

5 Myths About Young People and Social Media

Written by Peter Gray, Ph.D.

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A new book exposes widely held beliefs about new technology

Teenagers have always been attracted to public spaces where they can hang out, find new friends, and talk endlessly with peers about matters that concern them, away from parents and other authority figures. Such gatherings are crucial to human development; they are how teenagers expand their social horizons, share views on issues that matter to them, experiment with different versions of their personalities, and develop the sense of independence from parents and other adults that they must nurture in order to become adults themselves.



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Until rather recently, the places where teens would find one another were physical, geographical spaces, but today they are more often located in cyberspace. Many adults are

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As the title of her book suggests, the results of Boyd's study can't be summarized with a few simple statements. The book debunks some of the simplistic myths about teens and technology that we often find in the popular media or hear in conversations among adults. Here's a list of those myths, and some of what Boyd has to tell us that is relevant to each:

Myth 1: Technology creates social isolation.

A teenager at a computer or smartphone may look socially isolated, but, more often than not, the teen is using that device to overcome social isolation— isolation that adults have imposed. Boyd says that she often heard parents complain that their teens preferred computers to real people, but the teens' perspective was quite different. Teens, throughout the country

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Adults are often appalled by the tendency of teens to put information into the Internet that should be private. In contrast, teens regularly told Boyd that they used social media to achieve privacy. The difference seems to be one of concern about privacy from whom. Parents worry about the prying eyes of strangers, whereas teens are more concerned about the prying eyes and ears of adults who know them well. In Boyd's words: When teens—and, for that matter, most adults—seek privacy, they do so in relation to those who hold power over them. Unlike privacy advocates and more politically conscious adults, teens aren't typically concerned with governments and corporations. Instead, they're trying to avoid surveillance from parents, teachers, and other immediate authority figures in their lives. They want the right to be ignored by the people they see as being in their business. They wish to avoid paternalistic adults who use safety and protection as an excuse to monitor their everyday sociality.

Sometimes teens who are physically near one another will text or use social media rather than talk, precisely so parents or others who are physically present won't know what they're saying. Teens quite rightly get annoyed when their parents go online and read what was intended for peers, not parents. It's little different, to them, from reading private mail, or bugging their bedroom, or reading their diary. Boyd writes, further, In 2012, when I asked teens who were early adopters of Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram why they prefer these services to Facebook, I heard a near-uniform response: Because my parents don't know about it.

It is true, however, that many teens ignore or are unaware of the long-lasting traces they may leave when they communicate through social media and the harmful effects that can occur more

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