



A resource to spark biblically-centered conversations with your kids about the issues they face in today's youth culture.

ATTENTION!: HOW SCREENS ARE DIMINISHING TEENS' ABILITY TO FOCUS ON GOD

BY: Mike Terry, CPYU Research Fellow and Student Pastor at Parkside Green, Uniontown, OH

As followers of Christ, we want nothing more than for the next generation to fully embody the greatest commandment given by Jesus in Matthew 22:37: to “love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind” (ESV). But what if the digital environment we are immersed in is doing everything it can to keep the hearts, souls, and minds of young people today so distracted that this is never lived out?



WORLD



What is Happening?

- Attention and focus have been declining in this age of digital distraction, and it has drastic consequences and implications for teens today—especially for their spiritual growth in Christ.
- In his 2010 book *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* journalist Nicholas Carr says that because internet access tends to inundate us with constant streams of disparate information, our attention spans are regularly occupied, skimming a sea of shallow stimulation, harming our ability to focus.¹
- In his popular new book *The Anxious Generation*, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt says that “attention fragmentation” is one of the “four foundational harms” caused by a childhood immersed in screen media.²
- Adam Brown, co-director of The Center for Attention, Learning, and Memory agrees with Haidt and says that our problems with focus and attention have reached “epidemic” levels.³
- Dr. Gloria Mark and her team confirmed this new reality when in their study on changes in human attention span found a drastic decrease from 2000 to now. In 2000, the average person was able to focus on a screen for about 2.5 minutes. Now? 47 seconds, a nearly 70% decrease in attention.⁴
- Crucially, advertisers and social media companies have mastered capitalizing on this and have created what has been coined as the “attention economy” which monetizes human attention by capturing it and selling it for profit. This is highlighted by the fact that in 2023 alone, \$853 billion dollars was brought in through advertising revenue.⁵
- Finally, because the average teen spends between 7 and 8 hours on screen media each day, it is safe to say they will experience the bulk of these negative consequences on their still developing attention spans.⁶



WORD

What Does God's Word Say?

Scripture has a lot to say about our whole selves being fully attentive toward the things of God. If we as parents, youth workers, and mentors can better understand the attention fragmentation taking place in today's culture, we can better combat it and encourage the next generation to live into the focused, attentive life God is calling them to in Christ.

Paul in his letter to the Colossians says to "set your minds on the things that are above, not on things that are on earth" (3:2). If teenagers today are spending nearly 10 hours a day scrolling Instagram, Tik Tok, and YouTube Shorts it is increasingly likely that their minds are being brought lower into fragmentation, not lifted higher into focus on the things of God.

Psalm 42:7 says that "deep calls to deep." This is an expression where the biblical author recognizes his deep and desperate need for God and realizes that it is only the infinite depth of God's love that can save him. But if our teens are shaped into superficiality through incessant information through screens, then how can they ever truly recognize their deep need for God, let alone the depths of God Himself?

Finally, we see over and over in Scripture God's reminder to us to find our rest in Him alone. Biblical rest speaks not only to a physical ceasing from activity, but a *mental* ceasing as well—all in the service of recovering an awareness of who God is and who we are in Him. Psalm 37:7 says we are to "Rest in the LORD, and wait patiently for Him." If teens today are to recover peace, depth, and identity in Christ, it is important that they engage in regular daily and weekly rest *from* their frenzied and fragmented digital world so that they can rest *in* the powerful presence of God.



¹ Carr, Nicholas G. *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*. New York, N.Y., W.W. Norton, 2010.

² Haidt, Jonathan. *The Anxious Generation*. Penguin, 26 Mar. 2024.

³ Ducharme, Jamie. "Why Everyone's Worried about Their Attention Span—and How to Improve Yours." *Time*, 10 Aug. 2023, time.com/6302294/why-you-cant-focus-anymore-and-what-to-do-about-it/.

⁴ Mills, Kim, and Gloria Mark. "Speaking of Psychology: Why Our Attention Spans Are Shrinking, with Gloria Mark, PhD." *Apa.org*, American Psychological Association, Feb. 2023, www.apa.org/news/podcasts/speaking-of-psychology/attention-spans

⁵ Steinhorst, Curt. "Lost in the Scroll: The Hidden Impact of the Attention Economy." *Forbes*, 6 Feb. 2024, www.forbes.com/sites/curtsteinhorst/2024/02/06/lost-in-the-scroll-the-hidden-impact-of-the-attention-economy/.

⁶ Rosenberg, David. "Teens Are Spending the Equivalent of a 40-Hour Work Week on Their Devices. Here's How to Help Them Find the Right Balance." *Fortune Well*, 24 Oct. 2023, fortune.com/well/2023/10/24/teens-too-much-screen-time-find-balance/.



WALK

Conversation Starters and Questions:

Below you will find some questions that may provide healthy pathways into conversations with the teens in your life on this important topic of screens, media, and the effects it has on their attention and spiritual growth.

But before you dive into a conversation with your teen, here is a great tip: You should be genuinely curious about how your teenager processes these questions! If they feel like these are leading questions so that you can preach at them, they tend to shut down. You want to help them by being a vessel God uses to facilitate their own discovery that God is calling them to grow and mature into Christlikeness, which means giving Him their full attention.

- “How would you describe your relationship with your smartphone? How would you describe some of your closest friends’ relationships with theirs?”
- “Do you think your attention span is getting better or worse? Why? What does that feel like?”
- “Do you find yourself able to focus when you are praying or reading your Bible? What is that like?”
- “Do you see any connection to your struggle with focusing with your time spent on your phone? What might be happening there?”
- “When you think about your relationships with your smartphone and social media 5-10 years from now, what do you want it to look like?”
- “When you think about your relationships with God, with others, and with yourself 5-10 years from now, what do you want them to look like?”
- “What steps do you think are necessary in making these relationships healthier? Are there any steps you want to start taking this week?”
- “Does it sound appealing to take time to “rest” from your phone each week so that you can find rest in God?”
- “Is there anything I can do to help you toward these goals? How can I be praying for you this week?”

“Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that by testing you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect.”

(Romans 12:2)



Phone: (717) 361-8429
E-Mail: CPYU@CPYU.ORG
Web: WWW.CPYU.ORG

Mail: PO BOX 414,
ELIZABETHTOWN
PA 17022, USA