeguard their children. In fact, two-thirds of parents believe raising children today is harder than ever.³

California's caregivers understand the game-changing power of digital technology to connect and uplift people. Tech can be a potent tool for good. But as the digital age reshapes how children play, learn, and interact, there's growing concern about technology's impact on how kids relate to others and manage their emotions.


We yearn for connection — it's wired into us. Research consistently shows that children with well-developed social-emotional skills perform better academically, enjoy stronger friendships, and lead healthier lives.^{4,5,6} And while the internet can be a valuable tool for learning and exploration, it comes with potential downsides, including overload. The nonstop

stream of information from kids' phones can be overwhelming and even distressing, as can the constant pressure to be available 24/7. Caregivers must understand how kids seamlessly move between the physical and digital worlds in order to guide them through their dual reality.

“We're in a crisis of connection. Disconnected from ourselves and each other.”

DR. NIOBE WAY

Professor of Developmental Psychology and Director of the Science of Human Connection Lab



“Technology changed all of us. Our children already knew a lot, and we had to learn out of necessity.”

— GRANDPARENT

This report briefly overviews what we know about tech's impact on kids' social and emotional health through relevant research and reflections from real California caregivers and numerous experts.

Engaging with this report isn't just an academic exercise—it's a vital step in understanding how digital interactions influence young minds.

The report's companion family guide will help you turn that knowledge into action to improve your family dynamics and help the kids in your life better navigate the challenges of growing up in a digital world.

One thing is crystal clear: digital technology isn't going anywhere. Between 2010 and 2023, smartphone sales worldwide skyrocketed from 297 million to 1.6 billion.⁷ During those years, social media usage exploded, and the number of high school students reporting persistent sadness or hopelessness jumped 40%.⁸ This laid the groundwork for the youth mental health crisis we're facing today.

We need the right tools to support our kids and families as they respond to the new normal. This report explains how we got here and why we're hopeful about the future. Together, we can do this.

“The format of social media increases the risks. Kids consume it in private, making it harder for parents to detect.”

DR. NADINE BURKE HARRIS

Pediatrician, Former California Surgeon General, and founder of the Center for Youth Wellness

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“We don't have the benefit of hindsight. Older generations are learning at the same time as younger generations.”

KATHERINE MARTINKO

Journalist and author of *Childhood Unplugged*

How We Got Here

Youth mental health has been declining for more than a decade, since well before the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools nationwide have reported escalating and increasingly complex mental health needs for students of all ages.⁹ One study pinpointed middle school as a particularly painful time, finding that extreme sadness and depression tripled in 5th- and 6th-grade girls and doubled in 7th- and 8th-grade girls between 2017 and 2023.¹⁰



COMPOUNDING FACTORS

Many forces are at play. The 2008 financial crisis and subsequent recession heightened cascading economic pressures for many families. Political turbulence, rapidly changing technology, and concerns about the environment and the future add to the mix. Kids also spend less time outside, playing independently, and moving their bodies — activities that bolster mental health.¹¹

Simultaneously, the surging use of smartphones and tablets among kids and teens dramatically increased screen time, and high exposure to social media has escalated feelings of isolation, anxiety, depression, and even suicidal ideation.¹² The internet, with its undeniable benefits, has also ushered in a variety of challenges, from unhealthy social comparisons and cyberbullying to concerns about privacy, inappropriate content, extreme violence, pornography, and child predation.¹³

THE LONELINESS EPIDEMIC

Loneliness among all ages has been climbing worldwide, but its impact on youth and teens is distinct. Limited social interaction can lead to delayed cognitive and emotional development, including language, problem-solving, and social-emotional skills. Lonely children are more likely to experience mental health issues and behavioral difficulties.¹⁴ They may struggle to pay attention, negatively affecting their academic performance.¹⁵ In teens, loneliness is correlated with an increased risk of substance abuse, risky sexual behavior, and low self-esteem and identity issues.¹⁶

THE PERFECT STORM

These conditions set the stage for a perfect storm during the COVID-19 pandemic when COVID protocols and social distancing necessary to prevent the spread of the virus exacerbated isolation and accelerated an ongoing youth mental health crisis. Previous research from the California Partners Project during the pandemic found that social media and gaming became the primary way young people met their social needs.¹⁷ Online interaction replaced in-person get-togethers, and kids lost meaningful time learning to relate to their peers. Social skills stalled, and today's children and teens developed fewer and shallower friendships than previous generations.¹⁸

Within the home, conversations about increased tech use post-COVID-19 fueled family conflict. A 2021 California Partners Project listening tour across California revealed that many mothers felt guilty as they struggled to support their children during the disruptive, exhausting conditions of the pandemic.¹⁹



“The pandemic brought a lot of uncertainty. My son was transitioning from elementary to middle school, and he needed counseling to manage social relationships. When he went back to school, forming bonds and making friends was really hard for him.”

— PARENT

The Current State of Things

The youth mental health crisis is widespread, affecting kids globally, including nine million California kids. Children in the state are hospitalized for mental health issues more than any other reason, accounting for nearly one-fifth of child hospitalizations in 2022.²⁰ In 2020, year one of the pandemic, more than 37,000 California children between the ages of five and 19 were hospitalized for mental health issues.²¹

A RISE IN SCREEN TIME

Kids spend significantly more time connected to their screens than ever before. In 2022, 68 percent of Californians 17 and under spent two or more hours a day — apart from schoolwork — on their devices. And 20 percent spent more than four hours a day.²²

Those numbers align with the experiences of the California Partners Project's focus group participants. Nearly half of caregivers reported that their children spend one to three hours daily on digital devices outside school. Thirty percent said their children spent between three and five hours daily, while 14 percent reported more than five hours.

THE DIGITAL DEVICE AS AN EMOTIONAL CRUTCH

As screen time goes up, problems tend to climb as well. Research has shown that youth who are high users of screen time have a more challenging time controlling their emotions. They may be quicker to argue and struggle to finish tasks. They can also demonstrate lower curiosity and may have difficulty making friends.²³ For many young people, even those as young as toddlers, digital devices and social media have become a social-emotional pacifier. Rather than experience boredom, sit with uncomfortable emotions, or stumble through a potentially

awkward social interaction, they retreat to the relative safety of what's online. In the process, children lose valuable skills, including the ability to tolerate distress.

THE DECLINE OF IN-PERSON INTERACTION

More time online comes at a cost for children and teens. As they dedicate more hours to virtual worlds, where interactions are usually shorter and more superficial than in real life, time spent interacting with friends and peers in person declines. Research suggests that forming a lasting friendship takes 200 hours of real-life interaction,²⁴ but when children spend as much as five to eight hours online daily, the time available for real-life interactions plummets. And, the earlier a child receives a smartphone means even more of their developmental years are immersed in digital environments.²⁵ Virtual relationships, while valuable, lack the depth and expansiveness of live ones. Kids also miss opportunities to read and understand facial

“Kids are missing out on time spent in person with their peers. As a result, their capacities for conflict resolution, negotiation, and navigating relationships suffer.”

DR. MATTHEW BIEL

Chief of the Division of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry at MedStar Georgetown University Hospital



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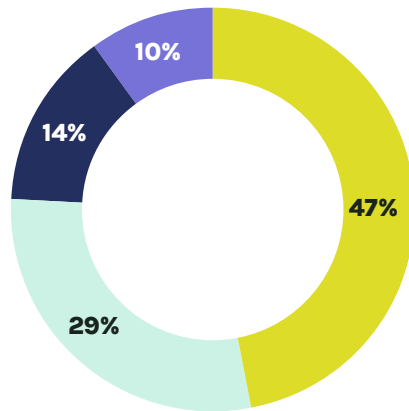
“If we go to a family gathering, eight of the ten kids have a phone or tablet, and they all gather in a circle. It impacts my kids because they don’t have a phone or a tablet. They can’t play this game and feel like the others don’t want to talk to them.”

– MOTHER



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Time spent on digital devices outside of school each day (0-18 yrs)



California Partners Project, 2023

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“We’re wasting a lot of quality time [because of devices], time we could be spending on so many other things. It’s getting lost on things that aren’t worth it.”

– MOTHER

expressions, body language, and tone of voice — critical social skills that take time to learn, practice, and master.

Decreased in-person socializing also contributes to less time enjoying social clubs and groups. In 2016, a substantial majority — 80% — of California youth between the ages of six and 17 were involved in at least one extracurricular activity, ranging from sports to clubs and organizations to after-school lessons. By 2022, that number dropped by almost half, with only 41% of kids participating in extracurricular activities.²⁶ This is a real loss. Extracurricular activities have been shown to boost achievement, self-esteem, and social development.²⁷

THE DEVELOPING BRAIN

To understand more, we need to examine transformations in the developing brain. What shifts are occurring, and what significance do they hold?²⁸

Along with the first three years of life, adolescence, beginning around age ten and ending in the mid-20s, is the most robust development in a person’s life. Brain growth in adolescence is not linear or evenly distributed. Some parts of the brain grow more quickly in the tween and teen years, especially the areas sensitive to emotions, rewards, novelty, threats, and peer expectations.

All of this is normal, a natural step toward independence. During this time, adolescents are “super learners” with a greater tendency to explore and expand as they integrate new knowledge and seek independence.²⁹

Other brain regions grow more slowly, impacting the development of reasoning, decision-making, judgment, and executive function. The resulting push and pull makes adolescence a particularly dynamic time.

THE ADOLESCENT SOCIAL WORLD

Adolescents specifically seek out connection and attachment to their peers as they move toward greater independence. Due to the widespread use of the internet and social media platforms, those peers are no longer limited by geographic proximity. While parents and caregivers still significantly impact their kids, peer influence increasingly helps youth shape their values, choices, and opinions.³⁰ Friendships begin to feel essential, and kids want to feel connected. Research has found that connection — across all ages — is a hallmark of happiness.³¹

Membership within a peer group — even a very small one — can have a tremendous impact.³² Young people want to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance from their friends. The last thing they want is to feel left out.

Simply forbidding or delaying access to digital technology has its challenges. Youth without smartphones or permission to use social media or online video games can feel excluded from their peers or feel they are missing out, an anxiety-producing feeling known as FOMO (Fear of Missing Out). So, it can be a hard road for the few parents or teens who try to hold out or resist the onslaught of technology. As a result, modern parenting can feel like a lose-lose situation, continuously adjusting to ever-changing conditions and contexts.

“Online forms of exclusion feel the same as in-person rejection to kids and teens. Parents may not be aware and might minimize it.”

MERCEDES OROMENDIA

Chief Clinical Officer at Manatee, child and family therapist

Effectively, we're in a collective action trap where social media's power extends well beyond individual users as young people strive to relate and fit in.³³ In response to this challenge, some parents seek help from organizations like Wait Until 8th, which offer resources to help families work together within their communities to delay smartphones until high school.³⁴

Parent Perspectives

These insights were shared by caregivers who took part in focus groups with the California Partners Project.



“I started noticing my son couldn't take his eyes off his phone. It was like he was in a trance, and once I did turn it off, his reaction was shocking — he was completely overstimulated, and it was very hard to settle him down.”



“Trying to get my son to do something healthier than watching videos online has been a struggle. It affects the way we communicate, and it's created a disconnect in our family dynamic.”



“I've noticed that when I try to talk to the kids, it often takes me a couple of times to get their attention. I'm already frustrated, and once they're off their phones, they're moody and angry.”



“Their devices consume them. When friends are over, they take photos with each other instead of socializing in person. Socializing with their siblings has turned into texting or tagging each other on social media.”



“They would rather be antisocial — not go to a party, not go to the park, not anywhere. They'd rather stay home surrounded by technology.”

CHILDHOOD REWIRED

Meanwhile, the brains of digital natives — kids and adolescents — are being profoundly rewired, especially by social media. Adolescent brains, controlled in part by the rapidly developing limbic system (the brain's emotional control system), respond in overdrive to social media, which is designed to play right into the brain's reward center. They experience a dopamine rush like a casino gambler hitting the jackpot.

Scientists suggest that the developing brain's amygdala (which guides emotional learning and behavior) and the prefrontal cortex (involved in impulse control and emotional regulation) experience distinct changes with frequent exposure to social media. The social-emotional challenges youth must navigate online are formidable: likes, comments, public and curated displays, the constant pressure to be always on or in the know, and the permanence of a digital footprint. Consequently, social media shapes adolescent identity in ways we're only beginning to understand.

This affects not only youth but also their families. Overall, the widespread accessibility of digital technology has increased conflict and tension in families. Parents say they struggle to find effective ways to manage their children's device

use, and disputes often spark when caregivers try to remove devices or limit their children's time online.

As face-to-face communication declines, smartphones and other digital devices frequently disrupt traditional interactions among family members and friends.

Parents and adults also need help controlling their tech habits. Despite attempts to be present and engaged with their kids, roughly seven in ten parents admit to being sidetracked by their smartphones.³⁵ California Partners Project focus group participants noted that living without these devices feels nearly impossible as smartphones absorb them increasingly. Tech distractions don't just reduce the quality of interactions; they erode the bond between caring adults and children and model unhealthy relationships with technology that kids adopt themselves.³⁶

"We are growing different little people, and it's not for their good."

DR. CATHERINE STEINER-ADAIR

clinical psychologist and author of *The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age*



Scientists suggest that the developing brain's amygdala (which guides emotional learning and behavior) and the prefrontal cortex (involved in impulse control and emotional regulation) experience distinct changes with frequent exposure to social media.



The Way Forward

HARNESS TECH FOR GOOD

So, how do we move forward? Digital technology itself is arguably neutral. Its true impact depends on how it's designed and used. When designed and used as a force for good, it can enhance learning, efficiency, and communication. Social media and gaming can also be helpful tools for fostering and forming friendships and communities, particularly for marginalized youth.

“Young people can find joy through their online social networks when they understand how to use it safely.”

DR. VERONICA TERRIQUEZ
Director, UCLA
Chicano Studies
Research Center

Families have also found benefits in connecting with friends and family. They can communicate instantly with family members, sharing news, photos, and experiences through calls, texts, messaging apps, and video chats. For many, this provides a level of relationship continuity they otherwise may not have.

But it's important to remember digital technology's limitations and potential drawbacks. The key lies in responsible and informed usage, balancing its benefits while knowing its potential downsides.

Technology is here to stay, and moving forward means restoring balance to our lives and families.

The window to positively influence our children doesn't close in early childhood; experts reassure us that caring adults still have a profound impact through adolescence. Secure and supportive relationships allow children's self-esteem to flourish. When children feel valued, cherished, and included, they blossom. This emotional foundation helps them navigate the challenges of adolescence and thrive well into adulthood.



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“I love seeing how my girls will grab the phone and FaceTime their grandparents, aunts, and cousins. It's relationship building.”

— PARENT

PARTNER FOR A SAFER DIGITAL WORLD

Still, we can't do this in a vacuum. Protecting children in the digital world is a shared responsibility that's getting a major boost. Research is catching up with technological advancements, with over 1,200 articles published about social media and adolescent health in the past five years alone.³⁷ This growing body of evidence is revealing the harmful impacts of too much time online for children. States are beginning to hold tech companies accountable through legislation, and the U.S. Surgeon General made addressing the impact of social media on mental health a top priority for his office. Meanwhile, federal lawmakers are pushing for a national standard of online safeguards.³⁸

Fed-up parents, schools, and 42 attorneys general have also filed lawsuits against social media platforms like Meta, YouTube, TikTok, and Snap, alleging the companies' unchecked algorithms have triggered unprecedented levels of anxiety, depression, identity struggles, and suicidal ideation among youth.^{39,40} Together, these actions reflect a collective call for bolder solutions to protect young people online.

LISTEN TO YOUTH

Adding to the chorus, Gen Z has emerged as a leading voice for change. They're advocating for online safety and influencing policy through activism with multimedia initiatives like Design It For Us and #GoodforMedia.^{41,42} In 2023, the California Partners Project's We Hear You (WHY) Youth Ambassadors released a declaration articulating their digital technology vision, values, and demands for policymakers and tech leaders.⁴³ Other organizations like #HalfTheStory are co-creating programs with young people and partnering with schools, policymakers, and businesses to create new standards of well-being for the next generation.⁴⁴

SUPPORT KIDS AND FAMILIES

California has adopted a broad strategy to ensure every child and family has the foundation they need to succeed. The state's groundbreaking multibillion-dollar investment to overhaul the state's mental health system has led to significant improvements: better insurance coverage, increased access to mental health screenings and school resources, and initiatives to reduce mental health stigma.⁴⁵ Funds are also being used to grow the professional mental health workforce and develop an online mental health platform for kids and caregivers, ensuring that more people can receive the help they need, regardless of where they live.

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Technology is both...
Helpful and harmful.
Exhausting and
energizing. Connecting
and dividing. Technology
is multifaceted, so
our approach to it
needs to be, too.”⁴⁸

CENTER FOR
DIGITAL THRIVING

In a parallel effort, California is investing billions of dollars to provide expanded learning opportunities and transform our schools into community hubs with families at the center.^{46, 47} Community schools are designed to be a one-stop source for many support services, including mental health resources and family engagement. These changes aren't just investments in education; they also provide vital childcare options and create safe environments where children feel connected in the real world.

This report is a valuable starting point in building a deeper understanding of the digital landscape's impact on social and emotional health, **but it doesn't end here**. The California Partners Project has thoughtfully developed a practical and actionable companion family guide to equip families with strategies and perspectives to thrive in the digital world. The family guide bridges the gap between awareness and action, offering a framework to identify and understand the issues, model healthy digital habits, and spark meaningful family conversations.

Together, we can nurture resilient, well-adjusted children capable of forging authentic online and offline connections. The journey ahead involves collaboration, learning, and growth — a path we are committed to navigating alongside you.



Explore our Social-Emotional Health Family Guide at

calpartnersproject.org/techlifebalance



Discover 10 Tech Tips for Families to embrace best practices at

calpartnersproject.org/techtipsforyourfamily

About This Project

The Tech/Life Balance: Helping Families Thrive in a Digital World series was created by the California Partners Project. Our organization works in partnership with the people of California to champion gender equity across the state and ensure our state's media and technology industries are a force for good in the lives of all children.

The contents of this report and accompanying family guide were compiled through focus groups with California caregivers and interviews with experts and researchers across disciplines.

These Social-Emotional Health resources, part of the *Tech/Life Balance* series, were made possible in part through the generous support of the San Manuel Band of Mission Indians and Pinterest.

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to learn more
about our
research and
how the

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created these resources.

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