

The Kids Are Not Alright

**Gordon Hull, PhD, Director, Center for Professional and Applied Ethics, UNC Charlotte
From *Mecklenbug Medicine*, Sept. 2019.**

It is undoubtedly some sort of discouraging sign of the times that the mental health of our children does not make daily headlines. The research is alarming. One [study](#) found that from 2007-2015, the number of ER visits by children for either attempted or ideational suicide doubled, with children aged 5-11 comprising the largest subgroup. [Another](#) noted a 28% overall increase in psychiatric ER visits by youth between 2011 and 2015, with a 54% rise among adolescents. African American and Hispanic patients saw much sharper rises. Suicide-related visits more than doubled during the period, and less than 1 in 6 of all of these patients saw a mental health professional during the visit, despite its being for psychiatric reasons. Yet [another survey](#) of over 500,000 individuals concluded that rates of major depressive episode increased by more than 50% in both adolescents (ages 12-17) and young adults (18-25).

The final survey, by Jean Twenge *et al.*, is of interest because it discovers both a cohort effect and speculates about causality. For cohort, they note that Baby Boomers, Millennials and iGen (born in the 1990s) had significantly higher rates than those in between and find that the data “suggest that cultural trends in the last 10 years may have had a larger effect on mood disorders and suicide-related outcomes among younger people compared to older people” (194). Particularly vulnerable seem to be upper-income white women and girls. What’s going on here? A huge increase happened from 2011-17, and the economy was strong then. Alcohol and drug use was mostly unchanged from earlier periods. Opioids are an unlikely explanation because their victims tend to be older, and self-reporting also is unlikely because of the strength of the cohort effect.

Twenge *et al.* speculate that a significant cause is electronic media: it is during the study period both that electronic media use rose, and that the cohort in question experienced a spike in mental health issues. They also cite a number of studies suggesting a correlation between screen time and depression and other disorders. Should we blame screens? I’m a parent; I know that the rise of screens is really important to childhood now in a way that it wasn’t even ten years ago.

As an academic discipline, Science and Technology Studies teaches that the meaning of the use of a technology can only be understood in specific social contexts. Failing to look at contexts risks blaming the technology or adopting a determinism in which the technology has all the agency. It seems to me that’s a risk here. First, as Twenge *et al.* acknowledge, kids also use social media for social support. There’s a long-running debate on whether Facebook use makes you lonely. The empirical literature on these points is mixed. Second, screens were already prevalent by 2010. [According to Pew](#), at the end of 2009, 78% of 18-29 year-olds reported social media use. By January 2018, it was 88%. That’s an

increase, but not a huge one. The much [more dramatic rise](#) is in smartphone use, and young adults, lower income and non-white users were more likely to rely on their phones for broadband Internet. In short, there is a lot of context-specific information to tease out here, including what kinds of screens are used by whom.

Third, schools wholeheartedly embraced technology during this time. High schoolers tote Chromebooks and do a lot of their work online now, and anxious checking of PowerSchool is normal. Homework culture is [deeply entrenched](#) in upper-middle class high schools, and teens report both very high workloads and decreased interactions with family and friends - the exact things that screens are supposed to take away, and in the same more affluent demographic. More generally, even though there has been economic growth, it is widely acknowledged to be uneven, and teens report high levels of anxiety about economic precarity, college admissions and costs, and so forth. In other words, there are larger sociological forces at play, and these interact with the adoption of screens.

None of this is to dismiss the real concern about kids and screens. It is to emphatically point to the alarming rise in mental health issues among young people, and to urge caution in interpreting how we got here.