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A downloadable video series (9 sessions corresponding to the 9 chapters of the book) is available at no charge for those who have purchased the book, *Screens and Teens*. Find this video series at [ScreensAndTeens.com](https://ScreensAndTeens.com), use password RECONNECT.

# 1

## TECHNOLOGY AND OUR DEEPEST HUMAN NEEDS

**M**ost teens today have seen electric typewriters only in the movies (*old* movies or retro movies set in old times), and they may never have seen a manual typewriter. But I'm old enough to remember my family's first typewriters, manual and electric. That big, heavy, gray-and-white piece of technology was a sleek and shiny gift. I loved the changes it brought! Fast typing, with just a light tap on the keys. Tapping a return key instead of lugging across a heavy carriage. Adjusting to that piece of technology was, oh, so worth it!

We've come a long way, haven't we? Now we carry tiny computers in our pockets and purses. We add and delete and access a world of information with just a click or two. The changes—from electric

typewriters to today's slim and efficient technological tools—have been continuous. It's the speed of changes that takes my breath away! Change happens now faster than it ever has before.

Is the speed of change influencing our kids? Could that be one of the reasons they're quickly dissatisfied with doing things the same old way? Is this why they want to line up at a store at midnight when a new game, movie, or device hits the market? Is it why they insist we get them the latest and greatest phone or other device even though theirs works just fine?

Our world changes, almost daily, with the changes in tech-

nology. And that's innocent, right? It seems as innocent as leaving behind Wite-out to correct typing errors in favor of the laptop's delete key! But are those changes having an impact on our children's behavior and beliefs—and on our own? Yes! In both negative and positive ways, technology with its rapid-fire ad-

vances is definitely shaping the personality and character and life path of young people.

Teens have always experienced peer pressure, but keeping up has reached intense levels of pressure for today's teens, who definitely feel a sense of urgency, as if they're going to be left out unless they have the best, the newest, the fastest, and the easiest.

**Parents and teens** are both affected by the influences of our screen-saturated lives, but young people experience the effects with ferocious intensity.

There's pressure to be the happiest, the most beautiful, the most talented. Do you hear any of these sentiments or see any of these attitudes in your home?

“My picture got more ‘likes’ last night than anybody else’s. I knew it would.”

“I’m not being rude. I’m multitasking, and I’m good at it.”

“They can’t expect me to use that. It’s so slow! I’ve got to buy what Alicia has.”

“That is way too hard. Is there an app to make it easier?”

“My parents are making such a big deal out of everything! All I’m doing is texting!”

“This stuff they’re making us read is so ridiculous! That book is so old!”

If you haven’t heard statements like these in your home yet, give it a minute. You probably will! These attitudes surface repeatedly in our technology-driven world. Listen and watch to see who your teens’ “Joneses” may be—those other teens they want so much to keep up with—and consider how much pressure your kids are putting on themselves. While you’re at it, pay attention to the pressure influencing you, too.

Our kids live in a world of screens. They have

- Digital/Smart Devices
- Internet/World Wide Web

- Social Networking
- Games, and
- TV/Movies/Radio/Streaming Services

This book isn't really about technology. But it is about how technology influences the beliefs and behaviors of teens and how parents can connect with their children to influence them positively. Parents and teens are both affected by the influences of our screen-saturated lives, but young people experience the effects with ferocious intensity.

I see the signs of screen-world stress in myself—and I'm middle-aged. Perhaps I notice it most in my own impatience (Why did that light just turn red?!) or in my desire to win every game of solitaire I play (I admit it!). I can get annoyed if I forget to program my DVR. I'm grateful for all the music I can choose from—though sometimes I feel so overwhelmed by the numerous choices that I choose nothing at all. I depend on the convenience of the Internet for research, but I also feel frustrated because there's so much information there.

Screens are part of our lives, and they're here to stay. But we long for deep connection with the teens we love. And that means making sure we give our relationships their rightful priority and connect face-to-face.

Being honest and recognizing how technology influences you can improve your relationship with your teens. You can talk

about what you have in common rather than being frustrated by differences.

One expert in the effects of media and technology on culture says, technology “is fast, cheap, effective, and cool. That’s the good part. The bad part is that it’s fast, cheap, effective, and cool.”<sup>1</sup> We all know that digital technology itself isn’t the problem. Technologies and how we use them can be wonderfully life-giving. They are both tools and toys—tools we need and toys we enjoy. But the content and use of technology can cause problems when they begin to encroach on our development in five core areas of need that both parents and teens share.

## **TECHNOLOGY AND OUR FIVE CORE NEEDS**

My interest in technology took a big leap when my staff and I met with Scott Degraffenreid, a social network analyst and statistician. Scott came to help us understand how young people were being affected by our digital culture and its rapid-fire changes. Scott became a trusted friend and a mentor for me in this area of digital influences.

As a staff we began to apply Scott’s information about the culture of technology to what we knew about young people’s core needs of *security, identity, belonging, purpose, and competence*. Suddenly, the behaviors and problems we’d been recently observing in teens began to make sense.

God created every single person with deep core needs of *security, identity, belonging, purpose, and competence*. For more

than twenty-five years, I've been teaching about these God-given needs and how, ideally, we meet them in healthy ways. There have always been problems when people try to meet these five core needs in unhealthy or counterfeit ways. I began to see that teens were turning to technology and the digital culture to meet their deep core needs—and technology is a definite counterfeit that doesn't work to meet those needs.

We can start by getting better acquainted with the five core needs. You will find them familiar because you have them yourself!

### *Security*

Security is our first core need, and it's defined by the question *Who can I trust?* We're healthiest when we meet our need for security in God, Jesus, and the Holy Spirit,<sup>2</sup> in trustworthy people, and in ourselves as we learn to be right and do right even when

the burden is heavy. Security is rooted in forgiveness—from God, from others, and especially from ourselves.

Everybody has this core need for security; it only be-

comes a problem when we begin looking for security in all the wrong places. Some young people try to meet their need for security in their technology and its availability. Many believe technology will never let them down (as human relationships often do!).

**Technology is not**  
how God designed the need  
for security to be met.

Perhaps we trust in technology because our computer disasters usually aren't disasters at all. Click a key to "Undo" the keystroke that was a mistake. Power down and reboot, and you're good to go. Have you been with teenagers who are "suffering through" power outages or coping with being at Grandma's house, where the cell signal is weak? Such interruptions of digital connectedness are big deals to them no matter how often we say they shouldn't be. When teens don't have instant access to their technology, their security feels threatened.

Many of today's teens are secure in things being quick, perfect, and easy. They trust that the access they need will always be readily available. They don't need directions to get anywhere because they have a phone with a GPS app. They don't need to remember a friend's phone number because every number is stored in their phones. They don't need to know Bible verses; they can easily look them up on a Bible app, too.

Teens are also secure in their ability to win and to be happy. It's *what* they trust that matters, not *who*. This is potentially very damaging because technology is not how God designed this need for security to be met.

Trusting people doesn't come naturally to young people partly because they're relating through social media and texting. It's

### **Christian parents**

cherish hopes that their teens will ultimately have the need for security met deeply, once and for all, by God.



hard to truly know people and develop friendship and discernment skills. They may be attempting to meet this need with the number of “friends” they have. What they don’t understand is that security is not found in *quantity* (multiple online connections). It’s discovered in *quality* (real and faithful relationships).

Christian parents cherish the hopes that their teens will ultimately have this need for security met deeply, once and for all, by God. But whether teens will rely on God to meet their need for security may be influenced by technology. The Web provides easy access to ideas about many religions and many gods. Some teens follow people we don’t know through services like Twitter. They can access information without us being aware. Information could be presented to them (without their looking for it!) via advertising or links in their social feeds. People they follow and sites they visit may report things about the God of the Bible and the way we’re choosing to raise our children that might cause them to think we’re wrong and our God isn’t the only One worth worshipping.

What is worship, after all? It’s assigning lordship to God and giving him our attention and praise—and giving him primacy in our days.<sup>3</sup> Have you ever seen teens with their tech tools and wondered if they almost worship their technology? It’s where they turn for answers to their questions and to solve their problems. Others unwittingly downgrade God, treating Him casually like a friend on Facebook who may or may not like their status update. As teens become increasingly acclimated to speedy

answers via the Internet, will it be harder for them to wait on God for an answer to prayer, if they do pray? Will young people be satisfied with a Bible app that provides a devotional each morning, considering that bit of Scripture as all the spiritual nourishment they need?

You can immediately realize that there are spiritual implications that accompany deep involvement with screens! But it's not all doom and gloom. A young person's security grows as they become more self-confident. Gaining knowledge (by using tech tools and platforms) can grow that "self-security." The ease of Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, and texting reinforces and can even strengthen relationships as they allow teens to be in regular contact and share much about their lives. For the discerning user, these platforms can also reveal inconsistencies, manipulation, and pride, clues that the wise young person can use to make better decisions about which friends he or she should keep at a distance and which they should engage with more personally.

Screens can positively affect faith development, too. Bible apps are convenient, and they allow us to keep the Bible with us. Devotional material read on handheld devices and Facebook posts from ministries, churches, and friends can encourage, humble, and mature young people. Worship music and videos of church services and concerts can be inspiring. Streaming allows teens to watch church services and conferences they might have missed in person.

When it comes to meeting our deep human need for security,

we want technology to take its rightful place. Digital tools can't meet anyone's need for security, but they can be tools that help teens develop the relationships with God and others that are real and trustworthy and nourishing.

### *Identity*

Identity is our second core need. It's defined by the question *Who am I?* Because the way we define ourselves influences our behavior, it's essential that our identity is current and honest. This means we see ourselves accurately. Ignoring our weak areas or challenges is immature. Denying our strengths is just as bad. It's important for us to know who we are!

For some teens, screen use has contributed to an under-developed identity. They may be devoting so much time to gaming and staying connected with "friends" that they don't have time or desire to broaden their interests or learn new skills, which would grow and solidify their identity. Also, because technology makes many things easier, they may be lacking the perseverance, diligence, and teachability that are often essential for adding to their skill sets and character development. Posting on social networks can limit identity development because the tendency is for posts to acknowledge only certain aspects of their lives. That means friends and family can only provide comments or ask questions about those elements—the ones the teens choose to show. For example, they may post often about their musical interests and never mention that they volunteer at an animal shelter.

As time goes by and no friends acknowledge or support the teen's interest in animal rescue, the teen may begin to devalue that interest and let it wane.

When young people interact with many people on social media platforms, their identity can get confused. Many of the people whose posts they follow don't even know them personally. Those writers are just making general statements about their generation. Yet their words can be very influential.

Words—even words tossed off casually on a social media venue—can strongly affect our teens. If someone whose opinion your daughter values makes a disparaging comment about her writing, she may dismiss her writing ability as unimportant. If she likes a particular sports team but finds out very few other people do, she may decide her inclination was wrong. In a matter of minutes, she can transition from believing one thing about herself to another. This shift in identity negatively influences security because she appears to be inconsistent.

Your son may “like” a musical group one day, and being a fan becomes part of his identity. After he finds out someone he values doesn't like that group, he'll quickly “unlike” them. But what about his friends who were glad he liked that group? Now they're confused and may communicate that to your son. They might actually be disappointed or angry. Now your son will experience the stress associated with trying to keep everyone happy.

But is this really so different from when we were teens ourselves? After all, we listened to the opinions of our peers—or of

**Today's young** people tend to be more conflicted about who they are and what they value.

celebrities we read about or saw on television. The vast difference lies in quantity! Today's young people are coping with a deluge of widely divergent influences, while we had a much smaller circle of people influenc-

ing us, and they were probably more unified in their preferences. And the influence is nearly constant! Before there were cell-phones, young people had time off from their peers—times when they were at home with just their families. Now teens are with their peers and with online influences 24/7 since they can access their social media and the Internet all day long.

Because of this large array of influences in their daily experience, today's young people tend to be more conflicted about who they are and what they value. It's even harder for parents to know their kids well—and for teens to benefit from the opinions and wisdom of the parents who love them because they're listening to so many voices.

But before we overreact and unplug all of our screens, let's remember that technology can also enhance a teen's identity. Today's cameras allow young people to easily record and express what they enjoy and what they do. They can share through social media and gain interest and support from family and friends. Also, posts from others may inspire them to consider fresh ideas and undertake new projects or adventures. Teens can follow

through where their personal interests lead them because finding information through the Web is easy.

Christian parents know that young people will be most whole and healthy when their identities are grounded in their relationship with God. The Bible is where they found out that they are created in God's image (Genesis 1:27), deeply loved (1 John 4:10), bought with a price (1 Corinthians 7:23), and so much more. Ideally they will add to these truths the pursuit of a personal relationship with Christ. Teens' use of the Internet and other tech tools can cause them to believe Christian truths or not. It depends on what websites they peruse, who they follow and listen to, how they use social media, and the types of television shows and movies they watch.

## **BELONGING**

Belonging is the third core need, and it's defined by the question *Who wants me?* Belonging is healthiest when we meet this need by belonging to God,<sup>4</sup> with people who have demonstrated solid character, and among people with whom we share beliefs, interests, and/or talents. Unique connections and belonging can also be found through differences because new experiences can bond us.

Belonging is dependent upon our security and identity. When one or both of these needs aren't met or they're met in illegitimate ways, we either won't experience belonging at all or our belonging will be unhealthy. For example, teens who place their

security in technology are more likely also to attempt to meet their belonging need through technology. They prioritize time with technology over time with people. Their digital relationships will be most significant to them.

Some teens stay busy with their technology, which can make investing in person-to-person friendships difficult. Also, social media tends to promote a lack of authenticity and accountability. A cut-and-run reaction to negativity is common and results in short-lived relationships. Using this same response with face-to-face friendships is damaging to the feelings and belonging of all parties involved.

As we remember technology isn't good or bad, but the use of it can be either, we must recognize that platforms like Instagram and Facebook can enhance relationships. Although I have many "friends" on Facebook I don't even know, some people who started as friends of friends or women who heard me speak somewhere have become women I'd like to get to know better in person. Young adults and teens can also spark new friendships through social media. This might be especially true for teens with social anxiety and those who are introverted or self-smart. We, of course, need to be alert regarding their online connections.

Simple games on phones can strengthen relationships. My own sister-in-law has enjoyed an ongoing competition with my niece's fiancé. It wouldn't be healthy if they related to each other only through this game, but their friendship has grown from sharing this game. Playing the game was fun and increased their

comfort with each other. It gave them something to talk about when they were together in person.

Posting pictures can enhance relationships. This week my niece and my cousin's daughter both posted old family pictures to commemorate an event. Soon lots of family members were chiming in with comments. For those few moments, our family didn't feel so separated geographically.

How might technology help teens discover and strengthen their belonging to God and to their church families? We've mentioned how teens can access the Bible through apps. This can make the study and memorization of Scripture easier and more likely. Young people might enjoy keeping up with posts from a church or youth group Facebook page or Instagram account. Many church youth groups pull students from various schools (public, private, homeschool), so social media groups might give teens a natural way to stay connected on the weekdays when they are not together for Sunday school classes or youth meetings.

The flip side of the coin is that screen-time influences can weaken a young person's belonging in their families or in their churches or to God. Screen time can occupy a lot of hours in a teen's day, keeping him or her busier than we'd like. Time with games and videos and social media platforms leaves less time for Christian peers, for attending church and youth group functions, and for reading the Bible. The pattern of quickly dipping in and out of social media creates a pattern of relating that doesn't work well when it comes to relating to God in a meaningful way. And teens'



impatience with anything less than a rapid response is exacerbated by constant media use; it makes waiting on God's answers in their lives seem interminable.

**Today's teens** are multitalented and multipassionate.

If these concepts sound familiar, it's because our need for belonging is so closely linked to our need for security. We long for our young people to have this pair of deep needs fully

met through healthy relationships.

### *Purpose*

Purpose is our fourth core need; it's defined by the question *Why am I alive?* The A+ answer is that we're alive to glorify God through who we are and what we do.<sup>5</sup> We need to know and develop our strengths, strengthen weaknesses, and accept challenges that are a part of who we are.

Because today's teens are multitalented and often multipassionate, they need direction in order to discover and believe in their specific purpose. Finding personal purpose is one of the great challenges of life. There's so much information available for teens to sift through, and they know they have many options during high school and beyond. Sometimes having so many choices before them has a demobilizing effect; they're like deer caught in the glare of headlights! Young people have a lot of sifting and sorting of their ideas and talents and passions to get through, and that can feel overwhelming. Also, if some of the other core needs

aren't met, it can warp the way young people approach finding their purpose. For example, if a teen's security and identity are wrapped up in being happy, she will choose only activities that keep her happy and may avoid opportunities that stretch her. She might bypass substantive factors that could shape her future.

One of the keys to finding purpose is hope. Hope gives rise to purpose. Social media can give young people exposure to fresh ideas and the great, big world out there. The Internet offers places where teens may discover causes they care about and people to follow who are doing good work. A broad security, complete and accurate identity, and people to connect and serve with will help youth do more than just "like" organizations. At the same time, the negativity and bullying that take place on many social media platforms can rob teens of their hope. The constant barrage of causes and themes can also have a numbing effect; teens get used to hitting "Like" and then moving on. That level of low commitment is all too common online. Again, technology gives and technology takes away.

Young people with a healthy purpose will come into their adult lives with a readiness to engage the world around them. Parents long to see young people find purpose in real-world pursuits and passions.

### *Competence*

Competence is the fifth core need, and it's defined by the question *What do I do well?* We'll believe we have competence

and can develop more when we have trustworthy people speaking into our lives (security). Furthermore, our competence is related to who we are (identity),

**God didn't** wire us to need perfection, but he did wire us for competence.

it's often discovered as we commit to others (belonging), and it's found in God so we can fulfill our unique purpose.<sup>6</sup> Purpose makes competence necessary.

Without it, we don't need to be good at anything.

God didn't wire us to need perfection, but he did wire us for competence—the ability to do what we need to do. If we're striving for perfection, that's not a desire from God. It may mean we're prideful, uncomfortable with our weaknesses, and not trusting God's grace. Young people can struggle to believe in their competence because of how easy it is to base our worth and ability on how we compare to others on social media platforms. We can always find someone more beautiful and more able there.

So, short of striving for perfection, where do teens develop competence? To incorporate a couple of clichés, young people need to “stretch their wings” and “test their mettle.” They need to tackle adventures that make them a bit nervous because they've never done those things before. This is how they find out where they're weak and might need to get stronger. This is how their strengths are affirmed. All of these experiences produce strong competence.

While they're discovering their personal giftedness or limitations, they are exercising a faith muscle—trusting God in new

challenges and new relationships and learning how to seek His wisdom and empowerment.

The Bible promises that when we are weak, He is strong and His grace is sufficient (2 Corinthians 12:9–10). When we find it hard to love, His love for us allows love to grow (1 John 4:7). Because of our faith in God through Christ, we can do all things (Philippians 4:13). Just as a connection with God enables the meeting of the other four core needs, that relationship makes competence possible as well.

### **MEETING CORE NEEDS IN THE BEST WAYS**

Along with their parents, teens have five core needs—for security, identity, belonging, purpose, and competence. Technology offers some good tools for meeting these five needs, but if we aren't mindful and observant, those tools can get in the way of meeting those needs. That's why young people need training in discernment when it comes to their digital choices. Bringing wise influence to bear in this area must be a major parenting goal.

Influencing our teens regarding technology is going to hinge on a lot of communication-discussions about their choices and ours, sharing the reasons for the choices we make, listening to one another with affection and respect. We need to understand our teens and their digital world better and understand the way a teen's mind works. Parents can grow in confidence and skills for parenting young people in a digital age. You may catch this vision for your role in your teen's development in the pages ahead.<sup>7</sup>

SCREENS AND TEENS

“I have the right to do anything,” you say—  
but not everything is beneficial. “I have the right  
to do anything”—but not everything is constructive.

1 CORINTHIANS 10:23

Finally, brothers and sisters, whatever is true, whatever is  
noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely,  
whatever is admirable—if anything is excellent or  
praiseworthy—think about such things.

PHILIPPIANS 4:8