



# Digital Happiness

*parenting in a digital age*

CHRIS PARKER

Why not for one week cut your phone, social media, internet use by half and replace the time with catching up with friends and family in-person, and doing some exercise.

There is no doubt that digital technologies are delivering on their promise of greater efficiency, instantaneous communication, and wider networks of connection. It is right and proper for us to take a grateful attitude towards them as a blessing from God. However, as I have mentioned in previous articles in this series, we also need to practise discernment as parents. We must continually ask big questions of how the effects of the fall are being expressed—not just through technology but through all cultural stories that are vying for our children's hearts and minds. Digital technology tells a captivating story of instant, and continuous, happiness for as long as we are connected. How much truth—and no doubt there is some—is to be found in this ever-present claim?

In her recent book *iGen: Why Today's Super-Connected Kids are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy—and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood*, Jean Twenge provides some eye-opening observations of iGen. Her research draws on the data of four major American studies of 11 million young people surveyed since the 1960s. She cites a fascinating array of trends. Some relate to the increase in engagement with technologies; the extension of childhood into adolescence; a significant increase in the amount of time spent engaged with screens (no surprises); the decline in in-person interaction; and, possibly most importantly for us to consider as parents, the "sharp rise in mental health issues" (p. 3). She soberly suggests that iGen are "at the forefront of the worst mental health crises in decades, with rates of teen suicide and depression skyrocketing since 2011" (p. 3).

Every time we receive a text, check the latest news, browse our social media accounts, receive a comment or a 'like', we receive a brain chemical that provides a pleasant sensation. This has been studied and measured. It makes us happy. We want to keep feeling it, so we keep on checking. We keep on replying and posting so that it increases the chances that we will get another 'ding' and a boost of dopamine. "Ah, that feels good!"

This is why Brad Huddleston titled his book *Digital Cocaine*. In his introduction he describes speaking to two girls after one of his presentations:

Both girls freely admitted to much of what I discussed that day. These confessions involved spending long hours every day on Facebook and spending most of their waking hours texting. They spoke openly about not being able to break the lock of digital connection to their friends. They slept very little each night, staying up late in their bedroom interacting with their smart phones. Those devices had gripped them and wouldn't let go. (p. 3)

Addictions have never delivered the happiness that they promise. This is no different for digital addictions. Addiction brings slavery not freedom; bondage rather than a cure for boredom. Ultimately, addiction brings despair because it is a bowing down to a false god.

One of the most confronting conclusions to Twenge's research for me as a parent, was summed up in this statement, "If an activity involves a screen, it is linked to less happiness and more depression. If it doesn't—particularly if it involves in-person social interaction or exercise—it's linked to more happiness and less depression" (p. 300).

How addicted are you? How addicted is your teen (or tween)? Maybe you could conduct a little family-based research. Why not for one week cut your phone, social media, internet use by half and replace the time with catching up with friends and family in-person, and doing some exercise. Discuss at the end of the week if any of you are feeling happier, more at peace, more joyful. What do you predict will be the case?

Tim Keller reminds us that an idol is born when we take a good thing and we make it an ultimate thing. Technologies are a blessing but too much of a good thing can result in us serving an idol that robs us of the freedom that God has paid a high price for in His son Jesus. Christian parents disciple their children to turn from bondage and use their freedom to live the 'good life' that God has designed for them; loving God and neighbour and seeking the Kingdom through dwelling in authentic relationships with others.

I finish with this powerful poem from Michael Leunig:

#### Hymn for Hymn

Greater love hath no man  
than this,  
That he lay down his phone  
for his friend  
And go to his side  
To care and abide,  
To hold and support  
and to mend. *—ML*

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