

Helping Teenagers Take Back Their Attention — and Take Greater Ownership of Their Learning

There is a familiar scene playing out in many homes.

A teenager sits at a desk with a textbook open, a laptop nearby and an assignment partly completed. Beside them is a smartphone. A message arrives. They reply. While doing so, they glance at social media or watch a short video. One video leads to another. Ten minutes pass. Eventually they return to the assignment, reread the paragraph in front of them and try to remember where they left off.

From the next room, a parent watches with growing frustration.

“Put your phone away and concentrate.”

“I am concentrating.” comes the reply.

In a sense, both may believe they are right.

This is one of the challenges facing parents and teachers today. Teenagers are growing up in a world where schoolwork, entertainment, friendships, games, news and social approval can all arrive through the same device. The smartphone can be a textbook, library, television, games console and social space, while also offering an almost endless stream of distraction.

For this reason, I believe the discussion about young people and technology needs to move beyond the familiar question of how much screen time is too much. Time matters, but it does not tell us everything. An hour spent researching a school project is very different from an hour spent moving almost automatically between messages, videos and social media.

Perhaps the more useful question is: what habits of attention, coping and learning are young people developing while they use technology?

Technology itself is not the enemy. It gives young people extraordinary access to knowledge, creativity, communication and opportunities that previous generations did not have. Nor can we prepare teenagers for adulthood by trying to remove technology from their lives. Their universities, workplaces and relationships will become more digital, not less.

What we can do is help them develop a healthier relationship with it.

Our aim should not be to raise teenagers who can concentrate only when an adult removes their phone. Over time, we want them to become young adults who recognise for themselves when something deserves their full attention and are able to put the phone aside.

At the centre of this is self-regulation.

In *The Scrolling Generation*, I describe this through the Balanced Digital Living Approach, which brings together awareness and healthy boundaries, empathy and social connection, and resilience with sustained focus. The intention is not digital abstinence. It is to help young

people become more aware of when technology is useful and when it is beginning to shape their behaviour in ways they may not have consciously chosen.

This is particularly important during adolescence. A 15-year-old may increasingly look and sound like an adult, but the ability to plan ahead, manage impulses, delay gratification and make thoughtful decisions is still developing. At the same time, teenagers are especially sensitive to friendship, belonging, identity and peer approval.

We have placed into this already complicated stage of development devices offering instant communication, entertainment and feedback. It is understandable that self-control does not always keep pace.

Simply telling a teenager to “have more discipline” is unlikely to be enough. Discipline is something that needs to be developed, practised and supported.

One place to begin is by recognising an uncomfortable truth about education: meaningful learning often requires us to stay with something that does not feel easy.

A student may struggle with an algebra problem. An essay refuses to come together. They read several pages and realise they cannot remember what they have read. They practise something repeatedly and still make mistakes. They receive a disappointing examination result.

These moments are not signs that learning has gone wrong. They are part of learning.

The challenge today is that relief from frustration is so readily available. Young people have always procrastinated, of course. Before smartphones, they might have stared out of the window, made a sandwich or wandered around the house. What has changed is how quickly boredom or discomfort can now be replaced by something stimulating.

This matters because resilience is not only about coping with major adversity. In everyday life, resilience is often much quieter. It is staying with something when it becomes boring. Trying again after getting something wrong. Tolerating the feeling of not knowing. Starting an assignment when you do not feel motivated. Receiving disappointing feedback without deciding, “I am bad at this.”

One of the ideas I often return to is that the opposite of scrolling is not studying. It is staying.

Staying with a thought. Staying with a problem. Staying with frustration. Staying with another person. Staying with an activity long enough for something deeper to emerge.

That ability matters both for resilience and for learning.

It may also help us think differently about attention. Parents sometimes say, “*My teenager has no attention span.*” Yet that same teenager may spend a long time editing a video, learning a game, drawing, playing sport or researching something they genuinely care about.

Attention has not disappeared. But the environments around young people are influencing how it is used.

When students move repeatedly between homework, messages, videos and social media, what feels like multitasking is usually rapid task-switching. Each interruption makes it harder to remain deeply engaged with the original task.

Rather than criticising teenagers for being distracted, it can be more helpful to let them experience the difference for themselves.

For example, instead of expecting an hour of uninterrupted study immediately, begin with 20 or 25 minutes. Put the phone outside the room or out of sight. Choose one subject and one task. Work on it without interruption, then take a proper break.

Over time, the period can be extended.

We would not expect someone who has never exercised to run ten kilometres on their first morning. In the same way, we should not be surprised if teenagers surrounded by constant digital stimulation find prolonged concentration difficult at first.

Focus can be practised.

The way adults respond when things go wrong matters as well.

Imagine a teenager coming home with a disappointing mark. A parent's first reaction may understandably be, *"How did you get 58 per cent?"* or *"Didn't I tell you to study?"* The conversation may quickly move to how much time they spent on their phone.

Those concerns may be reasonable, but they can also put a teenager immediately on the defensive.

Sometimes a gentler beginning gets us further.

"What surprised you about the result?"

"Which part did you find difficult?"

"What do you think happened?"

"What could you do differently next time?"

"What support would help?"

This does not mean lowering expectations. Accountability and standards remain important. But there is a difference between holding a young person accountable and making them feel that one poor result says something permanent about who they are.

"I don't understand this" can become "I don't understand this yet."

"I failed" can become "What went wrong?"

"This is too hard" can become *"What is the next part I can work on?"*

Gradually, setbacks become something a young person learns from rather than something that defines them.

The teenage years also require parents to begin shifting from control towards ownership.

Adolescents naturally want more independence. That does not mean a 14-year-old should make every decision without boundaries. Teenagers still need guidance, expectations and structure. But structure is not quite the same as control.

If every technology rule belongs to the parent, responsibility for maintaining those rules also remains with the parent. Mum removes the phone. Dad switches off the Wi-Fi. The teacher confiscates the device. The teenager complies because someone else is controlling the environment.

Sometimes that may be necessary. But over time, responsibility has to move towards the young person.

Otherwise, what happens when they reach university, begin working or live away from home? Who takes the phone away then?

One way to begin that transfer is to involve teenagers in deciding reasonable boundaries around study, meals, sleep and leisure.

Instead of saying, *"You are banned from your phone between seven and nine."* a parent might say, *"You told me you want to improve your maths this term. What do you think would help you concentrate?"*

Perhaps the teenager decides to leave the phone in the kitchen while studying. Perhaps notifications are switched off. Perhaps social media waits until homework is finished.

They will not always make wise choices. Neither do adults. Part of growing up is making decisions, experiencing the consequences and learning to adjust.

Over time, the conversation can shift from *"I am making you do this"* towards *"You decided this matters to you."*

That is an important part of developing motivation.

Parents and teachers can also help teenagers think about what they themselves want from their education. Many young people know exactly what the adults around them expect. They may be less clear about their own goals.

These do not have to be grand ambitions. One teenager may want to qualify for a particular course. Another may want to remain in a sports programme, pursue design, enter polytechnic, study medicine, become a chef or simply improve in a subject that has always been difficult.

What matters is that some part of the goal belongs to them.

Conversations can begin quite simply. What would you most like to improve this term? What is making school difficult at the moment? What is one habit that might help? What support would you like from us, and what part do you think you need to take responsibility for?

These conversations encourage teenagers to connect today's choices with tomorrow's outcomes without turning every discussion into a lecture about grades.

Sleep is another part of the picture that is easily overlooked.

A teenager who is tired may appear lazy, irritable, forgetful or unable to concentrate. Late-night messaging, gaming and scrolling can make an already difficult period of adolescent sleep even harder.

Families do not need to turn the home into a military camp. Sometimes small changes help. Could phones charge outside bedrooms? Could there be an agreed time when messaging stops? Could homework begin earlier? Could the final part of the evening become calmer?

Adults also need to look at their own habits. It is difficult to ask a teenager to put their phone away at dinner when the adults at the table are still checking theirs. Young people pay close attention to whether what we do matches what we ask of them.

Resilience is also built away from screens.

Sport, reading, music, creative activities, volunteering, part-time work, hobbies and simply being responsible for something all have value. Even boredom has a place. These experiences expose teenagers to patience, effort, mistakes, negotiation and delayed gratification.

They also create opportunities for young people to notice what is happening inside themselves.

When did I lose focus?

What was I feeling before I picked up my phone?

Was I bored, anxious, lonely or avoiding something difficult?

What helped me return?

This kind of reflection is far more valuable than simply counting screen-time minutes. It helps a young person understand their own behaviour.

That understanding matters because excessive technology use is not always a discipline problem. Sometimes it is meeting a need. A teenager may be online because that is where their friends are. They may game because it gives them a sense of competence they are not finding elsewhere. They may scroll because they feel lonely or overwhelmed. They may escape into short videos because schoolwork has become associated with repeated failure.

If we remove the screen without trying to understand what sits underneath the behaviour, we may solve the immediate problem without helping the young person very much.

This is where empathy becomes important.

Before asking only, “How do we get teenagers off their phones?” perhaps we should sometimes ask, “What are we helping them return to?”

Friendships. Conversation. Sport. Reading. Nature. Family meals. Creative pursuits. Meaningful work. A sense of purpose.

Young people need an offline life that contains things worth returning to.

Schools face much the same challenge as families. Restricting phones during lessons can provide valuable protected learning time, but rules alone do not teach self-regulation. Students also need to understand why sustained attention matters.

Schools could give students opportunities to experience the difference between working with notifications constantly appearing and working without interruption. Teachers can gradually create longer periods of uninterrupted reading, writing and problem-solving and help students notice what happens when the urge for stimulation appears.

The message then becomes less about “your phone is bad” and more about “your attention is valuable; learn how to look after it.”

For parents, perhaps one of the hardest parts of adolescence is accepting that successful parenting eventually requires us to become less necessary.

When children are young, we organise almost everything. We decide bedtimes, control devices, supervise homework, remind, check and intervene.

Somewhere during the teenage years, that role begins to change.

We gradually move from manager to coach.

A good coach still has expectations and notices when preparation is poor. A good coach does not pretend that every decision is wise. But a coach also knows that eventually the young person has to perform without them.

If a teenager spends an hour scrolling when they intended to study, the question may not always have to be, “How do I stop this?”

Sometimes it can be, “How do I help them notice what happened and choose differently next time?”

That takes longer than confiscating a phone. It also offers something more lasting.

There will still be bad days. Teenagers will procrastinate. They will stay online too late. They will ignore boundaries they helped create. They may spend hours watching videos when they intended to study.

Adults do these things too.

Resilience does not mean never losing our way. It means gradually learning how to return.

Focus can improve. Study habits can change. Academic setbacks can be recovered from. Relationships with technology can mature. Responsibility can be learned.

These capacities will matter even more in the years ahead. Artificial intelligence will make information easier to obtain. Entertainment will become increasingly personalised. Digital environments will become even better at capturing and holding attention.

In that world, educational success may depend not only on what a student knows, but also on whether they can stay with a difficult problem when an easier distraction is available. Whether they can work without constant stimulation. Whether they recognise when technology is helping and when it is getting in the way. Whether they can receive criticism, recover from failure and organise their attention around what matters to them.

Education is ultimately something young people need to learn to participate in, rather than something done to them by parents and teachers.

So perhaps the screen-time conversation needs to become less about winning a daily battle over devices and more about the kind of young adults we hope our children will become.

Eventually, no parent will be standing beside the desk. No teacher will be there to confiscate the phone.

The teenager will become an adult faced with their own decisions about where to place their attention.

Our task, then, is not simply to control their screens while they are young. It is to walk alongside them long enough for them to develop the awareness, resilience and confidence to manage their own attention when we are no longer there.