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Desire, joy, tears and addiction



'Mum!' I heard from down the hall. My teenage daughter was shouting from the bathroom in distress. 'I've dropped my phone in the toilet!'

She emerged in tears, angry with herself and freaking out about her immediate future.

We went into emergency mode, putting the sacred object into a sealable plastic bag full of dry rice in the hope it would absorb the water and save her personal device.

As her sobs subsided my daughter said something that took me by surprise. 'For a minute there, I was almost relieved not to have my phone.'

Her smartphone had become such an intimate object, vital to her life. But in her distress she glimpsed the relief she would feel without it. The demise of her phone offered a strange release.

In the days that followed she became more visible, less distracted and better able to do her school work. She even appeared happier.

Smartphones have been with us for a decade now. I have seen and felt their impact. They offer a kind of freedom—the freedom to connect and to be transported somewhere else. They have made us dependent. They have thinned time for the things we used to enjoy and the things we have to do.

In the bathroom, with the phone submerged, my daughter's first concern was how would she cope without what had become part of her identity. It was only when it had gone that she realised it had become a drug.

Day and night

My daughter's experience is not unique. A comprehensive study by the Kaiser Family Foundation in the United States found that young people aged 8 to 18 spent more than 11 hours a day with smartphones, computers, TVs and other electronic screen-based devices being entertained, gaming, texting and talking on the phone, sometimes all at once.¹

Australian teens are in step with those in the US. Almost all (94 per cent) of Australian teenagers and two-thirds (67 per cent) of all primary-school-aged children have their own mobile screen-based device.² More than 80 per cent of all children use some kind of social media, just slightly behind British teens at 90 per cent.³ Teenage girls use their phones more often than boys. Many fear not having access. The peak online time is between 5 and 10 pm. More than a quarter of all Australian teens are online between 10 pm and midnight. That's double the proportion of five years ago. Children are sleep deprived. Social media platforms and the prevalence of sexting and cyberbullying are fuelling anxiety and a mental health crisis.⁴

The whole family is feeling the impacts. Two-thirds of Australian families experience conflict, tension or disagreement about screen time at least three times a week.⁵

These concerns—the time children and young people spend online and the impact on their health and sense of self—sit in the context of a competitive and commercial space young people occupy online as members of a market. In his scathing essay, 'Youth in a Suspect Society: Coming of Age in an Era of Disposability', US and Canadian cultural critic Henry Giroux writes that commercial culture infuses every aspect of children's lives. Using the internet, social media and new media technologies, corporate institutions try to immerse young people in the world of

mass consumption ‘in ways more direct and expansive than anything we have seen in the past.’⁶

What I am most conscious of is the impact on relationships and especially face-to-face interaction, as the lifeblood of human society. Every conversation we have feeds our sense that we matter, that there are people who take us seriously. When my husband is again checking Twitter at the kitchen table while trying to have a conversation, it is reasonable for me to ask whether I am important. The desire to be taken seriously is probably the deepest and most important desire that drives us.

More than talking, listening is one of the greatest gifts we can give each other. Smartphone technology and social media has thinned our capacity to listen because it distracts us and makes other things urgent. And it overblows the idea that we have opinions worth sharing, rather than an obligation to learn from others.

The digital environment massively privileges shallow and dispersed connections over intense, focused and rewarding engagement and relationship building. It’s growth has big implications for children and young people.

The challenges

- Smartphone engagement is addictive and often emotional, making a rational and interdependent sense of self harder to nurture
- Children and young people have less impulse control than adults because the part of the brain that controls decision-making and thinking through consequences is less developed
- Unlike television, the personal wired device creates space for performance and sensation seeking
- Social media’s feedback loops can create emotional brittleness
- Smartphones can immerse children in mass consumption culture
- The smartphone has shrunk the number of years available to learn about the world and themselves without identity labels
- Social media can be a space that normalises deception
- Social media can be where users overshare and lose boundaries between the private and the public

The self is learnt



Ask late-primary and early-high-school children who they are, and they'll typically say they are working it out. It is well established that the self is learnt over time. But in setting up accounts on social media, children and young people are encouraged to provide profiles of themselves—to present themselves as a package. They are rewarded with hearts, likes and thumbs up if posts in that package are popular. And they can be punished, with sharp interactions, judgments and abuse.

In truth many adults find it hard to describe who they are—to present a coherent picture to the world. Imagine how much harder it is for the iGeneration (children and young people born this century)—the first generation to spend their entire adolescence in the age of the smartphone. The children and young people of this millennium are spending hours on social media, which encourages an online identity, while they are only beginning to discover what they like and who they are.

Childhood is a special time to develop a sense of coherent self that balances self-denial and egotism. A sense of self and selfhood is a condition for the development of identity and secure sexuality. The self is learned over time but our culture's hyper connectivity, especially through social media, has cut that time.

Feedback loops and a brittle self online

Influential sociologist and psychologist George Herbert Mead advanced the idea that our sense of self relies on relationships that act as a series of mirrors. People find it hard to be self-aware, even in the simplest way, without being aware of others as our own reflection. Mead said the self emerges from social interactions, such as observing and interacting with others, responding to others' opinions about oneself, and internalising external opinions and internal feelings about oneself referred to as the dialogical self. This is normal, but social media turns up the volume. The interactions are quickfire, from multiple people at once and potentially 24-7.

Children and young people are spending more and more time on social media, where communication is often sharp, superficial, judgmental and fake. Those interactions are also addictive. Facebook, Twitter, Snapchat and other social media sites offer what's referred to as 'dopamine-driven feedback loops'. They function like sugar or a new kind of cigarette. They satisfy, but only for a short time, leaving users wanting more. Former Facebook executive Chamath Palihapitiya summarises the impact bluntly. He says posting and reacting on Facebook is 'short term and leaves you even more vacant and empty than before you did it, because then it forces you into this vicious cycle where you are like: "What's the next thing I need to do now?"'⁷

Dependency leads to stress, even while being online temporarily calms users. Like payouts from a poker machine, the unpredictable rewards from social media invite users back for hit after hit until they are so full of chemicals they suffer 'disconnection anxiety' when not doing it. Children and young people can be beside themselves with anxiety when they don't have access to their smartphones to prop up their sense of self. Like us all, they want to be known and approved of.

Children, especially, long to be seen and understood. Social media acts as a giant and multifaceted mirror, teasing, validating and invalidating a sense of self. Girls more than boys build a life online seeking self-care (information on how to 'improve' and maintain a good body) and connections to feel less socially isolated.⁸ They are lured there, keen to find that 'someone thinks I am okay'. But their online connections, even those that are intimate, are abstract compared with concrete connections

made offline. They can overshare online, but in a comforting way they can still feel hidden, as if their true selves are not known.⁹

Users do find a kind of community there, people like themselves, and support in a group, but almost at random they can be told, ‘You are not okay, you are not worthy.’ Cyberbullying is a reality.

Rather than providing a space for safe vulnerability and belonging, social media can add to a young person’s insecurity. Users can lose a sense of stable self as they have become highly dependent on their social media interactions for the chemical hit that tells them they are all right. They risk being uncertain about who they really are and risk depression.

Drawing from international research and in-depth interviews of young people over many years, author and psychologist Jean M. Twenge says it is not an exaggeration to describe iGen as being on the brink of the worst mental health crisis in decades. Much of the deterioration can be traced to their phones and social media use.¹⁰

Twenge and a team of researchers at the University of San Diego have found that teens who spend a lot of time in front of screen devices—playing computer games, using more social media, texting and video chatting—are less happy than those who invest time in non-screen activities such as sports, reading newspapers and magazines and face-to-face social interaction. The happiest teens use digital media for less than an hour a day.

After an hour, their unhappiness rises steadily with increasing screen time.¹¹

Yet social media is now so pervasive that connections on line can strengthen connections offline. Children and young people, especially older teens, say they need to be online to know about social gatherings.

A fractured sense of self

Social media encourages pretending, borrowing or fabricating many identities.¹² Young people are able to add layers of complexity to the business of developing a coherent self, one that can be confidently articulated, consistently, on and offline.

At one level, mediated computer communication collapses the walls between the public and private self, encouraging all ages to reveal our innermost thoughts and desires to complete strangers. At another level,

it encourages us to play different roles and to literally manufacture and broadcast drama. We are performing, making displays, framing who we are, for different audiences.

Why social media is so attractive: it hooks into our need for a personal narrative

Without articulating it, children and young people usually know that there are key things or ‘constellations’ in their lives, an assemblage of reference points and experiences that fortify their sense of who they are. Those reference points are grounded in relationships with family, friends and elders. They are reliant on episodic and autobiographical memory.¹³ Facebook and other platforms give us lots of space to shape our own narrative over time, knowing that we are driven to tell stories. Stories construct meaning and help us make sense of the world. As an electronic keeper of our memories, the platforms force us to go online to feel validated, more so if real-world relationships are shaky. But being full of fabrications and other people’s narratives, it can leave us unsatisfied.

People have always told myths and parables, kept secrets and fashioned language for a specific purpose, but there are real and present dangers of self-delusion online.

Selective editing is normal but can take extremes. For example, an acquaintance is an alcoholic but there is nothing in his timeline to indicate that. When storytelling about ourselves conceals more than it reveals, we can alienate ourselves from our coherent self and each other. In shaping a master story on a Facebook wall or other social network that exaggerates or hides aspects of our lives (playing up exotic holidays, wonderful adventures, perfect children etc. over the challenges of life), we deny ourselves and our friends the riches that flow from telling truths. Connection online has created a kind of community, but one that can normalise deception.

Identity production is quickened and more intense

The increasing amount of time adolescents spend online has seen the period we call childhood truncated by a rush towards self-making. Positioning the self online takes many forms from curating and posting self-revealing text content (Facebooking, Google+, tweeting, blogging)

to adding photos and videos on social media (camming, consuming and producing internet pornography) and saving collections of images or music on Pinterest or Spotify. Information can be as mundane as what's for dinner tonight to relationship status and saucy details, real or imaginary, of sexual encounters.

There are multiple ways users can construct presentations of themselves. There is also unconscious self-making, like the cataloguing of information about what we buy and think, with much of it saved by advertisers and intelligence agencies.

Consider the pressure young people are ordinarily under to belong to a group and be regarded as a unique individual. The task of balancing between the two has become harder. It is difficult to demarcate yourself from a group if you are in a constant online contest to be liked.

The burdens online don't necessarily recede for adults. I feel the pressure not to conflate my importance with the (admittedly meagre) number of Twitter followers I have. Still, I have the wherewithal to distance my real self from the one on public display. Young people without strong bonds in the real world put more weight on social media. They are more likely to perpetually seek affirmation there.

There are few established boundaries online. The need to be liked can lead to sharing too much and quickly, posting and texting words and pictures without tone or inflection. A frequent news story involves a young person impacted by a violation online, either of a psychological or physical/sexual nature. That violation typically happens when there is a dysfunctional or fake relationship.

Typically the victim has disclosed more than he or she should have, overtrusting someone online.¹⁴ Teenagers, with a remarkably plastic brain, are already prone to being highly reactive, that is, overwhelmed by emotion.

Poor body image

The relationship between low self-esteem and depressive symptoms¹⁵ and anxiety disorders¹⁶ is well documented. Loving yourself while learning to love others is arguably the biggest single challenge humans face. The Australian documentary *Embrace*, in cinemas in 2016, told us that 70 per cent of girls don't much love their bodies. Forty-five per cent of women of

healthy weight thought they were overweight. Australians, most of them women, spend \$1 million a day on diets. They spend \$1 billion a year on cosmetic surgery. While we are more than our bodies, our bodies have become how we measure ourselves.

Unhappiness at one's physical appearance is a timeless and universal feature of adolescence.¹⁷ Now, children are being seen and are seeing others all day, amplifying this cohort's anxiety.

A parent in *Embrace* speaks for many of us when she said she feels as though her daughter is drowning in a sea of media that reinforces unattainable and dangerous expectations: 'I'm in constant damage control.' The internet had heightened her daughter's inner critic.

The online mobile photo-and-video-sharing service Instagram bombards late-primary-school-aged children and teenagers with images all day long. There's pressure to get one's own images liked and commented on, to not fall behind. It isn't just body image. Instagram glorifies the picture-perfect life, eroding self-worth.

While it is often argued that the internet supports the growth of new communities that allow people of all types to find people who accept them, it can do the opposite. Katie Roiphe, the American author of *The Morning After: Fear, Sex and Feminism*, says of Instagram: 'The fear of straying from the formula is matched only by the desire to be just a bit better at it. What is slightly chilling is the sameness, the lockstep, the absolute refusal of originality.'¹⁸

Exposed to a constant stream of airbrushed images of 'beautiful' stars and wealthy celebrities, young people also see advertisements for products pushing a particular kind of perfection. 'There's something branded, moneyed, about Instagram,' Roiphe says. 'The best things in life, it whispers to our teens, are by no means free.'

We do not know yet the extent to which social media is linked to anxiety, depression and eating disorders. In their study of 14 to 34 year-olds, researchers led by Beatrix Koronczai of Eötvös Loránd University in Hungary found that, among people of both sexes, dissatisfaction with physical appearance seemed to have a significant role in individuals' immersing themselves in internet use 'where they can disguise and/or hide their real physical characteristics and have the possibility to take on an alternative desired virtual appearance.'¹⁹

Overexposed to commerce: I consume, therefore I am

Capitalism is perhaps the greatest political force on the planet. The internet has supercharged it. Children today are exposed to so much more of everything, including products to purchase, that it becomes more challenging to manage conflicts of interest and desire. Products (gadgets, fast fashion and leisure activities) have quickened identity production—complete with rolling images of perfection and types of success.²⁰

Richard Eckersley helped create Australia's first index of subjective wellbeing, one of the first in the world.²¹ He has found that materialism (reinforced by individualism) doesn't lead to wellbeing, but to dissatisfaction, depression, anxiety, anger, isolation and alienation. 'In summary, the evidence suggests that individualism and materialism are powerfully and mutually reinforcing in their negative impacts,' he says. 'Broadly speaking, it would seem that they have produced a self that is socially and historically disconnected, discontented, insecure; pursuing constant gratification and external affirmation; prone to addiction, obsession and excess.'²²

He says this development has been explained, in part, by increased media use and changing media content, linked to violence, consumerism, loss of community and social cohesion, vicarious life experiences, invidious social comparisons and pessimism about global conditions and futures.

'These changes make it harder for young people to feel accepted, loved and secure; to know who they are, where they belong, what they want from life, and what is expected of them: in short, to feel life is worthwhile and meaningful.'²³

Even before the internet, commerce was organised around getting objects. The online environment pressures users to respond to prompts to spend or to think about spending 24–7.

Commercial television and newspapers have always featured advertisements, but the internet and apps are of a different order because our devices are mobile, and notifications and ads seem to follow us. If we succumb, shopping online changes the relationship between us and the maker/wholesaler/retailer into one that is purely utilitarian. Purchasing online increases our capacity to treat others as objects. Shopping at the local independent grocer or inside a department store provides the op-

portunity for improvisation, spontaneity and messiness—characteristics of interesting and vibrant urban and cityscapes. Public space, even within commercial precincts, brings with it the potential for chance encounters with people of diverse background and traditions, and learning that can break down barriers.

The challenge for children and young people with wired devices is that they have access to the world in previously unimagined ways—without the life experience, wherewithal and real-life understanding of the consequences of their choices that are needed to properly manage it. Critical of the commercialism of contemporary culture, renowned thinker, teacher and former Anglican Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, observes:

Children need to be free of the pressure to make adult choices if they are ever to learn how to make adult choices. For them to be free for irresponsibility and fantasy, free from the commitments of purchasing and consuming, is for them to have time to absorb what is involved in adult choice. Failure to understand this is losing the very concept of childhood. But it is just this failure to understand that is evident in the slippage in our public images and practices towards treating the child as a consumer, an economic and erotic subject, in ways that obscure the whole business of learning to choose.²⁴

Finding a way out: towards solutions and wholeness

In grappling with the implications of overconnectivity for young people we have to return to the basics of healthy development and personal formation. We must ask, ‘What are the ideal conditions to develop a coherent self?’ How will that help young people thrive? Ultimately the answers support what it means for them (and all of us) to live well.

Ideal conditions for developing the self

Quality face-to-face time

Quality time with affirming adults and positive attention from them, are crucial from early in life. Children’s sense of self is fortified by meaningful

relationships, genuine interest in them for who they are, in an environment that is caring and lacks conflict. While my father died before I was born, I was fortunate enough to have more than enough adults in my early years who cared for me.

As children grow, genuine, spontaneous and generous face-to-face conversation remain important. Connecting in this way can counter the combative and reactive space online where people may be connected but are increasingly polarised.

Time to self-reflect

Communication on a wired device eats into time to self-reflect because it invites quick responses. Those who do become either a spectator and/or a spectacle. There is scorching language, gut-wrenching violence and casual nudity. The device allows and encourages people to say and share things they wouldn't say and share across the table. And sharing things can backfire. A rant on Facebook can quickly turn into something serious.

To counter this children and young people need space to self-reflect. This means unplugging from social media and screens. It's more likely to happen if all of the family does it together.

Protected space to imagine

The online world can turn on imagination online, undeniably but usually in the form of packaged content. Without protected spaces for self-directed imagination, improvised and free-range play, children and young people become less good at resisting impulses.²⁵

Imagining involves having time to get bored—doing 'nothing' and discovering inner resources to cope. Simple activities like walking or drawing can spark inner dreamings and counter the need to go online for a dopamine hit. Those spaces should be without the pressures of buying and consuming things.

Space to learn, make mistakes and be forgiven

We have different expectations of people at different stages of our lives. Childhood is a special time to make mistakes and be forgiven ahead of being given the full rights and responsibilities of adulthood. We have typ-

ically expected children to say silly things and not be punished or labelled for it. As they grow we have expected them to acquire, refine and test language with their peers and carers and to push boundaries without severe consequences. Children and young people work out, roughly and with mistakes, what is expected of them. Their sense of a coherent self comes with time and practice.²⁶

Children, and to some extent, adults, are impatient for young people to be older than they are. Increasingly parents are giving them technology that enables them to create identities and interact with complete strangers well before the rituals that societies typically use to signal that they have moved from 'latent' to young adult.

These markers might have included acquiring a learner driver licence and completing high school. In faith traditions, confirmation classes and bar mitzvahs mark the transition.²⁷

We don't expect young people to get behind the wheel of a car alone until they have clocked up many hours of supervised learning and passed tests. Provisional plates indicate a transition to becoming a certified and independent driver.

We give children powerful communication devices without the equivalent P or L plates. With those devices in hand they enter an environment that privileges the reactive, that encourages being a spectacle and spectator and that presses all sorts of emotional buttons without an understanding of the consequences. Young people are encouraged to act, to provide representations of their mental and material states and to construct stories about their lives without the self-awareness that comes with greater age.

An experienced teacher I know, Paul (not his real name) appreciates that the internet has given his students a greater awareness of the world (they followed, for example, the US election of Donald Trump very closely). But he has observed the other side: "The bad side of a mobile phone is that a child can feel suicidal in the middle of the night ... What does she do? We would have written a note, "Want to end it all," and wake up in the morning and put in the bin.

'What do they do? Send a text message which sends a ripple through all their friends who wake their parents and say, "X is going to commit suicide, ring his mum." '

The student recovers but children have arrived at school very distressed and in need of counselling. At the same time, there is a support network. We get parents who come in the morning and say, 'You'll need to look out for so and so.' The online world makes them aware, perhaps too aware. They're on each others' doorstep.

I do not wish to trivialise this scenario. Suicidal thoughts and psychological distress are sensitive topics. I only make the point here that connectivity can heighten them. It can also garner social support.

Consider, also, the narcissistic reinforcement of a connected device. 'I was invisible but now I am seen.' In that sphere, surrounded by mirrors, children and adults can go to their device to remind themselves that they exist. If young people have a healthy development of self, they will likely feel less need to do it compulsively, but if they are brittle, it can lead to an even more vacuous sense of self, driven by a need for a drip-fed receptiveness.

The online world changes the conditions and nature of love. Relationships developed online tend to be egotistical. So people edit and reshape what they say for effect. A healthy sense of self enjoys a balance between self-denial and egotism. Online communication may be personal and private in nature yet its 'mistakes' and misunderstandings can become public. There can be long-term consequences where previously, in the real world, there were not.

Children and young people have always tested boundaries but they do it now risking long-term impacts.²⁸ If parents and carers are themselves distracted by the technology they are likely to be less able to respond with patience when crisis strikes.

Whatever our age, the need for approval, from others—especially from our peer group—is important. If we enjoy unconditional love from others in early childhood, then that pang for approval gets less intense.

In some ways, kids meeting in cyberspace is like meeting friends down at the mall and trying to work out who likes who. But in cyberspace communication gaffes are harder to contain. If they go viral, minor missteps can become unnecessarily humiliating.

As parents, grandparents and carers we should reclaim the value of forgiveness and exercise it. When an adolescent breaks up with a girlfriend and then finds her bagging him online, in ways he can't control,

it is going to eat at him, more so if forgiveness and letting go are not modelled at home. Of course, hurtful things can disturb anyone's sense of peace. But those hurtful things can haunt us for much longer than they used to because of their online visibility.

Forgiving requires strength. I wonder how we can cultivate forgiveness both in the virtual and the real world when the hurt has been seeded online? I don't have all the answers but I do propose ways to press the reset button for both the forgiver as the forgiven. In chapter 3 I will explore some practices that allow for letting go, moving children and adults from rage and fear to laying down burdens.

Should your children not have a smartphone or should they at least be encouraged to be put off being a social media user? While not having direct answers, Williams urges an understanding of our role as carers to protect the young from some of the pressures of choices that can hurt and be hard to undo:

To learn about this requires space for fantasy, a license for imagination, where gradually the consequences, the self-defining knots of adult choice can be figured out, fingered, experimented with. Adults equip a child to exercise power, to hold off unequal and deeply damaging contests of power while the child is still acquiring it. This is not without difficulty and complexity.²⁹

Summary

Social media asks too much of children and young people whose sense of self is still being developed. It holds them accountable as if they are adults. It makes it harder for them to learn how to belong with each other, respectfully and with patience. (Arguably parents and carers too have become less patient as they also spend hours on social media).

Children and young people are drawn to social media to make connections and belong. But it is with critical opinions and labels. In countering it, the adults and other key people in their lives are urged to create spaces that allow for learning and listening without immediate repercussions. Home is the best place to start to grow love and patience. Nature and the freedom it offers, is the next best place to grow agency and resilience.

In the chapters that follow we will explore how to support young people with quality face-to-face time, time for self-reflection, ways to find a calmer mind and ways to imagine and develop agency. Despite the challenges they can grow up relatively unscathed. The next chapter looks at how to fertilise their offline social network through conversation and dialogue. Subsequent chapters look at simple ways to reimagine, reflect and be more focused both online and offline.

Things to do/think about

- Reflect on what made your childhood good, what encouraged a healthy sense of self
- Educate yourself on current social media sites
- Delay introducing a smartphone until secondary school. Investigate options such as 3G phone watches that allow parents to keep in touch without social media access
- Examine what you consume and how much online and offline
- Consider how we avoid people-to-people interaction when we make an online purchase