

## **Teaching Our Students Resiliency: Helping Our Children Thrive in a Digital World**

Presented by Charlene Gerbig and Josephine Hunt

Hillside Elementary School Teachers and Leaders – Closter School District

Originally presented to the NJEA Conference

SEPAG Meeting 5/29/25

Attendees included: Mrs. Cohen, Mr. McHale, Kelly Martins and Danit Schwartz

**Please see presentation for additional information but a summary is presented below:**

### **Recommendations:**

Books: The Anxious Generation by Jonathan Haidt and Disconnected by Thomas Kersting

Video: Screenagers

### **Cell Phone Usage:**

The increase in cell phone usage, technology and social media has led to an increase in anxiety in children. This started 10 years before the pandemic with the beginning of smart phone usage.

Increased smart phone usage has been linked to persistent sadness, hopelessness, suicidal thoughts and behavior – showing an increase of 40%. It is impacting sleep, attention, and changes in brain development. It has also led to increased distress when separating from devices.

The following recommendations were noted in a short video:

- Give them a simple phone that just makes calls,
- Don't allow children to bring devices to playdates
- Parents should share information about and support each other in limiting screen use

A decline in a play-based childhood has been noted with decreased in-person interactions and a reduction in conflict resolution skill development.

An average child is thought to spend 9 hours a day on screen while a heavy user spends 13+ hours on screens. Increased screen time has been associated with decreased life satisfaction and insufficient sleep.

### **Social Media:**

Social media has impacted children significantly - with 64% of children being exposed to hate-based content. The engaging features of social media such as scrolling and auto play keep children (and adults) hooked.

### **Screen Time:**

Children are losing the development of intrinsic (from the inside) motivation, instead seeking extrinsic (external) motivation. The screens and social media are addictive and rewiring brains. They are impacting self-perception and increasing seeking external validation.

Consider times you may give children your phone or a device, such as at the supermarket. You may be sending the message that you don't think they can handle being in that environment. Instead, consider these times as teachable moments in social interaction, math, frustration tolerance, etc.

Sometimes screens are ok but it's a matter of finding balance. Adults are encouraged to consider their own use of screens and the model they are setting for children.

Increased screen time has led to decrease face-to-face interaction, reduced physical activity, limited unstructured playtime (where creativity helps address boredom or frustration tolerance or problem-solving skills), and diminished social skill development (including conflict resolution). It also has an impact on learning, including fragmentation of attention (aka acquired ADHD), decreased reading comprehension, decreased academic performance, increased classroom disruption, decreased engagement and decreased resiliency. Increased screen use has also been linked to an increase in anxiety and depression.

The brain prunes what it doesn't use. If you do something for 3 or more hours, your brain develops new neurons around what you are doing.

It is up to parents to keep children safe from the impact of these devices. **Children are over-protected in real life and under-protected online.**

Multi-tasking is a myth: your brain can only do one thing at a time. Attempting to multi-task causes fragmented thinking and contributes to attention and executive functioning issues. It is taking longer for children to do homework due to multi-tasking and distractions.

#### **Some signs our child is struggling:**

- Change in sleep
- Social withdrawal
- Declining grades

Resiliency, or the ability to adapt to stress and adversity, is a skill that is learned and requires practice. It includes skills, such as flexibility, adaptability, and discovering inner strengths, during difficult times.

#### **What you can do to help build resilience:**

- Let children fail and experience small consequences.
- Discomfort is normal during learning and allows for growth.
- If children ask for help, encourage them to figure it out - sending the message that they can do it.
- Provide scaffolded support, if needed.
- Normalize failures.
- Teach coping strategies.
- Encourage risk taking.
- Celebrate effort.
- Build problem solving skills.
- Support emotional regulation.
- Lead with joy (intrinsic reward).
- Use reframing or repainting the picture of difficult experiences to find the joy and steer towards growth

- Assign age-appropriate responsibilities.
- Allow natural consequences.
- Have consistent expectations.
- Clear communication.
- Welcome problems as an opportunity to work on skills – focus on how they can move forward – use your “figuring-it-out thinking”
- Have faith in kids that they can figure it out – you can help them, if needed, but believe they can do it without your help most of the time.

#### **How you can support reduced screen use at home:**

- Establish clear boundaries around screen use
- Implement phone free zones
- Establish tech free times
- Increase face to face interaction
- Model appropriate behavior around screen use
- Maintain consistent policies
- Increased movement
- Tech free family time
- Build community support around reducing screen time

#### **Examples of play-based learning:**

- Games/activities
- Cooking/baking
- Outdoor play
- Art/music
- Sensory play
- Imaginative play
- Building
- Nature play
- Reading

**Embrace joy! Embracing joy allows resilience and strength to develop. We have to choose joy and that is a skill that requires daily practice.**

**Parent Question:** How is screen time addressed at the middle school?

**Answer:** Teachers use Go Guardian, a program that allows them to limit access on laptops, to help keep children focused on lesson. Teachers are also mindful of how much tech is used in class. They also incorporate other methods of learning, such as group work, into every class, so screen time is only one part of the learning experience.