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Children in the Digital Age

Are We "Technically Better"?


KEYNOTE ADDRESS

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Agents of Change Continuing Education & Clinical Training

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About Dr. Mitchell



- 🏠 Currently lives in Ann Arbor, Michigan — Go Blue! 🇺🇸
- 📱 Early adopter of AI (it helps to be married to a tech nerd!)
- 👶 Busy chasing around my 16-month-old daughter!
- 🌿 You'll find me outside or in my garden whenever I can.

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My background and why this work matters now

<p>Clinician Registered Play Therapist working with children, teens, and young adults at Brain Space Wellness.</p>	<p>Why now?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The pace of change has outrun the playbook. • Social media is still unsettled, and now multiple forms of AI have arrived on top of it. • The children in your caseloads and in your lives are the first to grow up fully inside these systems. • The adults in this room will shape this new future.
<p>Former School Social Worker and Special Educator Years inside schools allowed me to watch the academic, social, and emotional life of students up close.</p>	
<p>Educator Lecturer at the University of Michigan School of Social Work; founder of Agents of Change. Technology and AI is part of the education framework today.</p>	
<p>Curiously About Technology Especially where technology and AI meet mental health practice and child wellbeing.</p>	

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THE QUESTION WE WILL HOLD ALL DAY....

Are children and teens truly “better off” with more technology?

Not “better at using it” but better off – in their development, relationships, and wellbeing?

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Setting the Stage: A Roadmap

The Current Landscape – Social media, technology, and AI: where today’s youth actually spend their time.

Behavioral & Developmental Impacts – How technology is reshaping growing minds and why kids aren’t just small adults online.

Hearing Directly From Youth – Before we decide what’s good for them, what do young people actually say?

Pros & Cons – A clear-eyed look at digital life: the good and the costly, held together.

The Future of Tech & Childhood – AI isn’t coming; it’s already here, in learning and social lives.

The Role of Adults – Children grow up inside systems adults built, run, and can shape.

From Awareness to Responsibility – We’ve named the landscape; now, what do we do with it?

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Pulse Check: Where Do We Stand?

? How many of you checked your phone within five minutes of waking up this morning?

? How many of you have picked up your phone during this talk already?


? How many of you have used AI – ChatGPT or similar – in the last week?

? How many of you sleep with your phone in the bedroom?

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The Current Landscape

Social media, technology, AI — and where today's youth actually spend their time.

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Online use is nearly universal and for many ... constant!

<p>~50%</p> <p>of teens are online "almost constantly" — up from 24% a decade ago.</p>	<p>96%</p> <p>use the internet every single day</p>	<p>95%</p> <p>have or can access a smartphone at home</p>
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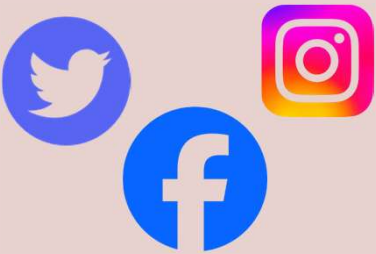
Takeaway:
Being online is no longer an activity children choose; it is the environment they interact with. "Screen time" understates how fully digital life is woven into identity, friendship, and learning.

Source: Pew Research Center, Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024 (n=1,391)

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Video and visual feeds dominate; the old "networks" are fading



What's shifting

- Short-form video leads (YouTube, TikTok, Reels).
- AI companions and chatbots are the fast-rising newcomer.
- Gaming is a primary social space, not just play.
- Facebook and X have collapsed among teens.

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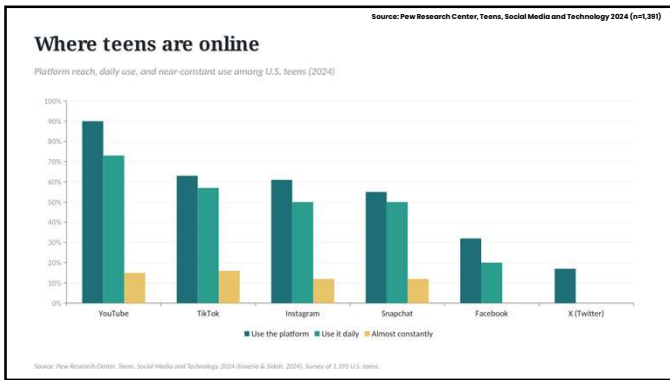
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Video and visual feeds dominate; the old "networks" are fading

Discord YouTube TikTok
Snapchat

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More hours online means less time for?

Unstructured time

Boredom, daydreaming, and free play. Spontaneous creativity is decreasing.

Face-to-face practice

In-person social skills built through eye contact, repair after conflict, and real presence.

Single-task attention

Deep focus and patience, feeds are engineered for the next thing. Our brains always want more.

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Of these, what gets neglected when your screen time increases?

- Unstructured time** → "I get bored for two seconds and reach for my phone."
- Face-to-face practice** → "I'd rather text than talk out loud or call on the phone"
- Single-task attention** → "I can't get through one thing without bouncing to something else."

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There is no single "digital experience"

By gender

- Girls use TikTok "almost constantly" more than boys (19% vs. 13%).
- Boys skew to YouTube almost constantly (19% vs. 11%).
- Girls report more of the harms: comparison, drama, sleep loss.

By race & ethnicity

- Black (28%) and Hispanic (25%) teens use TikTok almost constantly vs. 8% of White teens.
- Black and Hispanic teens also report higher near-constant use of YouTube and Instagram.

Source: Pew Research Center, Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024 (n=1,391)

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Behavioral & Developmental Impacts

How technology is shaping growing minds — and why kids aren't just small adults online.

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Gen Z vs. Gen Alpha: shaped differently

<p>Gen Z: Currently ~14–29 years old</p> <p><i>Born ~1997–2012</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Remember a “before”. They watched smartphones and social media arrive. More able to name tech’s downsides and are increasingly wary of it. Have some lived contrast to draw on. 	<p>Gen Alpha: Currently ~0–13 years old</p> <p><i>Born ~2013 onward</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> No “before.” Tablets, voice assistants, and AI are simply how the world works. Less awareness that tech could be any other way– fewer points of comparison. Growing up alongside AI from the start.
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Gen Z vs. Gen Alpha: shaped differently

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Technology is reshaping how kids develop

<p>Attention</p> <p>Feeds built on novelty and reward fragment focus and shorten the patience deep learning requires.</p>	<p>Memory</p> <p>Why remember when you can look it up? Memory is increasingly externalized to devices.</p>	<p>Identity & self-worth</p> <p>Likes, views, and comments become a real-time scoreboard for how a young person feels they matter.</p>
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These are not character flaws or poor choices made by kids.
They are predictable responses to environments engineered by adults to capture attention.

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Today's tech was not built for a child's developmental level

- The initial age of tech exposure is as young as 4 months. Much of this technology was never designed for such early or intense use by children.**
- Children under 11 have a limited understanding of abstract concepts, leaving them unable to fully grasp or control how AI collects and uses their personal data.**
- Age gates and "teen guardrails" are easily bypassed and are not real safeguards.**
- Products are built by adults for adults. AI companions routinely claim to be "real," inviting attachment and trust that kids aren't ready to navigate.**




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Let's Talk About It

Most of us haven't read the fine print on the apps we use every day... that's understandable.

What is one step you can take to be more aware and engaged in the security, privacy, and data policies of everyday apps?



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Hearing Directly From Youth

Before we decide what's good for them. What do young people actually say about tech?


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(Center for Digital Thinking, Harvard Graduate School of Education 2025)

"It listens."

— a 17-year-old, asked what adults should know about AI



Our job is to listen to young people better than even the best bot can.



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In their words... what they love and what they don't

What youth say they LOVE	What they DISLIKE or find harmful
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Staying close to friends and finding their people.  • Creating and expressing themselves. • Learning anything, instantly, on their terms. • A non-judgmental place to ask hard questions. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressure to keep up, post, and perform.  • Comparison that leaves them feeling worse. • Drama, exclusion, and feeling watched or judged. • Not being able to put it down, even when they want to.

Center for Digital Thinking, Harvard Graduate School of Education (with Common Sense Media & Hopedot), 2024-2025
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Checking In



How many of you think social media is harming young people today?

Now... how many of you think it's harming you?

JUST CHECKING IN

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Pew Research Center, Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024 (n=1,391)

"It's bad for them — not for me."

<p>48%</p> <p>of teens say social media is mostly negative for people their age (up from 32% in 2022)</p>	<p>14%</p> <p>say it has a mostly negative effect on them personally</p>	<p>Why it matters</p> <p>Teens see the harm — in others. Awareness alone won't change their own behavior.</p>
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What they wish adults understood


Come with curiosity, not a lecture. Their online life is real life. They want to be partners in the conversation and not judged for their behaviors.

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Third Person Effect

The tendency for people to overestimate the influence mass communication has on others' attitudes and behavior compared to its effect on themselves.



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Reflection?

If a young person felt as heard by you as they say they feel by a bot, what would be different in how you listen?

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Pros & Cons

Technology and AI is not "all good" or "all bad." We have to take a balanced approach.

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Pew Research Center, Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024 (n=1,391)

What technology genuinely gives young people

 <p>Community & belonging 74% of teens say it makes them feel more connected to friends.</p>	 <p>Creativity & self-expression 63% say it gives them a place to show their creative side.</p>
 <p>Learning & activism Access to advanced knowledge, causes, and a public voice.</p>	 <p>A lifeline for marginalized youth Strongest benefits for LGBTQIA+ youth and others who find support and acceptance online.</p>

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Pew Research Center, Teens, Social Media and Technology 2024 (n=1,391)

Behind the Screen: Sample Prompts

"I had a really bad day, can I just talk to you?"

"Help me figure out how to tell my mom I'm failing math."

"I've been feeling [anxious / numb / on edge] all the time and I can't sleep — is something wrong with me?"

"Can you explain this in a way that actually makes sense?"

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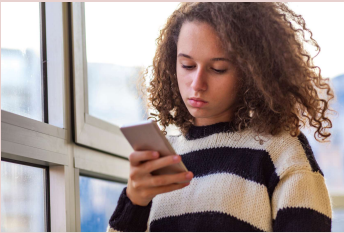
And what it can cost them... the downside

<p>✗ Mental health strain</p> <p>Stress, social comparison, and anxiety, most felt around sleep (45%) and focus (40%).</p>	<p>✗ Addictive design</p> <p>An attention economy built to maximize usage time, not wellbeing.</p>
<p>✗ Unsafe content & contact</p> <p>Misinformation, bullying, grooming, and exploitation.</p>	<p>✗ Pressure to self-brand</p> <p>The exhausting work of curating an online identity to be seen.</p>

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Girls carry more of the cost.



Also at higher risk

- Online harassment disproportionately targets girls and transgender youth.
- Girls report more drama, exclusion, and pressure to post.
- Yet girls also report more support and creativity — the harms and benefits both run higher.

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National Center for Missing & Exploited Children. (n.d.). Take It Down. <https://takeitdown.ncmec.org>

Online exploitation is REAL and dangerous.

- Financial sextortion is rising sharply. It is increasingly targeting teen boys.
- Child sexual abuse material and online enticement remain pervasive threats.
- Generative AI is now being misused to create exploitative imagery — a fast-emerging danger.



The progression of threats is often extremely rapid. It can start within hours of first contact and is deliberately designed to pressure children to act before they have time to process the threat or seek support.

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The Future of Tech & Childhood

AI is no longer coming... it's here and shows up in their everyday lives.

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(Center for Digital Thriving, 2025)

AI isn't the next app.. it's a different landscape

~Half
of Gen Z already use generative AI every week

Faster than anything before it
Generative AI is being adopted by young people faster than social media was, and it is woven into school, friendship, creativity, and even how they seek help.

The opportunity and the risk are the same feature
AI tutors and creative tools can extend learning and provide guidance and support; however, these same systems can mislead, manipulate, replace human connection, and harvest deeply personal data from children.

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(Common Sense Media, 2025)

This is happening now... not next year!

72%
of teens have used an AI companion

52%
use them regularly

1 in 3
have chosen an AI **over a person** for a serious conversation

The concern
1 in 4 have shared personal information with a companion – sharing intimacy with systems that don't have a child's best interest at heart.

The hopeful part
80% of teens who use companions still spend more time with real friends than with chatbots. Human connection hasn't lost... yet.

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AI can assist but these skills are essential:

<p>1 Adaptability Tools will keep changing; the capacity to keep learning is the durable skill.</p>	<p>2 Critical thinking Questioning information, sources, and influence in a world built to persuade.</p>
<p>3 Digital ethics Understanding rights, privacy, consent, and responsibility online.</p>	<p>4 Emotional intelligence Knowing what they feel and why — so a feed or a bot doesn't do it for them.</p>

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 **The Role of Adults**

*Children are growing up inside digital systems that adults built.
We have to step up and step in to make these environments safe.*

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Limiting screen time is not enough.

<p>Not enough on its own</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A time limit doesn't teach judgment. • Kids will meet these spaces with or without us — the question is whether they're prepared. • Bans push behavior underground and out of conversation. 	<p>What actually helps</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teach kids how to navigate online spaces, not just how long. • Build literacy before unsupervised use, "like training before a driver's license." • Stay in the conversation as a curious, trusted partner.
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(U.S. Surgeon General, 2023)

Children look to us as mirrors

The U.S. Surgeon General frames youth digital wellbeing as a shared duty across policymakers, technology companies, researchers, families, and the professionals who serve children.



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It takes a village...

 Families <small>The first model of digital habits, boundaries, and conversation.</small>	 Schools <small>Where literacy, ethics, and critical thinking can be taught directly.</small>	 Healthcare <small>Where problematic use is screened for and wellbeing is supported.</small>	 Platforms <small>Whose design choices set the default for online content.</small>
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Child welfare professionals sit at the intersection of all four.
We hold the power in this room to shape digital experiences for young people.

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Let's take a poll

What share of teens say major tech companies can't be trusted to protect their mental health, safety, and well-being?

Answer Options

- About 2 in 10**
- About 4 in 10**
- About 6 in 10**
- About 8 in 10**

Before I show you the next number, take out your phones.



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**Go to menti.com
Code 1494 7352**

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Results: How much do teens trust tech?

More than **6 in 10** teens say tech companies can't be trusted to prioritize their well-being.


Here's the hopeful part: they're not naïve, and they're not waiting to be warned. They get it!!

That shared wariness is something to build on. It's where the conversation starts we can listen alongside them.

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 **From Awareness to Responsibility**

We've named the landscape. Now how do we move forward?

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The Big Three.

- 1 Technology's role is only growing**
It will keep expanding across children's learning, social lives, and healthcare. There is no opting out for the next generation.
- 2 It's not good or bad – it's powerful**
Technology is neither villain nor savior. It is powerful, and it is the new "normal." Our job is to engage it wisely.
- 3 Our choices decide the impact**
Adult choices and professional practice will directly shape whether that power supports young people or harms them.

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So, are we "technically better"?

Today, let's think critically about it – together.

What I've offered are starting points.

The real exploration comes in the sessions ahead.

Thank you.



Meagan Mitchell, DSW, MSW, MEd, LICSW, RPT - Agents of Change Continuing Education & Clinical Training

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