

# Teens Are addicted to socializing, not screens: Screenagers in the time of coronavirus

By [danah boyd](#)

## Snapshot

This article first appeared online on April 14 2020. The researcher, [danah boyd](#), explores teenagers as social beings and posts interesting questions about how Covid-19, and the related schooling online, has impacted on the ways teenagers have, and will, used screens to socialise.

If you're a parent trying to corral your children into attending 'school' online, you've probably had the joy of witnessing a complete meltdown. Tantrums are no longer the domain of two-year-olds; 15-year-olds are also kicking and screaming. Needless to say, so are the fortysomethings. Children are begging to go outside. Teenagers desperately want to share physical space with their friends. And parents are begging their kids to go online so that they themselves can get some downtime. These are just some of the ways in which today's reality seems upside down.

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I started studying teenagers' use of social media in the early 2000s when Xanga and LiveJournal were cool. I watched as they rode the waves of MySpace and Facebook, into the realms of Snap and Instagram. My book *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens* unpacks some of the most prevalent anxieties adults have about children's use of technology, including the nonstop fear-inducing message that children are 'addicted' to their phones, computers, and the internet. Needless to say, I never imagined how conditions might change when a global pandemic unfolded.

I cannot remember a period in my research when parents weren't wringing their hands about kids' use of screens. The tone that parents took paralleled the tone their parents took over heavy metal and rock music, the same one their grandparents had when they spoke of the evils of comic books. Moral panics are consistent — but the medium that the panic centers on changes. Still, as with each wave of moral panic, there's supposedly something intrinsic to the new medium that makes it especially horrible for young people. Cognizant of this history and having gone deep on social media activities with hundreds of teenagers, I pushed back and said that it wasn't the technology teens were addicted to; it was their friends. Adults rolled their eyes at me, just as their teens rolled their eyes at them.

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Now, nearly a month into [screen-based schooling](#) en masse, I've gotten to witness a global natural experiment like none I ever expected. What have we learned? The majority of young people are going batshit crazy living a life wholly online. I can't help but think that Covid-19 will end up teaching all of us how important human interaction in physical space is. If this goes on long enough, might this cohort end up going further and *hating* screens?

Until the world started sheltering in place, most teens spent the majority of their days in school, playing sports, and participating in other activities, almost always in physical spaces with lots of humans co-present. True physical privacy is a luxury for most young people whose location in space is heavily monitored and controlled. Screens represented a break from the mass social. They also represented privacy from parents, an opportunity to socialize without parents lurking even when their physical bodies were forced to be at home. Parents hated the portals that kids

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held in their hands because their children seemed to disappear from the living room into some unknown void. That unknown void was those children's happy place — the place where they could hang out with their friends, play games, and negotiate a life of their own.

Now, with Covid-19, schools are being taught through video. Friends are through video. Activities are through video. There are even videos for gym and physical sport. Religious gatherings are through video. Well-intended adults are volunteering to step in and provide more video-based opportunities for young people. TV may have killed the radio star, but Zoom and Google Hangouts are going to kill the delight and joy in spending all day in front of screens.

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Fatigue is setting in. Sure, making a TikTok video with friends is still fun, but there's a limit to how much time anyone can spend on any app — even teens. Give it another month and there will be kids dropping out of school or throwing their computers against the wall. (Well, I know of two teens who have already done the latter with their iPads.) Young people are begging to go outside, even if that means playing sports with their parents. Such things might not be surprising for a seven-year-old, but when your 15-year-old asks to play soccer with you, do it! As a child of the '80s, I was stunned during my fieldwork to learn that most contemporary kids didn't find ways to sneak out of the house once their parents were asleep because going online was so much easier. I can't help but wonder if sneaking out is becoming a thing once again.

As we're all stuck at home, teens are still doing everything possible to escape into their devices to maintain relationships, socialize, and have fun. Their shell-shocked parents are [ignoring any and all screen time limitations](#) as they too crave escapism (people who study fortysomethings: explain [Animal Crossing](#) to me!!?). But when physical distancing is no longer required, we'll get to see that social closeness often involves meaningful co-presence with other humans. Adults took this for granted, but teens had few other options outside of spaces heavily controlled by adults. They went online not because the technology is especially alluring, but because it has long been

the most viable option for having meaningful connections with friends given the way that their lives have been structured. Maybe now adults will start recognizing what my research showed: youth are 'addicted' to sociality, not technology for technology's sake.

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***dannah boyd** is a researcher of technology & society. She is the founder and president of Data & Society, a partner researcher at Microsoft Research, and a visiting professor at New York University.*