



Don't Tell Kids How Tech Affects their Minds -- Ask Them

If you are reading this blog, you likely already know a thing or two about how young people are being impacted by digital media. As awareness grows about the mental impacts digital media can have on youth, there is naturally a growing desire to educate them about these risks and issues.

However, as a young person who grew up with the internet, I highly recommend *not* telling young people how they are affected by digital media. Instead, ASK them how they are affected! There are numerous reasons for this:

- 1 They might already have profound insights and surprising self-awareness.** At this point, compulsive tech use is so rampant that it's pretty hard not to notice that something is a bit awry. I have had astonishing conversations with 8-year-olds (who seemed to think about nothing but Minecraft) about their concerns with digital tech.



- 2 Asking instead of telling builds habits of attention.** This is crucial for developing self-control and self-regulation skills, which youth build through practice (not lecture).



- 3 **Asking instead of telling empowers young people** to share their perspectives and take charge of their relationship with tech, to play a role in crafting their own solutions to the problems they are experiencing.
- 4 **Getting it wrong could make you lose credibility.** Generic ideas about the effects of digital tech from statistics in studies do not always apply to individuals, with their varying circumstances, interests, behaviors, and levels of awareness. And it is notoriously hard for adults to keep up with the latest tween media trends. If what you say doesn't add up, they may be less likely to trust other claims you make.
- 5 **Knowledge we discover for ourselves is often more convincing and impactful** than things we are told by others—especially when the outside information feels like pestering. If a young person notices that their media habits are affecting them in ways they do not like, motivation to make a change will come from within.
- 6 **Knowledge gained through self-awareness is fine-tuned for one's own specific situation.** Young people immersed in digital activities already have expertise in navigating the digital realms they engage with. They also have direct access to the content of their own minds. No one is in a better position to give them personalized information about how their minds are affected by their digital activities.

7 **Beliefs about mental experience shape those experiences.** Beliefs about love *affect the experience of love*; beliefs about depression risk levels *affect depression risk levels*. The Silicon Valley leaders who are raising alarms about persuasive design and how tech can manipulate us (for example, in the documentary “The Social Dilemma,”) paint humans as victims of sophisticated engineering and algorithms they cannot hope to resist. On one end of the smartphone, they say, there's you, with your single hominid brain stem, and on the other end there are a thousand brilliant engineers trying to change your behavior. Who will win? Well, if you *believe* the engineers will win, then they will—because you no longer have to take responsibility for your actions. But you can also make choices—even with a mere human brain—to limit the engineers' ability to affect you or collect information on you. Just because an algorithm is trying very hard to make you do something does not guarantee that it has any way to succeed!



8 The only form of knowledge that can keep up with the evolving digital landscape is self-knowledge. Digital platforms constantly test new ideas, scaling up whatever works best to meet their goals. They have immense amounts of data and money, so they can do this very rapidly. Self-knowledge may not be perfect, but it's faster than waiting for peer reviewed studies! If cultivated, it even has the potential to keep up with Silicon Valley R&D.

In addition to encouraging young people to pay attention to how their minds are affected by their interactions with digital tech, it is worth teaching them about the ways digital platforms are *trying* to affect them: what persuasive design is, why it is everywhere, and how to recognize it in the wild. This leaves it up to them to decide just how much digital manipulation affects them—and if, upon reflection, they are concerned by what they observe, it leaves the door open for them to do something about it.



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Seth Bunev is an outdoor educator and studies the evolution of mental experience across history. His book, *Screenfarers: Nurturing Deliberate Action in a Digital World*, is a guide for parents and teachers to how digital media shape the mind, and how young people can learn to sail the sea of information with skill and intention— rather than becoming habitually distracted through passive surfing. *Screenfarers* is available electronically [here](#) and will be released as a paperback in June 2021.



THIS BLOG SERIES IS PRODUCED BY OUR SCREENS IN SCHOOLS WORK GROUP.

Screens in Schools is a work group of CCFC's Children's Screen Time Action Network, which brings together experts, parents, and caregivers to talk about critical issues around kids and technology. Learn more about joining the Network, or sign up for our email list to be notified about upcoming events at www.screentimenetwork.org

screensinschools

teachovertech



Fairplay is the leading nonprofit organization committed to helping children thrive in an increasingly commercialized, screen-obsessed culture, and the only organization dedicated to ending marketing to

LEARN

- Childhood Beyond Brands
- Resources

ACT

- Campaigns
- Screen-Free Week

ABOUT

- Mission + Impact
- Staff
- Board
- Press
- Connect



CONTACT US

Fairplay
 89 South St. Boston, MA 02111
 (617) 896-9368
info@fairplayforkids.org
 Twitter: @fairplayforkids
 Find us on Facebook



children. Our advocacy is grounded in the overwhelming evidence that child-targeted marketing – and the excessive screen time it encourages – undermines kids' healthy development.

[Action Network](#)

[Volunteer](#)

[Donate](#)

