

I put my teens on a digital detox – the results shocked me

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Published: November 13, 2017

I never realised just how damaging our obsession with smartphones and our switched-on lifestyle was, nor how addictive screen time was, until I put my teenagers on an extended digital detox. The results were swift and shocking, raising the question of just what is happening to the selfie generation and whether we have more to fear than just a bad Snapchat Story or a wasted day bingeing on Netflix.

It was out of desperation that I instructed my teenagers to go cold turkey from screen time for a term – thanks in part to the advice of our tutor who said they needed to study more to catch up in maths – and save up the things they wanted to do, even "go crazy", after their exams.

Social media apps were deleted but I had to concede my children could keep their mobiles to text the tutor and use their laptops as part of the school's Bring Your Own Device policy for homework and "research".

The depth of the problem revealed itself almost immediately one bedtime when I sent an article to my kids via Facebook (for them to read later); and immediately one of their mobiles buzzed via the Messenger app I didn't even know was there.

Further investigation revealed a folder set up in the phone that one daughter had ambitiously named "Do not look" and in there were the apps I had previously deleted.



*Vivienne Reiner and her teenage daughters.
Photo: supplied*

I caught my other daughter once in her room offline, looking through the photo stream on her mobile – she explained she just wanted to go through the action of swiping.

I had long had the feeling that the fact we all seem increasingly stuck to the screen was no accident. And just days ago, Facebook's ex-president Sean Parker admitted that in developing their ubiquitous social media products the creators of Facebook and Instagram consciously strived to manipulate people's vulnerabilities so that their creations "consume as much of your time and conscious attention as possible", aiming to give users a little dopamine hit every time someone likes or comments on a photo.

Facebook, he said, "literally changes your relationship with society, with each other ... It probably interferes with productivity in weird ways. God only knows what it's doing to our children's brains."

A research firm that specialises in consumer reactions to products, Discount, recently found people touch their phones on average 2617 times a day; a former Apple inventor

who is now studying to be a neurosurgeon believes "addictive technologies" can affect the same neurological pathways as gambling and drug use, the Guardian has reported.

Yet other studies have found the mere fact of having a phone nearby can result in eroded concentration, a *Wall Street Journal* feature reported. Relying on the internet makes us forget because the "truth" is just a click away.

But what is the impact of just relying on your smartphone to tell the time, or to wake you up? Or having an app for everything?

These devices are now often an extension of ourselves, distracting us and filling the void where we once had time to do nothing; to daydream or to think deeply and reflect.

It is said that owning a pet such as a dog can help people with mental illness or stave off depression but I wonder what symbiotic processes are happening with our smartphones – and now smartwatches – which are always kept so close.

Surprisingly, my children did not take too much convincing to agree to our "prison at home" term, as one referred to it jokingly, although small concessions were made – the girls insisted on being able to search for lyrics to songs – but they did not fall for the pop-up suggestion to watch videos of their favourite artists.

One of my daughters noticed with surprise once, when a single-word text from a friend arrived that she could read from a distance, that she nonetheless felt an urge to open the message, although she knew she would find nothing more if she physically "opened" the text.

Our first weekend evening screen-free was spent playing games – something we had not done in months. Our dinner proceeded without interruption and we enjoyed what seemed to be focused, connected and happy conversation.

Almost immediately after we banned screen time, my children started studying much more – there's not much to do, they explained – no internet black hole sucking in hours at a time, assisted by auto play that commences the next- or related instalment we never asked for.

We bought some books and my children have a newfound love of reading: "It's so much better than TV," one enthused, even while conceding she was looking forward to holiday catch-up television.

"I'm much happier now," the other chimed; checking what her thousand "friends" were up to virtually made her feel downhearted, especially at night.

Music has returned to our lives, replacing the YouTube morning routine and social media catch-up that accompanied breakfast.

Weeks later, we still don't know what other people are doing "out there" and we don't care. My children's heads are clear – it's as if we've woken from a stupor.

Vivienne Reiner has teenage children and works in public relations.

This story was found at:

<http://www.smh.com.au/comment/i-put-my-teens-on-a-digital-detox--the-results-shocked-me-20171106-gzg4ey.html>