SUMMARY
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THE BIG DISCONNECT
BY CATHERINE STEINER-ADAIR

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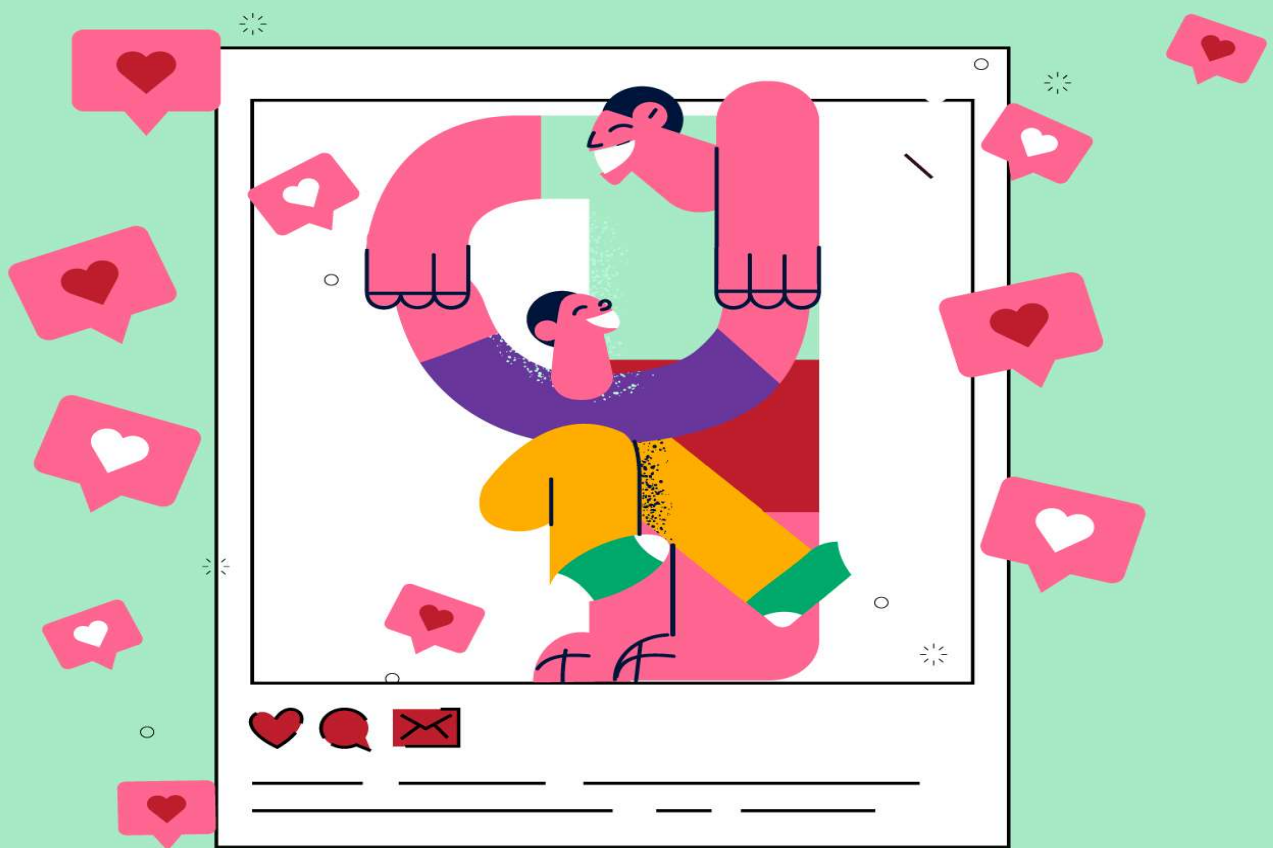
Summary of The Big Disconnect by Catherine Steiner-Adair

Written by Alyssa Burnette

How to raise children in the digital age.

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Introduction

How many times a day do you think you pick up your phone? I'm not even talking about the activity logs you can monitor on Instagram or Facebook to see how much time you spend on one particular app-- I'm talking about how many times a day you catch yourself grabbing your phone and checking something. And if a number doesn't spring to mind, you're not weird; we're all so connected to our phones that it's as if they've become extensions of our very selves. Whether we're checking a notification, glancing at the time out of boredom, or playing Candy Crush in the waiting room between appointments, interacting with our phones is second nature.

In fact, our phones function as an extension of our very selves to such a degree that social media addiction is regularly diagnosed in adults. Our crippling codependent relationships with our phones can also ruin relationships, reduce our memory, and impede our ability to focus on tasks. And all of these symptoms are just a few of the documented effects technology has on adults. But what about our kids? If technology can impact us in so many negative ways, what can it do to a young, developing mind? Over the course of this summary, we'll explore the impact of social media and technology on children, along with strategies parents can implement to protect their kids.

How Digital Media Impacts A Child's Development

How did you interact with other people when you were a kid? How did you meet prospective playmates? If you're like me, your interaction was almost exclusively in a real-life, face-to-face setting. You met prospective playmates at the park, on the playground, or in a library reading group. If someone called you a name or said something unkind, it was to your face or through a note that got passed around. It was never through a screen or via a nasty DM. Unfortunately, however, that isn't the reality for kids who are growing up today and child psychologists warn that this is having a profound impact on childhood development.

Fueled by an ever-increasing concern, child psychiatrist Dan Siegel observes that children develop through face-to-face interaction with other human beings. That interaction is how we develop empathy, how we learn to understand emotions, and how we develop our social skills and friendships. And if you think about it for a moment, it makes a lot of sense! Because children aren't born with empathy or social skills, they need to interact with other people in order to cultivate those traits. And when you can look someone in the eye, hear their tone of voice, and watch their facial expressions, you can easily understand that they're a real human being with real feelings that deserve to be respected. In fact, you can probably point to a moment in your own childhood where you refused to share with a playmate-- or where you were bullied yourself-- and you learned that actions have consequences. You learned that you can be hurt by someone else's actions and vice versa. These childhood experiences informed our budding sense of morality and influenced the development of the people we became.

But what if that early development primarily takes place through a screen? What if your playmate is little more to you than an avatar or words in a chat window? The author's research proves that overexposure to digital media, combined with a lack of real human contact, literally makes children less empathetic! When a child's playmates and socialization are primarily online, the child will struggle to understand that the other person is a real human

being with real feelings. And as a result, they may struggle with concepts like emotionally "putting yourself in someone else's shoes" or judging the impact of their actions on another person. It's a pretty safe bet that most parents hope to raise kind and empathetic kids, so this type of developmental disruption poses a significant threat to parents everywhere!

But unfortunately, the damaging side effects of technology don't end here. A heavy dose of digital media can also disrupt the development of your child's memory and their ability to concentrate. Although you may not have identified technology as the root cause of this problem, most adults are more distracted than we'd like to be. In fact, if you've ever walked into a room and instantly forgotten what you came there for, this isn't news to you. But although we tend to think of distraction as being a negative thing, the reality is that distraction is not only perfectly normal, it's our brain's natural state! It actually takes a lot of effort for us to concentrate because our neurobiology sort of predisposes us to be distracted. Let's take a look at how that works. For starters, concentration can be difficult for us because our brain first has to decide what to concentrate on. This is a complex task performed in the prefrontal cortex, and unfortunately for us, the prefrontal cortex gets tired very easily. So, when it has to make too many major decisions or feels overloaded by the pressure of lots of little decisions, it sort of shuts down. This means that our brains quickly return to a state of distraction and we have trouble focusing on anything.

And it doesn't help that sustained concentration requires a lot of effort. In order to focus only on one thing, the brain has to disconnect from all unnecessary internal and external stimuli and prevent additional sensory information from competing for its attention. We might not be consciously aware of it, but every time we apply sustained concentration to any one task, our brains are actually putting up a firewall to protect us from distraction and it takes a lot of effort to deflect all those distractions for a long period of time. So, we have to work pretty hard to block out distractions and to remember anything at all. But unfortunately, phones have a negative impact on memory as well.

In fact, every time you look at your phone, you're damaging your short-term memory because the distraction of checking a notification prevents it from obtaining information about what's going on in the world around you. And because your short-term memory can only keep track of a few things at a time, if you're checking a barrage of Instagram notifications around the same time you meet someone new, you may not be able to recall their name or face. Similar detriments can occur in your long-term memory as well. Because your long-term memory's job is to keep track of big picture events like what you did last week and the year you graduated college-- but that data starts its journey in the short-term memory.

Because these events originate as a very recent experience-- and thus, are housed in your short-term memory-- it's only transferred to long-term after the passage of time determines that your short-term memory no longer has room for it. But because the short-term memory can be fractured or disrupted by conflicting inputs from your phone, your entire memory process is in danger of collapsing. So, when the appropriate information doesn't get transferred to your long-term memory and you feel like you're losing chunks of time, your phone is actually to blame! This is especially true for children because their memories and concentration skills have just begun developing. The more their learning process is disrupted, the less information they retain. And the instantaneous nature of technology is teaching them that they don't have to focus on anything for a very long time. So, because they aren't building these critical skills like focus and information retention, they are more likely to struggle in school, score badly on tests, and struggle with a minimal attention span.

Teens, Technology, and Relationships

Many technophobes have ranted about "kids these days and their darn digital devices" and these concerns have largely been dismissed by proponents of new technology. But the author's research indicates that we have more to fear than we might have suspected. Just as pre-schoolers need face-to-face, interactive play in order to develop empathy and social skills, the development of older children and teenagers can also be affected by overexposure to digital media. As a result, it is vitally important that kids are protected from harmful experiences via social media. These harmful experiences can cover a wide variety of potentially damaging stimuli such as exposure to inappropriate materia v4l, bullying, sexual harassment, and more. In this chapter, we'll take a look at some statistics regarding adolescent experiences with social media and how exposure to negative stimuli can impact a young life.

A 2018 study conducted by the Pew Research Center discovered that that 59% of U.S. teens have personally experienced at least one of six types of abusive online behaviors. According to the study, "the most common type of harassment youth encounter online is name-calling. Some 42% of teens say they have been called offensive names online or via their cellphone. Additionally, about a third (32%) of teens say someone has spread false rumors about them on the internet, while smaller shares have had someone other than a parent constantly ask where they are, who they're with or what they're doing (21%) or have been the target of physical threats online (16%).

While texting and digital messaging are a central way teens build and maintain relationships, this level of connectivity may lead to potentially troubling and nonconsensual exchanges. One-quarter of teens say they have been sent explicit images they didn't ask for, while 7% say someone has shared explicit images of them without their consent. These experiences are particularly concerning to parents. Fully 57% of parents of teens say they worry about their teen receiving or sending explicit images, including about one-quarter who say this worries them a lot, according to a separate Center

survey of parents. The vast majority of teens (90% in this case) believe online harassment is a problem that affects people their age, and 63% say this is a major problem. But majorities of young people think key groups, such as teachers, social media companies and politicians are failing at tackling this issue."

These statistics are worrying enough, but unfortunately, they do not represent the only digital threat parents face. Cyberbullying continues to pose a massive threat to the mental health of older children and teenagers. Face-to-face bullying at school is undeniably harmful, but cyberbullying is especially horrific for victims because it robs them of their ability to find peace in a safe space. Thanks to the constant presence of our digital devices, bullies can infiltrate your safe space in seconds, penetrating your attempts to recover at home. The anti-bullying organization Cyberbullying.org records the stories of survivors such as the following example, which prove that cyberbullying is a uniquely insidious threat. One victim of bullying wrote:

"When I was 15, a freshman in high school, I was bullied over the Internet and at school. I felt like it came out of nowhere. One day, the group of girls I called my friends turned against me viciously over MySpace. They created a fake MySpace profile for me, which contained my cell phone number and instant message name. They photoshopped obscene sexual photographs of me and posted them in this profile. I was getting calls and began being stalked by strange men. These girls would make up sexually explicit rumors about me even though at the time I was a virgin. They would instant message me and tell me I was going to die. They were going to kill me. I was afraid to leave the house, to have friends, to pick up the phone. I lived in fear for so long. I knew they were looking for a fight and I refused to give them one so I deleted all known online presence and changed my number.

I became a recluse, a prisoner in my own home. Once I graduated high school, I applied to college outside of my hometown to run away. Now, I am 22 and still have to live with the effects of these cruel girls. Trauma is hard to recover from but I know it is possible and I am stronger now than I have ever

been. I am not that scared 15-year-old girl but I am still haunted by the girl I used to be."

Throughout her career as a therapist, the author has worked with many victims of bullying who have very similar stories. And that's one of many reasons why she believes that we need to disconnect and unplug if we want to protect our kids.

How to Protect Your Kids in the Digital Age

The author recognizes that it is both impossible and impractical to withdraw from technology entirely. You can't lock your kids away from the world and you can't protect them from everything. So, since it's impossible to anticipate every threat, the author affirms that the best defense is a good offense. Start by assuming that your children will, at some point, have a negative experience with digital media. Whether that comes in the form of bullying or an encounter with material that's inappropriate for the age, your kids will inevitably encounter something that is concerning to them. Robbing them of their privacy and being overprotective will not prevent this, it will just make your kids distrust you and avoid coming to you with their problems.

So, your best course of action is to begin a conversation about online safety. Teach them the basics of digital self-defense, such as protecting their private information and avoiding strangers on the internet. Make them aware of the warning signs they might encounter and help them understand what to do if they are in a situation that makes them uncomfortable. But above all, be approachable. Many kids avoid asking their parents for help because they're afraid that they will overreact or be overprotective. They may also struggle to trust you if you commonly engage in confusing and untrustworthy behavior at home. A common example of this behavior might include telling your kids that they should never swear or shout when you regularly do both. If you set an incongruent example, your kids may decide that you can't be trusted and opt not to come to you for help. So, be mindful of the example you set and be open to having real conversations with your kids about online safety.

Final Summary

There's no doubt about it: we live in a crazy digital age. And although some people might hope to get off the grid, it's unlikely that our society will ever revert to the simpler, less-electronic age that many of us remember. That's why it's important to adapt and learn to protect our children in the best way we can while accepting the world in which we live.

For this reason, the author recommends restricting your child's access to digital media until they're five years old. Focusing on face-to-face interaction helps them to build vital social and emotional skills that they will need for the rest of their lives. And as they grow, it's important for you to monitor their exposure to inappropriate material and harmful experiences online. Teach your kids about online safety and ensure that they feel safe coming to you for an open and honest conversation about the problems they're experiencing online.