



Created to Connect:

Helping teens develop deeper relationships

Jason and Melissa came to their pastor seeking help. “We’ve tried everything we know, but just can’t seem to connect with our teenage son, Ethan. In fact, the harder we try, the more distant he becomes. It’s like we speak a different language than he does. All he wants to do is play video games and chat with his online friends. We want to be close to our son, but he just seems to be drifting farther away from us.”

Madison felt dejected and depressed. Despite spending hours each day on social media, she experienced more loneliness and isolation than ever. Her online friends were nice, and she enjoyed interacting with them, but she was always left with an empty feeling – like she was missing out on something important that everyone else had. Her desire for relational closeness eventually led her into pornography. There had to be something more – something that would fill the void in her heart.

Michael was disturbed by the trend he was seeing in his youth group. Whenever the teens gathered together, they hardly put their phones down long enough to participate in a Bible study or even a fun activity. The teens seemed to be drawn to them like moths to a bright light – even when he and his youth staff would try to engage them. Efforts to enter into conversation with a teen usually fizzled out quickly. They seemed more comfortable texting than talking directly, even when the other person was sitting a few seats away from them.

Michael was at a loss to know what to do.

What exactly is the problem?

Each one of these scenarios hints at a common theme: teenagers today seem to be struggling to develop face-to-face relationships. Obviously, there are exceptions – not all teenagers struggle to relate personally. But the trend has been growing for quite some time now, to the point that concerned adults are taking

notice and raising the alarm. The challenge transcends geographic and cultural boundaries. For example, according to a 2019 study, conducted in China by Lu Liu, Na Wang and Lumei Tian, lack of relational connection with parents increased the tendency of adolescents to engage in risk-taking behavior, revealing a dangerous lack of self-control.^[1]

Before exploring potential solutions to these concerns, we must first take time to define the nature of the issue. How do we know that teens are struggling to develop genuinely deep relationships? And, if this is true, why is it problematic?

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God created people to be relational. This characteristic is a foundational aspect of being made in his image. A core desire to relate deeply to other people finds its source in the very nature of God. Because of his triune nature, God is inherently relational. All people need relationships in order to fulfill their God-designed purpose.^[2] This created purpose explains why human beings are driven to form relationships – whether healthy or unhealthy.

The pervasive influence of screens

Sadly, many teens substitute shallow, artificial relationships for deeply meaningful ones. Teens today are truly “digital natives” in that they have never known life without smartphones.^[3] They rarely, if ever, unplug from digital devices, and they see this as completely normal. Weighing the positive or negative effects of continuous screen time falls outside the scope of this paper. However, people at least agree that digital influences have changed the way digital natives think – as well as how they relate to others.



Based on research compiled from four extensive databases, Professor of Psychology Jean Twenge concludes that “the number of teens who get together with their friends every day has been cut in half in just 15 years,

with especially steep declines recently.”^[4] This translates to an hour less spent in person with friends per day than previous generations. Twenge concludes that this means “less time building social skills, negotiating relationships and navigating emotions.”^[5]

The world at large is taking note of this relational dynamic. Based on a study conducted in 2020, Psychiatrists Elia Abi-Jaoude, Karline Naylor, and Antonio Pignatiello observe that “social media can have a negative impact on friendships and is changing the way teens date. It can even impact their mental health.”^[6] A joint research article for the American Journal of Preventative Medicine states that “most teens today would prefer to text their friends rather than have a conversation. Additionally, they are less likely to spend time together if they can communicate online.”^[7]

The next time you encounter a group of teens, maybe in a restaurant or at a youth group activity or a school function, observe their interactions. How much time do they spend looking down at their phones compared to looking at each other? (Increasingly, we could ask the same question of adults.) Many teens relate to each other primarily through a screen. But why is this a bad trend?

An illusion of closeness

After studying the subject for years, Tracy Dennis-Tiwary, Professor of Psychology at Hunter College, came to this conclusion: “screen time can disrupt a fundamental aspect of our human experience – paying attention to one another’s eyes.”^[8] Perhaps you’ve heard it said that “the eyes are the window to the soul.” Dennis-Tiwary agrees: “From the earliest days of life, babies tune into their caregivers’ eyes to find comfort and decipher emotion. As they grow, people build on these skills and learn to lock eyes with social partners to communicate and collaborate.”^[9] While screens can serve to connect people on a surface level, they can also stand as a barrier to genuine relationships.



Consider social media. Through the medium of a screen, teens can craft a public persona. While this curated image may not be intentionally false or misleading, it highlights only certain aspects of their lives. It does not tell the full story. Hiding behind this photoshopped image creates an aura of security, allowing teens to feel safe while interacting with online friends and acquaintances who are doing the same thing. People only know what the user wants them to know. Social media platforms intentionally discourage deep conversation, limiting interface to “likes” and brief comments, knowing the addictive power of social affirmation.^[10]

While participating in these avenues of communication, deep down, these teens sense the limitations of relating to people through screens. In moments of honesty, they express a “fear of missing out” (FOMO), perhaps because they realize there is more to relationships than “scrolling” and “liking.” Yet they can rarely enunciate what is lacking.^[11]

Seeking for deeper relational connection, teens sometimes turn to unhealthy ways of expression, such as sharing deeply personal information through texting or sending inappropriate pictures to friends. The prevalence of sexting continues to increase with the number of teens owning smartphones. One study concluded that more than one third of all teens have received sexts.^[12] The screen barrier not only creates a false sense of security but it also gives teens an illusion of closeness – as if sharing or viewing intimate images will provide genuine intimacy.

Perhaps this also explains why pornography use among teens has risen significantly over the last decade. According to an online survey of over 1,300 teens conducted by Benenson Strategy Group in 2022, 73% of teens reported consuming pornography by the age of 17.^[13] Far from bringing relational closeness, pornography trains teens to objectify people made in God’s image, mangling relationships in the process. Porn viewing can even distort a person’s view of God.

The hypersexualized message of our culture adds to the confusion about relational closeness. Many people today have difficulty separating genuine friendship from sexual attraction. They simply cannot imagine that a deep and lasting friendship could be built on anything else. Add society’s confusion about gender to this toxic mix and we can easily understand why teens are confused about relationships. They desperately need a counter-balance to the distorted message they are hearing from the world.

Possessing continual and often unfiltered internet access, many teens are looking for relational closeness in the wrong places. No wonder they feel uncomfortable when they are presented with an opportunity to interact face to face with another human being. The layer of screen protection is gone. Their artificial persona has evaporated. Facing a real-life person seems awkward and stilted.

Discovering the roots of the problem

But these are just symptoms. What is the source of this problem? Why are today’s young people struggling to

develop deep relationships? Consider this: a teenager growing up in western society today will automatically receive a steady IV drip of self-love and individualism. “Be true to yourself.” “If you don’t care for yourself, no one else will.” “Discomfort is bad.” Not only are these mantras expressed audibly and visually, they are assumed to be valid.^[14] “Know thyself” has been replaced by “love thyself.”

Let’s return to Madison. Over time, her sense of exclusion and emptiness continued to worsen. Her listlessness and lack of interest in anything outside of her circle of friends on social media escalated the concern of her parents. Madison’s grades at school cratered, and she dropped out of cheerleading. Some days, she just stayed in bed. Eventually her mom took her to a secular counselor who diagnosed her with clinical depression and prescribed an anti-depressant. According to modern psychology, Madison has a poor sense of self-worth. However, according to the Bible, this diagnosis widely misses the mark. The path of self-love actually leads to emptiness. In the process of celebrating themselves as individuals, teens unwittingly miss the bigger purpose for their lives.

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A better way

Thankfully, God himself speaks into the confusion that modern teens experience. As Timothy Lane and Paul Tripp write, “Scripture offers clear hope for our relationships.”^[15] The Bible teaches us that building genuinely deep relationships with other people requires authenticity and vulnerability.^[16] Ed Welch captures the essence of this relational truth in his book, *Side by Side*: “Knowing and being known – by design we enjoy human connections, and those connections are forged over time through normal interactions and questions that gradually ask for more. Such connections are the foundations for mutual help, and they are helpful in themselves since they are expressions of love.”^[17] Without these foundational elements, relationships will remain shallow.

This brings us back to the limitations of social media. Screen connections engender artificiality – not authenticity. Teens present a carefully crafted image to the outside world. In turn, they interact with the images that others portray online. Authenticity can hardly flourish in such an atmosphere. Even further, online communication tends to flow in one direction, putting up a further barrier to authenticity. A one-way conversation is hardly a dialogue.

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Regarding the second ingredient of authentic relationships, teens do not like feeling vulnerable – none of us do. Relationship building requires pushing through those uncomfortable feelings to face our own weaknesses and shortcomings. As Ed Welch observes, “We spend too much time concealing our neediness.”^[18] God designed people to live in community with others. Genuine community exists only when we know **and** are known. We were created to need other people. Why then do so many teens today shun this kind of authentic, real-life interaction? Maybe they are afraid of what they will discover.

Stephen Spielberg created the Sci-fi movie, *Ready Player One*, to communicate an important message about the real world.^[19] In the movie, a brilliant but eccentric man by the name of James Halliday creates a virtual reality world called “The Oasis.” He explains his motives: “I created the OASIS because I never felt at home in the real world. I didn’t know how to connect with the people there. I was afraid, for all my life. Right up until I knew it was ending. That was when I realized, as terrifying and painful as reality can be, it’s also the only place where you can find true happiness. Because reality is real.”^[20] Perhaps this rambling explanation expresses the angst that some teens feel.

So how can we help?

If this struggle to relate is pervasive among teens, then what can we do to help? Is it possible for the teens in our lives to successfully navigate this quagmire of relational challenges? It starts by **establishing a healthy communication line with them.** As

Heather Holleman admonishes, “It’s time we talked more about how to love others well through our conversations.”^[21] “The way in is to listen for what is dear, what is loved, what is feared, what is hard – we listen for how someone feels.”^[22]

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in community with others.*



This line of communication is vital because teens need a safe place to go with their questions. They also need to be warned about the danger of pseudo-relationships. Posting, chatting and texting have a purpose, but none of these communication methods can replace open, face-to-face conversations. They need to be shown the proper place of smart phones, seeing them as helpful relational tools rather than an escape mechanism.^[23]

Teens need someone to warn them about the lures of pornography and the profound, long-term injury it inflicts. All this requires a healthy line of communication. They will learn about all of this from somewhere – shouldn't it be from someone who loves them and wants the best for them?^[24]

Teens today need to be **guided in the art of forming genuine relationships**. But how is that possible? It starts with godly role models. They need people in their lives who will actively engage them in face-to-face conversations. People who won't be deterred by the aura of disinterest they give off. People who will persist even when they get one-word answers to their questions. Whether parent, caregiver, pastor, or friend, teens need examples of how to put down their cell phones and engage with others in meaningful conversation: with people who are themselves growing in healthy relationships.^[25]

But establishing communication is just a starting point. Ultimately, teens need to be **guided into a better understanding of these defining truths about relationships**: 1) God created them to relate – first to himself but also to other people. 2) By developing healthy relationships, they are actually reflecting the image of God Himself as seen in the Trinity. 3) Understanding their settled relationship with Christ (and therefore to God) provides a framework for their relationships with other people. When a teen understands these biblical truths, they are released from the bondage of relational fears. They can embrace authenticity and vulnerability with other people because they know they have nothing to hide from God. After all, God sees them as they really are and still receives them through Christ! We can be vulnerable with others because we have been fully accepted by God.^[26]

Rather than being left in relational isolation, **teens need to be stretched socially**, gently nudged into situations where they will have opportunity to develop healthy relationships. Ideally, this training should start at home. Daily interactions between parents and siblings provide the perfect practice field for sharpening relationship skills – but this will not happen accidentally.

At Home

As a single mom raising two teenagers, Rachel is maxed out. Yet even with the pressures of work, school, and extra-curricular activities, she purposes to help her teens learn how to develop strong relationships within her family. Supper becomes protected family time. Her teens are strongly encouraged (dare we say “required”?) to come out of their rooms, put away their phones, and engage with her and with each other. Rather than asking mindless questions like “How was your day?” Rachel introduces a variety of fresh conversation starters. She also sets reasonable boundaries on media time and enforces a cut-

off time for cell phone use for the entire family (including herself) each evening, encouraging further face-to-face interaction.

At Church

Even though Michael is intimidated by the lack of responsiveness among his youth group teens, he resolves to challenge the status quo. He realizes what is at stake for these young people.^[27] After seeking input from his pastor and a few trusted parents, he decides to banish cell phones from youth group Bible studies. Soon after, he presents a practical series of messages on the importance of healthy relationships and then looks for creative ways to help his teens practice the principles he introduces. He invites the youth group parents to listen to a video recording of the same series. All the while he and his youth staff continue to lead by example, refusing to be put off by awkwardness or an icy reception. Together, they begin to master the art of asking thoughtful questions.^[28] Not content with peer-to-peer interaction, Michael and his youth staff intentionally set up opportunities for the teens to interact with other groups within the church, including the college class and senior adults.

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In Community

David and Amy notice with concern how isolated their twin teenage girls have become from their local community. The local home school co-op does help, but Emma and Emily just don't have meaningful contact with anyone outside their church or family. Jason leads his family in a discussion about this problem, and they begin praying. Carefully and deliberately, they explore opportunities for community involvement. While volunteering at a local food pantry the girls meet all sorts of interesting people and have longer conversations with several. Emily also expresses interest in volunteering at the library while Emma decides to pursue volleyball. Their parents walk beside them in these ventures, listening to what they are learning, asking insightful questions, and helping them learn how to engage on a deeper level with those they meet. They are encouraged by their daughters' growing desire to be involved in the lives of others.

At Camp

When Pastor Brian first came to Calvary Baptist Church, he learned that the church did not have a culture of sending teens to summer camp. Having worked as a counselor at a Christian camp during his college years, he had observed first-hand the spiritual and social benefits of camp in the lives of young people. The opportunity to make new friends and to interact on a personal level with spiritually minded young adults became even more important to Pastor Brian as he saw teens in his church struggling to relate personally to those around them. Camp also provided a built-in media detox by following a policy of "leave your phones behind." After several years of encouragement, the parents of his church came to embrace the benefits of summer camp as a helpful tool in their quest to equip teens in face-to-face relationship building.

Hope for today's teens

Teens today face an uphill climb. All around them, people struggle to develop deep and meaningful relationships. Technology throws up another barrier that must be overcome. Self-love adds to the confusion. Yet in spite of these obstacles, it is possible for young people to thrive relationally. And deep-down teens are longing to connect – of course they are: they were created for it! But they will not find the path to relational depth on YouTube or from a self-help book or from popular podcasts. They need to be surrounded by loving adults who will not only **teach** them what God says, but will also **model** that for them. In the process, they will experience the joys of knowing and being known. They will also learn that God wants them to know him in the same deep and personal way.



The staff at The Wilds has a passion to help young people both spiritually and relationally. Please let us know if we can serve your church or your family in any way.

About the author

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- ² *And the Lord God said, It is not good that the man should be alone.* (Genesis 2:18, KJV).
- ³ Prensky, Marc. "Digital Natives, Digital Immigrants Part 1." *On The Horizon*, vol. 9, no. 5, Emerald, Sept. 2001, pp. 1–6. <https://doi.org/10.1108/10748120110424816>. Educator Marc Prensky coined the term "digital native" in this 2001 white paper.
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- ⁵ *ibid.*
- ⁶ Abi-Jaoude, Elia, Naylor, Karline Treunicht, and Pignatiello, Antonio. "Smartphones, Social Media Use and Youth Mental Health." *Canadian Medical Association Journal*, 10 February 2020, <https://www.cmaj.ca/content/192/6/E136>.
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- ⁹ *ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Profitable conversations can certainly take place on social media, but public forums decrease the likelihood of spiritual benefit.
- ¹¹ Laurence, Emily. "The Psychology Behind the Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)." *Forbes Health*, 30 September 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/health/mind/the-psychology-behind-fomo>. Laurence noted this quote on FOMO from Natalie Christine Dattilo, Ph.D, the founder of Priority Wellness Group and an instructor of psychology at Harvard: "Younger people are considerably more at risk due to the increased amount of time spent online coupled with a heightened sensitivity to and need for social approval and belongingness."
- ¹² Mori, Camille, et al. "Are Youth Sexting Rates Still on the Rise? A Meta-analytic Update." *Journal of Adolescent Health*, vol. 70, no. 4, Elsevier BV, April 2022, pp. 531–39. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jadohealth.2021.10.026>.
- ¹³ "Teens and Pornography." *Common Sense Media*, <https://www.commonsensemedia.org/research/teens-and-pornography>. September 2022. According to the study, the average age for first viewing pornography is 12.
- ¹⁴ This self-love theme has been fully embraced by western culture, as expressed by author Christian Nestell Bovee: "Our first and last love is self-love." Actor Robert Morely agrees: "To fall in love with yourself is the first secret to happiness."
- ¹⁵ Lane, Timothy, and Paul David Tripp. *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making*. 1st ed., (New Growth Press, 2023), 13.
- ¹⁶ Genesis 2:18; Ecclesiastes 4:9-12; Proverbs 27:17; 1 Corinthians 12:18-21; Galatians 6:1; 1 Thessalonians 5:11.
- ¹⁷ Welch, Edward. *Side by Side: Walking with Others in Wisdom and Love*. 1st ed., (Crossway, 2015), 80.
- ¹⁸ *ibid.*, 15.

- ¹⁹ Spielberg, Steven (Director). 2018. *Ready Player One*. Warner Bros. Pictures. The movie is based on the 2012 sci-fi book of the same name by Ernest Cline. The dystopian novel presents the dark and hopeless outlook of a worldview apart from God, but tacitly acknowledges that human beings intrinsically need to relate to each other face-to-face rather than through technology.
- ²⁰ *ibid.*
- ²¹ Holleman, Heather. *The Six Conversations: Pathways to Connecting in an Age of Isolation and Incivility*. (Moody Publishers, 2022), 7.
- ²² Welch, *Side by Side*, 81.
- ²³ Abi-Jaoude, "Smartphones, Social Media Use and Youth Mental Health." Research shows that teens naturally have lower impulse control than adults and are more susceptible to smart phone addiction.
- ²⁴ "Teens and Pornography." *Common Sense Media*. According to the 2022 study, less than half of teens (42%) indicated that they have discussed pornography specifically with a trusted adult.
- ²⁵ Holleman, *The Six Conversations*, 20-21. Conversations are the key to relational closeness. She gives four mindsets for engaging in meaningful conversation: 1) Be curious. 2) Believe the best. 3) Express concern - investment. 4) Mutual sharing (which requires being vulnerable).
- ²⁶ Biblically sound books on relationships abound, including *Side by Side* by Ed Welch; *Relationships: A Mess Worth Making* by Timothy Lane and Paul Tripp; *Made for More* by Hannah Anderson; and *Delighting in the Trinity* by Michael Reed.
- ²⁷ Welch, *Side by Side*, 91. "The church is an ideal venue to see the talents and gifts of others, because most gifts emerge in the context of serving people."
- ²⁸ Start by finding common ground with "get-acquainted questions." As opportunity arises, look to move on to "heart questions." 1) What do you trust to make you happy? 2) What relationships in your life bring you the most joy / sadness? 3) Who are your closest friends and why? 4) How does God fit in the total picture of your life? 5) How would you describe your relationship to God as it stands right now? 6) If you could change one thing in your life, what would it be? 7) When you encounter problems in your life, what helps you to resolve them?