



## **After the Fact | How Parental Stress Fuels Doomscrolling**

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### **TRANSCRIPT**

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**Andrea Davis, founder and CEO, Better Screen Time:** Most of the time, parents overestimate how well their kids are going to be able to handle the tech. And it's not because our kids aren't good, our kids are amazing, but this technology is just incredibly powerful.

**Giuliana Pence, host, "After the Fact" podcast:** Welcome to "After the Fact." For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Giuliana Pence.

Smartphones and screens have increasingly become a rite of passage for many children and teens. And with the rise of social media and the constant need to stay connected, today's kids are spending more time online than any other generation.

But parents are often glued to their screens as well. According to Pew Research Center, 56% of parents say they spend too much time on their smartphones. And many are recognizing that their own screen habits are taking a toll on the whole family.

In this episode, you'll hear from experts as they confront how screens and stress are reshaping family life.

But before we get started, I wanted to check in with my colleagues around the office to see what screen time looks like at home.

#### **Clip:**

I have completely lost control.

They watch a lot of TV.

I think the pandemic played a big role.

As soon as he got his phone, he was just like...



We just don't acknowledge the TV at home.

No phones during school time, and no phones at nighttime.

I just say, "This is our house, and these are our rules."

OK, last question.

Yeah.

How is your screen time?

It's awful.

What is it? Ask me no questions, I'll tell you no lies. Something like that. Yeah.

I do doomscroll a lot, and I'm in the reels. It's the world we live in.

**Giuliana Pence:** While screen time poses real challenges for us as parents, it turns out that we're not alone. According to a 2024 report from the surgeon general, 48% of parents say that most days their stress is completely overwhelming. And screens may do more harm than good.

Andrea Davis, who you heard earlier, is an expert who works with families to help set healthy boundaries with technology at home.

**Andrea Davis:** Time spent on a screen is always displacing a real-life activity. We talk about what we call the three Cs: So, am I creating, am I connecting, or am I consuming? And of those three, you can probably guess which one is worse.

**Giuliana Pence:** She'll give us more advice later in this episode. But what we're experiencing at home also reflects a bigger trend when it comes to mental health.

**Jessica Roark, senior officer, behavioral health, The Pew Charitable Trusts:** The single biggest predictor of a child's screen time is parental screen time.

**Giuliana Pence:** I sat down with my colleague Jessica Roark, an expert who works on Pew's behavioral health projects and is a parent herself.

**Jessica Roark:** Pew has been exploring how to prevent problematic substance use among youth. Children and teens have been experiencing worsening mental health well



before COVID. And in 2023, nearly 40% of high school students reported persistent feelings of sadness or hopelessness. And about 1 in 5 reported experiencing major depression.

**Giuliana Pence:** So, when we talk about youth mental health, what are the most common stressors you're seeing today?

**Jessica Roark:** Surveys of teens consistently show well over half feel a lot of pressure to do really well in school. And that can also build as you're getting closer and closer to graduating high school. None of these stressors are probably that surprising to any of us.

What might be different now is we have such greater line of sight into what's happening in other people's lives because of what gets posted on the internet.

**Giuliana Pence:** Right. It's almost like comparison overload. Like you might not have known what your friends were doing on the weekend. Now you do. And you know whether you're invited or not, right?

**Jessica Roark:** And we also just live in a challenging time where the future seems uncertain, and that can also put a lot of pressure on kids, especially at a time when they're trying to figure out what their own future looks like.

One of the things we're finding is that nearly half of youth who do use substances report that they're doing so to manage their own feelings or anxiety. And so it's become quite clear to us that we cannot disentangle any work around substance use prevention from mental health issues that may be going on.

**Giuliana Pence:** You know, we love data here. In 2023, the U.S. surgeon general issued an advisory about the impacts of social media on teens and found that adolescents who spent more than three hours per day on social media face double the risk of experiencing poor mental health outcomes, including symptoms of depression and anxiety.

So, where does screen time fit into the picture for you and into the work that you do?

**Jessica Roark:** Screen time for everyone, not just kids, is a hot topic right now.

We know that excessive screen time makes it harder for young people and children to manage their emotions.



But I think what people often miss is it also depends on what they're doing on the screen. Watching a television show, completing a school project or school lesson, playing games, or scrolling on social media: They're all very different kinds of activities, and our brain kind of responds to them in a different way.

And parents and caregivers have such a huge role to play here. The single biggest predictor of a child's screen time is parental screen time. So, we need to make sure we're putting our own devices away and modeling good behavior. But some children are going to need additional support in managing their emotions and in making good decisions. So, we want to make sure programs that do that are available to families and in the other places where children are, such as schools.

**Giuliana Pence:** What types of interventions and policies related to screen time might actually improve mental health outcomes?

**Jessica Roark:** One of the things we're starting to see that may be promising—it might be too early to tell—are communities or states that are enacting limits or bans on cellphones or devices in schools.

Some of the early evidence is starting to show that youth are more engaged in the classroom. I've seen teachers or principals reporting that the hallways are noisy again, because no one's on their phones. Kids report that they're making new friends because they don't have their phones with them.

So I think that is, from a policy perspective, one of the interventions that we might consider scaling up, you know, if we can learn more about how it works, how to do it well, and whether it is actually benefiting young people.

**Giuliana Pence:** So we were talking a little bit about our kids earlier. Knowing all you know, how do you balance your perspective as an expert and your role as a parent?

**Jessica Roark:** It is difficult knowing what I know and also being a parent of young kids to not go a little crazy. I find it a little helpful actually, because my kids are so young, I can start to think about the things that might be on the horizon for them, in terms of risks, and think about how can we, as a family unit, increase the protective factors around them so that as they get older, some of these things, fingers crossed, might be less of an issue that we have to deal with.

And I don't think our work is done when it comes to youth behavioral health, but I think we're starting to see some good signs.



**Andrea Davis:** It's not about being anti-tech or throwing all the tech out the window, but it's just using technology with intention and with purpose.

**Giuliana Pence:** Years ago, Andrea Davis came to her husband with what sounded like a crazy idea: What if they put their TV away when they weren't using it and only took it out when they actually wanted to watch something?

That small experiment was the first step towards a bigger calling in life. Now, she helps other families set healthier boundaries with screens through her organization, Better Screen Time.

Andrea Davis, welcome to "After the Fact." Thanks for joining us. It's great to have you.

**Andrea Davis:** Thanks. I'm excited to be here.

**Giuliana Pence:** To start, can you tell us about yourself and how you came to start Better Screen Time?

**Andrea Davis:** Our family moved across the country from Illinois to Oregon, and our oldest was 12, and we handed over an abandoned smartphone to her so she could stay in touch with all these friends that she was leaving behind in middle school. And she was like the ultimate oldest child, like the kind of kid that cleans her room without being asked. But fast forward a few months later, and I remember my daughter coming home from school and she was getting her after-school snack, like always, and she was spooning cereal into her mouth with one hand, and with the other, she was scrolling and not talking to me. And I immediately thought, "Where did my kid go?"

It was too much too soon. And so we went back to a brick phone. And it was incredibly hard, as you can imagine. My daughter had tears streaming down her face. But it was a pivotal moment for our family. And I realized I wanted to use my background in education to help parents. My primary goal at Better Screen Time really is helping families to have these conversations to create boundaries.

Every family's different. There's no one size fits all. It's not because our kids aren't good, our kids are amazing, but this technology is just incredibly powerful.

**Giuliana Pence:** What are some of the challenges families face today when talking about screen time?



**Andrea Davis:** One of the biggest challenges really is the disconnection and the conflict that comes sometimes over devices. I get a lot of that, just like, “How do I keep the peace in our home over screens?”

But also, safety is a big concern for many families. Kids coming across content that’s inappropriate for them, and parents are frankly panicked because it might be violent. It might be pornographic. We know that there are long-term effects for exposure to these things.

And so, we, as parents, want to protect our kids. And then kids not feeling like they’re enough and comparing and feeling left out and all those things that didn’t used to be a thing because we didn’t know what everyone else was doing all the time.

**Giuliana Pence:** You’ve shared this 2016 stat before that kids spend less time outdoors than people in prison. And the CDC more recently found that nearly 4 in 10 preschoolers get an hour or less outside during the week. So talk me through the connection. How much of this is screen time replacing outdoor time, and how much do screens make it harder to get kids outside once they’re used to being indoors?

**Andrea Davis:** Time spent on a screen is always displacing a real-life activity. The average statistic says that kids are spending seven hours a day on a screen. And that’s not including time spent at school. So, if you think of a 24-hour cycle, what are the things that a human being needs to thrive? We need sleep, we need physical activity, we need face-to-face interaction with people. A lot of those things truly take up most of our time. And so, if kids are spending seven hours a day on a screen, they’re not doing all of these other things that really make a happy, healthy human being.

**Giuliana Pence:** What does rest entail for parents these days and how does the use of screens play into that?

**Andrea Davis:** How often when we just want to decompress or unwind do we turn to our phone because it’s always there? We really have to consider does that really help us feel replenished and rejuvenated?

We talk a lot about what we call the three Cs. So, am I creating, am I connecting, or am I consuming? And of those three, you can probably guess which one is worse. And that’s usually consuming. But when we’re consuming, we might be watching YouTube to help us know how to fix the minivan door or the dishwasher.

And so, as parents, we have to keep modeling that for our kids, but also just doing that for ourselves so we truly are getting a mental break.



**Giuliana Pence:** No, it's so true. I've found that sometimes if I'm scrolling, I'm more tired after I'm done scrolling.

**Andrea Davis:** Yes, there's studies to prove it, especially with short-form content—short videos—on attention span and how it's affecting your overall well-being. And it's not good, basically.

**Giuliana Pence:** Could you talk a little bit about the frameworks you use to help parents teach better digital skills to kids?

**Andrea Davis:** So we talk a lot about the relationship. That is the foundation of everything. That really comes down to just having conversations. And we call them “tech talks” in our house. But we'll sit down and just have a conversation about, like, how's this boundary going?

When we started making changes in our own home, we sat down to create our family tech plan. And when we decided, OK, we're not taking screens into the bedrooms or bathrooms, one of the first things my kids said to me was, “But Mom, you take yours into the bedroom and the bathroom.” And I was like, “Oh, you're right.” And so, I committed to my kids at that point. And it started as a boundary that I really wanted to keep to model for my kids, but in the end, really I'm the one that's benefited.

The parents that I teach, we talk about we want to teach, plan, and delay. We are big fans of delaying smartphones until age 14 and social media until age 16. But we also have a set of evaluations that we've used in our home, and a lot of parents have used, called “Am I Ready?” And essentially, it's a list of questions that you can print out, give to your teenager, and it asks things like, “Do I get up for school on my own? Am I responsible and am I emotionally mature? Am I kind to my siblings?” So, it lets them self-evaluate.

And that can really help parents to delay and then have a baseline but also have some kind of a milestone. And that could be like getting a driver's license. Or, my second daughter, who turned 18 this last fall, we said, when your college applications are in, then you can open a social media account. And instead of parenting from a place of fear about technology, how can I parent from a place of confidence? And so, as you prepare your kids and you prepare yourself, you start to feel confident about your decisions. And your kids can sense that: “Oh, I'm not going to keep begging because I already know Mom's not going to give in on this one.”

**Giuliana Pence:** It sounds like you have to be very intentional going in.



**Andrea Davis:** You really do. And obviously we all have periods where we just let kids watch screens too much. I've had phases like that. I was pregnant with my fourth child and we were in temporary housing, my husband just got a new job, and it was incredibly hot that summer. So I had three girls all stuck in an apartment. I was incredibly pregnant. And my girls watch "The Wiggles" for several hours every day for a couple of weeks. But you know what? We all survived. But then always moving away from that, this is temporary, and we're moving on, this isn't how we're always going to use screens.

**Giuliana Pence:** So, it's possible that someone could see your framework and think, given how dependent our world is on technology, that these recommendations are unrealistic. I'm sure you come across skeptical parents. What is your response?

**Andrea Davis:** I think in every society, every culture, throughout time, there's always been people who've done things counterculturally. And I am doing it in my home, and I know a lot of other parents throughout the world who are doing it as well. It's not about being anti-tech or throwing all the tech out the window, but it's just using technology with intention and with purpose.

I think if parents are like, "Oh, this all sounds too hard," you need to consider, what's the alternative then? Because there are some real consequences. If you're feeling doubtful, I would encourage you to talk to a few college-age young adults about their technology use and what boundaries they had growing up. I think the biggest regret is the missed opportunities. They'll tell you, "Oh, I hate all the time that I've spent."

**Giuliana Pence:** How does a parent's screen time impact their children? You've obviously seen that in your life with your family and in many of the families you work with.

**Andrea Davis:** I mean there's studies that show that's one of the biggest factors in a teen's screen use is how their parent uses their screen. And that's the beauty of the family tech plan is because it isn't just telling your teenager, "Get off your phone" or whatever it is. It's, "Hey, we're doing this together."

**Giuliana Pence:** Have you encountered situations where, in families with two parents, one spouse is on board for the family tech plan, and maybe the other one has a harder time? And what do you do in that situation?

**Andrea Davis:** Yeah, I would say 90% of the time, that's how it is. So, in those situations, the best thing is, as we make changes with our own tech habits, we can share that with our spouse or partner. One that I remember is getting into the car, and if



my husband was driving, I would immediately grab my phone because it was this great time to catch up on all the texts and arranging the carpool and the calendar. And I remember one day, my husband said, “I’d really love it if you just talked to me.” And that was like, oh, I didn’t even recognize or realize what I was doing. It, for me, I was more like, I’m being efficient—being efficient with my time. And so, I immediately put my phone away and that’s something I’ve been very mindful of ever since.

On the flip side, I think I definitely was more concerned and worried about our kids and screen time than my husband was. But now, it’s so interesting as I hear him defending and talking to other parents about, “No, we need to really watch this and be careful,” because he’s heard me talk about it so much over the years. And it’s worth having those conversations.

**Giuliana Pence:** Are there any positives to screen time?

**Andrea Davis:** Definitely. Yes. So together screen time is the best kind of screen time. So, as we look at family movie night, I think that’s a common screen practice and that can be really healthy and bonding for families.

As parents, the thing we need to be most mindful of is, do we put our phones away during family movie night so that we’re not doing the double screen? And that’s also a common bit of advice from screen experts is, one screen only, one screen at a time. So, putting our other devices away so we can truly be present with our kids.

Another great thing that a lot of people love is watching sports together. That’s also quite often happening on a screen and that’s something that our family loves to do. And even like doing some of the video games where you’re dancing, like my kids love that. We don’t have video games in our home, but we actually check out a Nintendo Switch from the library once in a while. And so that is a great strategy if you’re like maybe we don’t want to bring video games into our home. But that’s how we’ve balanced that out. It’s just thinking about what are those types of screen time that bring your family together and aren’t isolating everyone.

**Giuliana Pence:** Is there anything we didn’t ask you that you feel is important to share with our listeners today?

**Andrea Davis:** When it comes to parenting and technology, mindset is really powerful. Trying to focus on parenting from a place of confidence and not a place of fear. And also, just deciding what feels right for your family. The idea of creating a culture in your home, what do you want that culture to be? And Cal Newport in his book, *Digital Minimalism*, talks about almost like an identity. So, I think it really is, like, what do you



want your identity to be when it comes to technology? But also what do you want your family culture to be? And as you create that culture, it will make it easier for your kids when you're holding the line, and they know this is how it is and they will someday thank you.

And that 12-year-old daughter, when she was writing her college admissions essays, which has been a few years ago now, she wrote one about this whole experience. And I didn't know she was going to, but she sent it to me. And she talked about the TV in the closet and the smartphone and going back to the brick phone. And she said, "I know I've matured because I've come to appreciate those restrictions." She said, "My ears were covered when the world was telling me who to be. I found myself on my own. I know who I am."

**Giuliana Pence:** Thank you so much, Andrea, for joining us. And if our listeners want to get more information about Better Screen Time and the work that you do, where can they find you?

**Andrea Davis:** Yes, so our website is [www.betterscreentime.com](http://www.betterscreentime.com), and ironically, you can find me on Instagram at [@betterscreentime](https://www.instagram.com/betterscreentime).

**Giuliana Pence:** Thanks for listening. You can learn more about this topic at [www.pew.org/afterthefact](http://www.pew.org/afterthefact). And make sure you're subscribed to "After the Fact" wherever you get your podcasts to hear all of our latest episodes. For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Giuliana Pence.