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Social Media's Influence on Adolescent Identity

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Academic Rationale for Research

Social Media Digital Stress Influencing Adolescent Relationships

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Introduction

Are you familiar with what a teen looks like without a phone in hand? These days, a sighting of a young person without a phone seems to be an aberration. Even adults can be seen juggling the device and multitasking to the max, so it is no wonder youth have followed suit. In suburban Massachusetts, the middle school age of adolescence exists in the era of negotiation – some schools shifting from no devices during the school day to devices allowed in the hallways after the final class or for in class use at the teacher’s discretion. At the high school level, the students are often given much looser parameters under the guise of freedom that comes with responsibility. No matter how the story unfolds in any given location one thing is certain: technology and social media are on the radar during most aspects of daily life.

Many of the devices adolescents carry are connected to social media, which is mainly differentiated as used for social networking (e.g., Facebook) and virtual communing (e.g., gaming). According to Cingel and Krcmar (2014), “A growing body of research has found support for reciprocal relationships between media use and user characteristics (which can include developmental stages)” (p. 156). Today, the task of being a teenager includes the glee and complication of technology. Adolescents are dealing with pubertal body changes, reordering of the brain, shifting relational expectations, and identity development - all more publicly than previous generations while juggling that social media presence.

Growing up in a different era led me to consider contrasts of life then with life now, and the pros and cons of social media. Noticing the presence of technology and social media has crept in to everyday life, I am mindful of the influence it has over us. Aware that I am coming

from a different place than a digital native has ever known makes me realize exploration of this topic is important. Although there are many positive factors involved in our shift to a more technology reliant life, it appears to me that we have lost some of the harmony in discourse that is known to promote a more civil and humane society. From the camp that believes we are born with the intrinsic desire to do good and be kind, there is a level of discomfort in what seems to be an ironic disconnect from all the technological connectivity. Knowing technology is here to stay, it is important to look for ways to integrate positive moments of the past with the social media construct of the present. Pondering the thought of digital stress resulting from the burden of overuse or the fear of being singled out in an embarrassing way led me to ask the question “how does digital stress from social media use influence the shifting relationships of adolescence?”

Social and Media

There have always been shifting relationships and an emphasis on socialization in the teen years. During adolescence, “the emergence of the self, the search for identity, the individual’s relationships with others, and the role of culture throughout life” (Erikson, 1959, p. 34) are paramount. In middle school, student focus “shifts from shared interests to social acceptance” (Lahey, 2015, p. 105), a shift that highlights the importance of acknowledging and understanding social influence. Peer groups contribute to both adaptive and maladaptive development. In fact, peers help each other learn about themselves (Underwood, 2011).

Adolescents have always been influenced by media. Lemish (2015) found that:

Media have both positive and negative potential to make a difference in children’s lives in all areas of their development: behaviorally (e.g., imitating sharing or aggression), socially (e.g., making new friends and strengthening existing relationships through social

media or bullying their classmates on the internet); cognitively (e.g., learning school preparedness skills or developing short attention spans); creatively (e.g., creating computer graphics, writing blogs, and uploading their own videos or reproducing cliched commercial formulas and stereotypical messages); or even physically (e.g., learning balanced nutrition or developing bad eating habits). (p. 5).

It is safe to say that media influences viewers with their topic selection, which in turn holds the power to influence the viewer. Eventually, media evolved to include the world wide web.

In the early years, the internet began as an information providing resource. With the onset of Web 2.0, it “was no longer a place where you went predominantly to consume content and information. It became a place where you participated; a dynamic space that was shaped (both intentionally and inadvertently) by your own actions and contributions” (Sergeant & Tagg, 2014, p. 2). This change resulted in human connection playing a greater role on the internet. Weinstein and Selman (2016) reminded us that the “common challenges of social relationships” intersect with social media and “reflect unique challenges of navigating relationships in a networked age, including the ease of deception and genuine confusion about evolving relationship norms” (p. 392). Influence over the relationships of adolescence emerged as the internet transitioned to a social space.

With his ecological theory, Bronfenbrenner (1979) placed the most influential relationships - with family, peers, and teachers - closest to the individual at the center of his model. Constructed with mass media further out as part of the exosystem, the model was developed prior to social media, which has a much more immediate and direct influence on the individual and his or her closest relationships. Courtois, Mechant, Paulussen, and DeMaraz (2011) indicated that the multitude of devices carried held meanings and different methods of

engagement and usage. Bear in mind, “inside human minds, but never in a computer, are memories of past experiences” (Gee, 2017, p. 8). Lamia (2015) felt it important to consider the role of social media as an edited reality. The words social and media have meaning when they stand alone, and further meaning when they stand together. Today, discussion about healthy adolescent development for many Americans needs to address a reality which is, in part, lived on social media.

Unintended Consequences

According to Turkle (2015), “we have not assessed the full human consequences of digital media. We want to focus on its pleasures. Its problems have to do with unintended consequences” (p. 16). This statement rings true in my case and brings forth a vivid memory. The year was 2009 and I had yet to begin my on again – off again relationship with social media. An article appeared without my name in it, but the story referenced people associated with me and an alleged incident in relation to me. As the supposed victim of a possible crime, I neither asked for nor wanted the attention this article brought to an untenable situation. Yet, there it was, front and center on the actual paper, with an online version too. Suddenly, I was suffering from what I termed Hester Prynne Syndrome. Later, I would find this term in the book *Shame Nation* (Scheff & Schorr, 2017), validating my feelings. However, in the moment, I struggled with feelings of shame and embarrassment. Even though I had done nothing wrong, I felt like people were watching me and judging me. I was right.

While grateful for much love and support, I was still left with a feeling of being outed, of not belonging. Even a kind e-mail from another mother left me with mixed emotions: happy she offered me wonderful words of encouragement, but sad because I understood it meant others saw me as part of this sensationalized story. Then, I had to contend with the people who saddled up

their keyboards and left comments under the article, beginning a war of words that I wouldn't get involved in and that wrongly accused a friend of using his position to curry favor. My friend, who had done nothing of the sort, was trolled for almost a full year over this article. Each time he was mentioned online, a comment was made that referenced the case and made accusations that he used his power inappropriately. Yet another point that made it difficult for me, offering up guilt to the equation, was that my friend had a young family.

It was a very challenging time for me, as I fell victim to the aftermath of situations that I had no control over: first the incident and next the article. The most difficult part of this period in my life was the fact that I had a young child. The internet leaves a permanent footprint that doesn't wash away like a step in the sand during a tidal change. Forget about me, in one fell swoop a 7-year-old had a dimension added to his innocent life that would lie in wait and impact his days even without his knowing. A fact of life? Maybe. An unintended consequence? Most definitely. From that moment on, I lived looking over my shoulder and entering many social situations with a feeling of imbalance and fear of the unknown. Worried to turn on the computer and see the article, I felt a need to be aware of what was being written while knowing I would never respond. The biggest worry was that my small child might be told about it on the school playground when he was too young to process it. I didn't know the term then, but the stress I suffered would be construed as digital stress.

While all stress isn't bad (Willard, 2016), prolonged stress can create both physical and mental burdens. Examples of negative implications are cardiovascular problems, immune system deficiencies, diabetes, and mental health issues (McEwen & Lasley, 2002). For teens, this stress occurs as the brain is taking shape (Siegel, 2013), which raises concern in general about chronic stress and/or anxiety. In considering ways to influence brain and overall

adolescent development positively, it is important to understand that growth and maturation occurring during this period influences how an individual will continue to “remember, think, reason, focus attention, make decisions, and relate to others” (p. 7). Certainly, the type of stress that allows positive change or serves as a motivator is preferable to the type that negatively impacts life and health.

Weinstein and Selman (2016) identified two types of digital stress. The first, Type 1 Stressors, involve one or more of the following: mean and harassing personal attacks, public shaming and humiliation, and impersonation. The second, Type 2 Stressors, are connected to use and/or relational in nature. In response to the research question asking what digital stressors are over the line, Weinstein and Selman (2016) indicated that vulnerability increases when digital tools are used for Type 2 scenarios that promote connection and intimacy. Categorized as a Type 1 Stressor, my situation is unique just like the multitude of others. I couldn't know or control the words and actions of other people, an especially difficult position when I realized it was placed on such a public forum.

When it comes to social media, we have moments of feeling overexposed, underexposed, or somewhere in the middle. Because a large component of a teen's social life occurs front and center on social media, great potential exists for digital stress to appear due to unintended consequences. The teen years are such a busy time in life, and picturing the ecological model described by Bronfenbrenner (1979) reveals how many relationships, environments, and aspects of an individual's life exact power over development. Overlaying stress on this model exhibits its far-reaching influence, which can serve as a powerful motivator for finding ways to mitigate it.

Fear or Fixation

Gee (2017) stated, “humans are driven by a deep need to make sense of things, often in terms of causality” (p. 136). When I was struggling with my connection to that online story, after I spent time wondering “why me,” I began to wonder why. Even though I felt shame and embarrassment, I was adamant I didn’t want these circumstances to define me while at the same time recognizing that many factors were beyond my control. Oeldorf-Hirsch, Birnholtz, and Hancock (2017) investigated embarrassment indicators among friends posting on Facebook and found that the level of embarrassment “is driven by the quasi-public threat to one’s identity, rather than the revelation of any particular information” (p. 97). The further a post deviated from the individual’s perceived identity, the stronger the embarrassed response” (p. 97). The power of that inverse relationship, along with the variables involved, is important to address.

Social media can be influenced by fear. Fear of what to say: too much, not enough, or the wrong thing. Fear of what you see: a response to you, the post of another, or being pulled in to a situation. Those who have experienced shame or even embarrassment online may develop a stress response to initiation of or participation in online socialization. Certainly, fear of embarrassment, shame, or perception of missing out can be a huge problem. However, there is another issue lurking about: fixation. Fixation can come in the form of usage issues such as excessive monitoring that interferes with activities of daily life including face-to-face interaction and obligations like schoolwork (Turkle, 2015). For many years, a full life did not include social media. That life consisted of typical and atypical stress, just as it had methods of escape from those stressors that weren’t always positive outlets. Adding an additional layer of social media communication can provide a wonderful way to connect, and can offer ample opportunity to avoid. The concern comes when we replace one stress with another by spending time online that

takes time away from another beneficial task. Fear and fixation can combine in the phenomenon known as FOMO, or the fear of missing out. Social media offers a way to connect and communicate with friends, and it can be a good escape from the daily rigors of life. Yet, in avoiding typical stressors through escapism the possibility exists to create another level of stress.

Fear and fixation can be counterproductive to well-being, particularly if the result is constant stress. Factors influencing an individual's development include "changes in the individual's feelings, personality, self-concept, and relations with other people" (Woolfolk & Perry, 2012, p. 7). McEwen and Lasley (2002) discussed how the 21st century lifestyle increases exposure to stress and depletes defenses against it. Gee (2017) considered body and mind to be a combined "experience-processing device" (p. 9). Bronfenbrenner (1979) reminded us about environmental influence, which explains why it is impossible to isolate fear, fixation, and digital stress from other aspects of life. Clearly, understanding and addressing issues that negatively impact well-being makes for a healthier developmental process; one way a teen could improve this process would be to address media use and its influence on his or her life.

Social media can be a great place to explore the possibility of identity and connect in relationships. While it has many positive attributes, social media also has a dark side. No one can control the words and actions of other people, and these words and actions can influence identity and relationships. The age-old words of wisdom are true that you can't control others, but you can control your response. Choice exists in the response, particularly to fear or fixation. When it comes to reckoning with fear, a good start is to understand the fear and then have the desire to replace it. Fixation is about balance. Keeping balance in mind is important when conceding that areas of daily living can suffer at the hands of too much time online or under the stress of not being willing or able to let go of social media. People talk about diversifying their

stock portfolio and representing all the food groups in a healthy diet, and those tasks represent balance as a benefit to a well-rounded life. It is just as important to think about the place social media and digital stress have in a bountiful life.

Who am I?

This question - Who am I? - plays a prominent role in an adolescent's developmental process and progress. Adolescents focus on identity work and relationships (Erikson, 1959), and spend time exploring possibilities and consequences, including those created by roles placed upon them by others (Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). Underwood (2011) endorses exploration and decision making that supports an individual's goals. A busy time in life, teens are often working on development with a device in hand. When referring to identities, Gee (2017) divided them between activity-based and relational. Activity-based identities are defined by free choice and reciprocal relationships between an individual and a social group; relational identities are described by commonalities or contrasts among people, such as age, gender, and culture. Both aspects exist on social media and an adolescent can be exploring multiple identities at once. Social media – networking, virtual/gaming, or both – play a prominent role in an adolescent's existence too. This means it is important to view this period of youth development through a lens that includes social media and its influences on the individual and his or her personal ecological system.

When he was seven, my son learned one of his peers was on Facebook. An astute rule follower, he was flabbergasted to realize that his friend portrayed himself as much older to establish a profile and at the same time, he wondered why this boy wanted to pretend to be someone else. Exhibiting wisdom beyond his years, he expressed rule breaking as problematic

and vocalized his disappointment that his friend would lie and that his mother allowed it. And, when it came to the fact that a false identity had been created, my son was sad knowing that a boy wanted to deny his identity and pretend he was a grown up. It seemed to me his was an age appropriate reflection on the possible existence of cognitive dissonance.

Thinking about this seven-year-old adult imposter brings up the prospect that creation of a social media persona advances or stalls development. By design and definition, cognitive dissonance, stress that results from two conflicting beliefs, creates friction for an individual. In his motivational model, Maslow (1987) postulated both growth and deficiency needs. In the deficiency end of the spectrum, he included belonging and esteem needs, in which he theorized an individual would be motivated to fulfill steps to progress up a pyramid in the quest to move forward in a positive direction toward self-actualization. Throughout my years as a child and an adolescent, my parents advised caution when it came to application of the terms always-never and everyone-no one. This warning replays in my mind as I consider how digital stress from social media involvement may influence development and shift relationships.

Cingel and Krcmar (2014) suggested we suffer by comparison, stressing over attempts to present a certain image to others. Expanding on the psychosocial stages of Erikson (1959), Marcia (1966) theorized there are four identity statuses, which refer to relational choices. The four statuses are identity diffusion, foreclosure, moratorium, and achievement. It is worth exploring the possibility that uncertainty of social media responses, expressed and received, may equate to diffusion, which in turn slows processing of a developmental stage. This possibility, along with consideration given to the works of Maslow (1987) and Bronfenbrenner (1979), indicates that while the direction is unknown, the shifting relationships of adolescence are influenced by digital stress from social media.

In its central theme of search for identity, adolescence is an important time for focus on positive assets and potential. In their recent study, Scales, Benson, and Roehlkepartain (2011) found that “the accumulation of three broad strengths in adolescents – their sparks or deep passions, their relational opportunities, and their sense of empowerment – are strongly associated with better academic, psychological, social, and behavioral well-being for adolescents, and specifically, with prosocial outcomes that reflect engagement with and contribution to community and society” (p. 275). They found that aligning supportive ecologies with an individual’s personal strengths and capabilities promotes self-efficacy, which holds the promise of a brighter future where a youth’s positive development may include making a beneficial contribution to the individual’s identity and his or her community.

Maslow (1987) regarded childhood as the time when much of adult character formation takes place. Referencing an ecological approach, he indicated that motivation rarely takes place in a vacuum; instead, it is influenced by people and places. If elements organize in a manner that supports identity exploration, the result is congruency for an adolescent, which opens up the possibility for healthy individual development and opportunity to make societal contributions. Unfortunately, elements don’t always organize in the optimal way, which can result in stress. Stress influences life – in a positive way it can motivate you or in other instances certain exposure or prolonged stress can negatively impact development. All this influence can be inferred to digital stress. Who am I? This question can be answered in many ways for just one person. Early teens are living through the mystery of what they will become, looking for a place of belonging in their world. The search for identity is a lifelong process, but an integral part of that process occurs during adolescence when individuals are learning who they are and what they think.

What Do I Think?

During adolescence, amid puberty, the brain continues to develop, and adolescents' choices affect brain health. Brain health "involves a proactive and lifelong application of specific behaviors that are organized into five major domains: physical activity; mental stimulation; spirituality; socialization; and, nutrition" (Fine & Sung, 2014, p. 31). "The teenage brain differs from adults, particularly in key areas of emotion processing, sensation-seeking and decision making" (p. 522). It has also been determined that "the parts of the brain associated with complex decision making, impulse control, error-checking, and judgment mature the latest" (p. 522). Current theory promotes the inclusion of both biology and environment in brain development. An ecological approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) infers consideration of reciprocal relationships among influence, such as what the brain thinks and how the brain develops.

Society often portrays teen turbulence as fallout from the hormonal changes they experience. Emphasizing an ecological approach that recognizes the influence from an interplay of psychological, social, cultural, and historical events, Lerner (2007) relayed that "the environment doesn't simply act on us; we act on the environment" (pp. 29-30). Because many American teens live a portion of life on social media, it is a place for them to act on the environment. Consequently, social media can be a great tool for development as youth open up and create their own identity. Seargeant and Tagg (2014) suggested that "Identity cues that are 'given' – through deliberate and conscious management – and those which are 'given off' – less consciously revealed in interaction – are mediated not through face-to-face co-presence, but primarily through language use" (p. 6). Who we are and what we think are inextricably linked. In social media, as communication happens without face-to-face context, an adolescent is left to decipher meaning of another individual's post/message with only his or her own perception.

The value of an adolescent gaining understanding and realizing the influence of relationships is illuminated by social constructivism. For example, Vygotsky (1930) saw learning and development as a collaborative process that emphasized the influence of environment and experience. Social constructivists contend that people develop knowledge based on their personal perceptions of the reciprocal relationships, including social and cultural, that they maintain within their environments. A social worker or teacher may use constructivist methods with a teen to help “alter their constructions of reality in order to change emotions and behaviors that are problematic” (Furman, Jackson, Downey, & Shears, 2003, p. 265), but a specialist is not necessary to facilitate the benefits of social constructivism. The benefits can be extended to online environments and to life in general. If a teen is inclined to use a constructivist approach, it can lead to a strong sense of self-efficacy.

A reciprocal relationship, other people’s perceptions and those of a teen all influence his or her life choices and wellbeing. Perceptions can be connected to confirmation bias. Gee (2017) called confirmation bias a “brain bug” that “causes we humans to pay attention to evidence that supports evidence we already believe and ignore or misconstrue evidence that does not” (p. 138). This concept is strengthened by egocentrism during the teen years. Elkind (1967) explained the developmental phase of egocentrism as alive and well during early adolescence. Egocentrism presents itself in an adolescent’s belief in the existence of an imaginary audience “that is preoccupied with his appearance and behavior” (p. 1030) and creation of a personal fable. Both concepts influence some of the behaviors seen in this age group as a teen feels unique, as if what affects his or her life is different from everyone else. It is understood that this perspective taking influences thoughts and actions. What comes to mind is how imaginary audience and personal fable adjust for social media times.

Hoping to better understand the implications of a social media heavy adolescence, I am curious to know how social constructivism and egocentrism play out in social media, if the imaginary audience turns real and personal fable becomes collective. In one study, Cingel and Krcmar (2014) revealed results that show Facebook use as positively related to behavioral rehearsal, which is related to imaginary audience ideation. The authors posited the Compare-Think-Act trilogy, which has adolescents comparing their behaviors to that of others, thinking of ways to achieve a desired behavior change to appear like the others, and acting in a way that achieves the desired outcome (Cingel & Krcmar, 2014). A later study (Cingel, Krcmar, & Olsen, 2015) indicated that personal fable heightens a teen's awareness of imaginary audience, which results in teens staying very active on Facebook to achieve the "goal of remaining special and important" (p. 34). While personal fable is related to an increase in social media activity, it is not linked to controversial self-disclosure (although imaginary audience IS linked to controversial self-disclosure). What does all this mean?

In the daily life of a teen, the exploratory nature of the adolescent developmental stage coupled with the increased desire for peer connection highlights the significance of disclosure. As a way of exploring the possibilities of identity, adolescents try on roles (Woolfolk & Perry, 2012), sharing pieces of information and self to be seen and to connect. Turkle (2015) posited the pros and cons of identity work in a digital space, which influence development. Since social media is prominent in a teen's day-to-day life, it is an environment ripe with disclosure. Issues arise when a disclosure is met with vocalized judgment, leaving a teen anxious or upset. This can lead an individual to spend time worrying about not only what to think but what to say (Scheff & Schorr, 2017), thus stalling advancement.

The automatic thought that follows egocentrism is the fact that the individual is only thinking of him or herself. While that may be true on one level, Elkind (1967) demonstrated it is often in the name of belonging. Just as Maslow (1943) said, people are motivated by the need to be a part of something; a need that applies to relationships. As they develop, teens may struggle with finding a place in society. Adding the perception of varied and conflicting social media contexts during identity formation contributes to a recipe for influence on development. There is no absolute on how an adolescent perceives social media during the age of egocentrism. In some respects, social media has turned the imaginary audience real, just as for some the fable has become collective. This is particularly true if social media posts are made in an attempt to belong. The trick is to temper the need for belonging with the need to develop individuality.

It is entirely possible that the public venue and converging cultures adolescents involve in their daily lives as they surf the web cause digital stress by challenging “a teens’ ability to meaningfully portray the nuances of who they are to different and conflicting audiences (Boyd, 2014, p. 47). Dweck (2016) spoke of mindset, making the case that a growth mindset adds value to an individual’s life. “The growth mindset allows people to value what they’re doing *regardless of the outcome*” (p. 48). Most assuredly, this type of outlook can contribute greatly to a teen’s development by influencing how he or she handles daily life and time on social media. Advocating for the cultivation of a growth mindset is another way to help a teen establish the skills and resources to flourish by making wise choices or, when necessary, working to overcome a less than favorable outcome.

Where Do I Belong?

Searching for belonging can be construed as an internal developmental journey or as a trip towards connection with others. Part of an internal journey could be the outward act of

building identity on social media. In fact, Turkle (2015) found that youth gravitate to the digital world to experiment with identity work. “The ability to understand how context, audience, and identity intersect is one of the central challenges people face in learning how to navigate social media” (Boyd, 2014, p. 30). Over time the way adolescents use technology has evolved, but the fact that “virtual space is a place to explore the self” (Turkle, 2015, p. 6) has stayed the same. An internal journey that includes identity work performed on social media comes with connectivity to the online community, which means it most likely includes connectivity to online reciprocal relationships.

After asking where do I belong, the next question might be where does social media belong in the lives of active participants? A positive reaction to social media use is the ability to give “identities” a trial run. On the flip side, a deterrent is the worry of identity being held at bay due to fear of being judged or bullied. Either way, it can be said that the desire for belonging motivates the behavior (Maslow, 1987) in either direction. Achieving a sense of belonging is a positive outcome capable of helping a teen to thrive. The problem comes when an individual continues to feel as if they don’t belong, which keeps them searching for connection, potentially at the expense of meeting higher level needs. Whether it be constant monitoring of social media due to fear or fixation, or another reason, searching for a sense of belonging online can be a distraction from the age appropriate tasks of development.

Adult perceptions can affect adolescents’ thoughts and experiences such that it leads to the question: Do adults, at times, project stress on adolescents, thinking from the experience of growing up in an earlier off-line time? Teenage digital natives are growing up in a different era, one that doesn’t include a period of life without devices and online networks; the normal adolescent stressor of trying to find one’s place is magnified on and complicated by social media.

Back in the day, my friends and I had private conversations and shared events that united us. When we re-hashed them to get a chuckle, we called them inside jokes. Inside jokes and shared experiences were discussed among a close group of friends where belonging was secure for its members. Now, these intimate moments are likely posted on the world wide web for a wider audience to see. As an adult, the world I describe and prescribe may look very different from the one in which a current teenager exists, especially when I am privy to a social media post that is an inside joke among a group of adolescent friends. Whether or not I am the intended audience or part of the story, I can see a public post and it has the power to influence my relationships with the youth in my life. After all, I, as a parent and educator, am setting expectations for another while that individual is wanting to follow his or her own path. While this does not necessarily result in overwhelming stress in every instance, a certain level of stress is inherent in any situation where one person is attempting to control an aspect of another's journey. Social media adds an extra layer of complexity to this realization.

Boyd (2014) discussed context collapse that “occurs when people are forced to grapple simultaneously with otherwise unrelated social contexts that are rooted in different norms and seemingly demand different social responses” (p. 31). This happens in the real, non-virtual world, but presents with distinct challenges in the virtual world because the audience is not visible and grows more quickly and easily without one's involvement. Recall the study (Oeldorf-Hirsch, Birnholtz, & Hancock, 2017) that investigated embarrassment and found a response determinant was the “nature of the audience,” which “needs only to be imagined, not present” (p. 97). This remark reinforces that the audience is as it is perceived by an individual, imagined or real. Further exploration on how perception influences development for a teen is

important if the way in which a communication is perceived impacts an adolescent's sense of belonging within the peer group or beyond.

A potential byproduct to explore is the concerning prospect that the public nature of social media results in an individual's feeling as if he or she has no safe haven. Sadly, I believe further research will show that the long-reaching arm of technology makes many people feel as if they have no place to seek refuge from its storm. Due to the "global" nature of social media – in the home, at school, on the streets – there is no escaping it, social media follows an individual anywhere and everywhere. But what do people expect? Educator and mother Jessica Lahey (2015) suggested, "the social conflicts of childhood are all part of our education in human relationships" (p. 97). The role each relationship plays can be positive, negative, or a combination of both. Bronfenbrenner (1979) indicated a smoother developmental transition is an affirmative response to strength through connection, reinforcing the belief that nurturing relationships and positive regard are instrumental in life (Corey, 2013). Adolescents need to understand that while they seek to belong, they also need to find balance, which may include making choices such as one that deals with the role of social media.

What Do We Mean To Each Other?

Turkle (2015) raised issue with a resulting loss of empathy due to missing opportunity for eye contact, listening, and paying direct attention to others. Admitting technology has value, she nevertheless wanted to caution people not to fall in to a false sense of connectedness when the same social media has the power to divide. She encouraged developing online and in-person communication and conversation skills in our youth so that they develop empathy. Promoting well-being as central to life satisfaction, the website of the Centers for Disease Control and

Prevention (2013) states that “in general, well-being is dependent upon good health, positive social relationships, and availability and access to basic resources”. Although every aspect of this scenario is important, relationships stand out. In pursuit of a goal to foster healthy teen development that promotes compassion (for self and others), it is imperative to understand the ways in which communication via social media changes how a teen interacts with friends and family so that the quality of adult guidance Vygotsky (1930) pointed to in his Social Constructivist Theory can be put in place.

From middle childhood to and through adolescence children base their friendships on shared interests and reciprocity while moving towards a deepening of the peer bond through increased commitment and intimacy (Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). Cingel, Krcmar, and Olsen (2015) explained that teens stay active on social media to remain special and important. “To exist in digital space is to exist in peer culture, especially for teens” (Collier, 2014, pp. 253-4). Pre- to early adolescence is marked by a decline in self-esteem as this age group worries about what their peers think of them. Later, that worry trends downward as young people align their behavior with their personal belief system while thinking less about how others see them and becoming more in tune with the reality of their future (Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). While steps and missteps during this transitional period can impact development, healthy connections with peers can be pivotal in redirecting a negative pattern toward a more positive outcome.

Teen drama has the potential to be amplified by social media (Boyd, 2014). Defined as “performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media”, teen drama “does not automatically position anyone as either a target or an abuser” (p. 138). Englander (2013) differentiated bullying from gateway behaviors with the established criteria of a power imbalance, repeated incidents, and intention. Boyd (2014)

asserted that “gossip, good and bad, helps people broker social status” (p. 145). Sharing a general admission about technology, Turkle (2015) reflected: “From the early days, I saw that computers offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship and then, as the programs got really good, the illusion of friendship without the demands of intimacy” (p. 7). Learning how to balance the influence of social media on peer relationships is a skill for a teen to add to his or her repertoire, especially considering that intimacy leading to adult generativity, by its very nature, evolves through face-to-face contacts. An important point to remember is that when it comes to teen drama, intention and perception count.

An area that needs further exploration is determining how fear of judgment and/or bullying influences peer interactions. Peers rely on one another for support, but it is important for them to remember they are all developing the skills necessary to cope in positive ways (Boyd, 2014). It is clear that outside influence exists in the pursuit of belonging inherent in the age and life of the American teen. Boyd (2014) determined that, “Although the data suggests otherwise, the assumption among many parents and journalists is that social media radically increases bullying” (p. 130). This data may be encouraging, but it doesn’t exorcise the potential for underlying worry that could show itself as anxiousness or stress in a teen who wants to fit in and be a part of a collective whole, but is unsure of how to act or react on social media.

We envision the family unit as a group of people, yet there is another pertinent member of most households today: technology. Back in the days before technology, Marcia (1966) reminded us that an adolescent’s identity work involved parental influence. For parents, the balance waivers between keeping adolescent children in the nest “safe” and helping them learn important skills to enable healthy development and success. Social media use strikes at this balance from all directions. Collier (2014) cautioned against sheltering your teen from online

activity when she discussed juvenoia, the term coined to describe excessive fear over society's progress and the resultant social influence. For example, I know a couple who got divorced, stating their biggest argument was about the children's use of technology; the mother felt the kids should be online most of time because it kept them at home safe while the father felt they were missing out on all the world had to offer by being connected to their social/virtual networking devices. While I may not believe that was all that severed their matrimonial bond, it is a difficult subject to address from polar opposite sides.

“Perceived collective family efficacy is defined as members' beliefs in the capabilities of their family to work together to promote each other's development and well-being, maintain beneficial ties to extrafamilial systems, and exhibit resilience to adversity” (Bandura, Caprara, Barbaranelli, Regalia, & Scabini, 2011, p. 424). Research showed that “family efficacy contributes to the quality of family functioning and family satisfaction” (p. 441), which can be instrumental in modeling appropriate behavior by allowing adolescents an opportunity to help shape “collaborative family processes” (p. 426), and inferring the benefits of self-efficacy. Creating a mutually caring environment in the home where members feel supported and confident enough to engage in and act on human agency lends itself to movement in a positive direction.

Courtois et al. (2011) addressed family rules with a discussion of bedroom culture as it pertains to media use, discussing the varied degree of freedom that exists among teens. This study found that when teens must access media in a family common area or have access to fewer devices, that “limitation has a profound impact on the range of experiences that can be derived from media consumption” (pp. 416-417). “The higher the number of available devices and the more these devices are located in private spaces, the larger the chances of making up

autonomous media consumption” (p. 417). As with most options, there are positives and negatives to either media consumption environment. The idea of interdependence can help promote connection while at the same time encouraging a teen to learn healthy tools and set proper limits on social media viewing and participation.

Devices connect people to favorable social and educational means, but parents must be aware that tech-distracted parenting, “can look and feel to a child like having a narcissistic parent or an emotionally absent, psychologically neglectful one” (Steiner-Adair, 2013, p. 16). When it comes to technology, adults not only need to model appropriate behavior, but also to remember *not* to relinquish their parental role. Lamia (2015.) called it passive neglect. Turkle (2015) described a cycle of both adult and teen being distracted by their own technology yet being exasperated when the other falls victim to the same. While technology, including social media use, “can replace us as the source of values, information, context, community, and coaching in our children’s lives” (p. 18), it is not able to provide human relational aspects that promote youth development. It does not provide the touch of a human hug, reflection off a human tear, or strength of a bond between loved ones.

Being the adult in the life of an adolescent requires understanding of the underlying truth that teens are often reluctant to come to parents or other adults with concerns about something they see, witness, or experience on the internet due to the fear they will be viewed differently or even punished (Livingstone, 2014). Boyd (2014) stated, “teens are blamed for not thinking while adults assert the right to define the context in which young people interact. They take content out of context to interpret it through the lens of adults’ values and feel as though they have the right to shame youth because that content was available in the first place. In doing so, they ignore teens’ privacy while undermining their struggles to manage their identity” (p. 51).

This behavioral sequence has the potential to impose a limit on the developmentally appropriate separation from parents, and it isn't always the result of the teens thoughts, actions, or behavior. A thoughtful approach is to remember that each teen has a unique - personality, perception, situation, experience, etc. – and to consider social media and technology to be part of a relationship existing within the microsystem. This implies reciprocity and also the potential for healthy, harmful, or neutral influence. Future research should explore the possibility that the always on – always accessible social media culture results in teens' difficulty in achieving age appropriate separation from parents and/or guardians.

The Game of Risk

The game Risk was popular in the 1970's. The goal was world domination, and a player had to expose him or herself to risk to win. One of the strategies was to form alliances with the other players; bonds that furthered shared vulnerability for a stake at victory. My cousin was nuts about Risk, asking us to play long rounds of the game day in and day out for what seemed like forever but was probably a year or two at best. The concept of the game is not unlike the mindset of a teen when it comes to actual risk. Unfortunately, my Risk-loving cousin took a lot of risk but didn't win in the end. His excessive substance use that began in early adolescence paved the way for him to begin his residency in a nursing home at age 35. During the teen years, peer pressure has strong influence over most teens. Exposure to risk becomes a major concern for this age group as it can severely inhibit positive development. While many human behavior theories focus on problems often equated to the age group, it is important to express that most teens “manage to navigate the hazardous terrain without developing serious personal problems” (Bandura, 1997, p. 177). Offering knowledge that creates awareness assists teens in navigating the unknown terrain of youth and life.

Understanding brain development and response can lead to emotional and relational improvements (Siegel, 2013), which aid overall well-being. Brain development research findings emphasize context in determining how an adolescent reacts to a task or situation. “Hot tasks are those that require balancing risks and potential rewards in high-stakes situations” (Fine & Sung, 2014, p. 523); these moments can cause a delay in response that can result in a negative outcome. Fine and Sung’s research (2014) discussed Social Cognitive Theory (SCT) – using observation and reflection to learn (Bandura, 1997) - as a mode for adapting behaviors and building skills to help overcome the biological deficits arising for teenagers, and to contribute to brain health. Adolescence is an excellent time to raise awareness of brain health and to develop habits that demonstrate human agency and relate to the goal of my research: advancing adolescent awareness to the potential influence digital stress from social media can exert over his or her relationships in hopes that understanding will help facilitate healthy relationships and positive development.

The penchant for risky behavior is also the result of underdeveloped executive skills in young people. “Around puberty, the teen brain begins to undergo major changes, many of which will not be completed until the early to mid-20’s” (Chamberlain, 2009, p. 21). Because of this ongoing brain development, young people have difficulty reading other people’s emotions and managing their own. Therefore, it is a benefit to spend time honing decision-making skills, which, in turn, will lead to a better ability in perceiving and considering risk and reward (Chamberlain, 2009). These brain and behavior changes are inclusive of executive function, adding another layer to development and influence for adolescents.

The age-old fight-or-flight response to stress affects teens; fight can appear as aggression with flight manifesting as anxiety (Willard, 2016). When a pattern of fight-or-flight persists, the

adolescent brain can “become rewired for reactivity, making it hard for them to access their own wisdom or think clearly” (p. 12). When not thinking clearly, someone is more likely to post impulsively on social media. This scenario creates yet another moment of exposure to the possibility of unintended consequences, as sadly, the present day seems to represent a world short on empathic displays and long on critical statements. In the bigger picture, the hope is to offer information and inspiration to minimize the antagonistic response common in these days. Fostering a growth mindset (Dweck, 2016) and creating opportune moments to promote the skills taught through SCT (Bandura, 1997) make a positive mark on development.

One aspect of peer friendship is peer pressure; conformity and persuasion often result from this influence. Peer pressure can be based on real or perceived influence by friends and can lead to risky behavior, especially for middle school students due to their evolving cognitive abilities (Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). In their study of social influence, Ojanen, Sijtsema, and Rambaran (2013) recognized peer influence as a key factor shifting middle school students towards similarity over time. When peer pressure leads to conformity it can leave an individual “in a state of tension between values associated with individuality and values associated with conformity” (Aronson, 2008, p. 14). In cases where peer pressure is negative, the combination of egocentrism and the tendency to conform may result in poor decision-making and participation in risky behaviors for this age group (Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). Once again, the need is apparent. On or off social media, the subject of peer pressure and conformity are met with stress.

We think of risk as big negative actions taken by a party, but at times just being out there on social media can be too much exposure. Boyd (2014) explained that, “mass public shaming is a byproduct of widespread internet attention and networked distribution” (p. 146). And, “how

other teens and celebrities use technologies to negotiate attention sets the stage for what teens understand as normal” (p. 148). With this norm-setting in mind, it makes it easier to see that under the stress of belonging, teens (or people in general) take action or make statements on social media in an effort to be seen and to belong. If the reaction is an unintended negative response, the result can leave a person with digital stress.

We live in a risk-averse culture (Livingstone, 2014), which means that avoidance may be practiced. However, avoidance isn’t always realistic and, in an effort to limit risk, may result in the burden of stress. Rabe (2007) suggested creating environments that encourage thinking and reward healthy risk taking to innovate people. Encouraging healthy risk and positive innovation fosters development of new ideas, which can minimize the limitations of conformity. Knowing that a social media post can hurt you (or another) now and later may motivate an individual to act in ways that will improve outcomes. A helpful perspective to remember is that play isn’t just for children. It may look different from young to old, but play is a positive part of life that can help us explore risk *and* opportunity.

That’s How They Do It On TV

Have you seen the commercial on television where the family sits down for dinner and the mother turns off their Wi-Fi connection with a tap to her smartphone? It seems a warm and witty way of demonstrating a contemporary family with modern age distractions. But if this is supposed to sell family togetherness, it falls short in my eyes. Bothered by the fact that the ad puts the behavior responsibility on someone or something else, it seems a better message would be to see a family gather after being considerate enough to put their phones down in another room before heading to the table.

Media's behavior and influence existed long before the internet. As a child and teen during the 1970's and early 80's, I lived in an era when youth rode bikes delivering newspapers to area homes that had three TV channels, all of which showed both the local and national news. On some evenings, my family would watch an hour or two of shows, together. The TV Guide was a popular read, particularly when the time came to monitor the scheduling of the Christmas specials (after all, if you missed them you had to wait a whole other year). Popular music and sports games brought families to the radio, and there were magazines, some covering celebrities but more fell under the category of educational and informative publications.

As a young child, I wanted to live on the prairie like Laura Ingalls, be part of a big crazy mixed up family like the Brady Bunch, or at least drive around on a colorfully painted bus with my singing family like the Partridge's. Unfortunately, there were no log cabins or prairies in my hometown, and my small but solid two kid – two parent family could not carry a tune; but that didn't stop the shows from influencing me and my relationships. Through play, we became the Ingalls' girls at school or the large singing family on the bus. For me and my playmates, these shows contained the power of persuasion. According to Aronson (2008), "even when communicators are not making a direct attempt to sell us something, they can succeed in influencing the way we look at the world and the way we respond to important events in our lives" (p. 61); "this influence can be very subtle indeed, even unintentional" (p. 61). Many times, viewing these shows convinced viewers to change how they looked and behaved. Along with the writers, producers, and actors, these shows held the power to make us feel good or bad about how we were behaving or what we were doing at the time.

Playing a significant role in the socialization of adolescents, "media content lubricates conversation and play" (Lim, 2015, pp. 322). Peers keep on top of current trends to be relevant

and stay connected; this includes music, shows, and social media viewing. Media influence still exists in the present day, and it seems magnified by the speed and reach offered by technology. I believe this reaffirms the placement of social media closer to the individual in Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Model (1979) thus stronger in influence, while intersecting the ideology on belonging that Maslow (1987) shares through his Motivational Model. Just as there is psychology behind advertising, it exists behind other forms of media too. Social media is no exception. For possible consideration comes the idea of looking at psychological well-being as a routine health mode (versus the negative connotation of a pathological approach). This thought process can increase the focus on a more humane approach where and emphasis on compassion and self-compassion helps smooth the path to more positive communication and interaction with others.

So, How Do You Do It In Real Life

Calling them "conference calls", my 15-year-old son and his friends connect each night by sharing a group conversation on their phones. After a coworker acted astounded by the fact that they spoke to one another over the phone, I conducted informal polling among teenage-parenting coworkers. Apparently, this call pattern is not the norm. My coworkers expressed approval of the old-fashioned party line connection, which led me to ask the question: is our positive response the result of a feeling of comfort based on our experience growing up? Adolescents are digital natives, not us. In a way, it is interesting to recollect what it was like when we grew up. How did we communicate back then? With a cord tethering us to the wall! Nowadays, we are still tethered to our devices, overseeing our accounts in whatever pattern/habit we have created, and what is determined to be the big difference is the fact that we can't just leave them at home. Basically, one reason people find it difficult to disconnect is because the

device is almost always right there with them, in hand even. Since adults seem unable to disconnect, the expectation that teens do so seems absurd.

In most cases, it would be hypocritical, illogical, and futile for an adult to tell a teen to ditch the technology. To be effective, an adult can provide information, model appropriate behavior, offer guidance, and create opportunity for other means of connection. In his Social Ecological Model, Bronfenbrenner (1979) viewed change as possible, recognized the role of history in development, and realized that a search for understanding should take the diversity of people, relationships, and surroundings into consideration (Woolfolk & Perry, 2012). Building on the work of Maslow (1943), Bandura (1997) expanded the idea of development stating, “self-efficacy theory acknowledges the diversity of human capabilities” (p. 36) and is “concerned not only with the exercise of control over action but also with the self-regulation of thought processes, motivation, and affective and physiological states” (p. 36). Development and mastery of self-efficacy is pivotal in an adolescent’s present time and future. Being aware of the benefits can help motivate a teen to increase efforts toward achieving positive development.

Turkle (2017) explained that while “today’s adolescents have no less need than those of previous generations to learn empathic skills, to think about their values and identity, and to manage and express feelings” (p. 172), the always-on environment of today discourages the opportunity to do so. In fact, during a gathering with students Turkle (2017) discovered the audience was not answering her question, which asked when they last spent time uninterrupted, because they were anticipating the next interruption. While the example Turkle shared of anticipation does not directly show a decrease in empathy, it demonstrates the lack of focus and attention that seems to present challenges in the ability to be empathic. Exploring self-compassion and resilience during the period of identity formation, Neff and McGehee (2010)

found that “self-compassion was strongly associated with well-being among adolescents as well as adults” (p. 225). Compassion for self is often viewed as a pre-cursor to compassion for others. An adolescent that becomes adept at self-compassion while young will have a significant opportunity to not only perpetuate that healthy form of self-care across the lifespan, but also to share the wealth in the form of empathy and compassion for others.

Developing Emotional Intelligence (EI) benefits adolescents as they continue to work towards greater independence and responsibility while pursuing connection and relationship. EI is the combined skill of knowing and managing emotions while having the ability to self-motivate, recognize emotions, and handle relationships (Goleman, 1995). To develop EI capabilities and strength, individual’s not only to depend on themselves for personal development but also to seek out and nourish relationships that advocate growth and connection at both the individual and community level (Wall, 2007). In addition to EI, Goleman is also co-founder of the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning, or CASEL. The collaborative defines social emotional learning (SEL, 2016) as:

The process through which children and adults acquire and effectively apply the knowledge, attitudes, and skills necessary to understand and manage emotions, set and achieve positive goals, feel and show empathy for others, establish and maintain positive relationships, and make responsible decisions. (p. 8)

CASEL indicates that SEL is comprised of five core competencies: self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision-making (SEL, 2016). SEL can be used informally in situations in which behavior is represented as a model, and it also has a basis on most formal educational systems. Turkle (2015) wrote, “conversations with a

good teacher communicate that learning isn't all about the answers. It's about what the answers mean" (p. 8). Guiding adolescents to develop their thinking skills and themselves is key in promoting the awareness and self-efficacy necessary to develop high regard for self and others. This type of learning is crucial in connecting with teens in a manner that creates opportunity to offer tools and resources to share.

Gee (2017) shared that experiences shape an individual's framework and at times when it clashes with that of another proposes reflective mitigation in an effort to move forward. This concept is indicative of a growth mindset (Dweck, 2016). In attempting to foster development in pursuit of goals expressed here and beyond, it helps to view self-efficacy as a dual-purpose word – educating for self-efficacy and using self-efficacy to educate oneself. Vygotsky (1930) talked of the zone of proximal development to explain how people with more knowledge can serve as mentors or role models for another. The allure of this perspective is that it prioritizes an adolescent's need to establish self-efficacy to further his or her personal growth and development. Sharing knowledge, offering guidance, and modeling healthy behavior for observation are some of the key ways adults can help adolescents reach for their own identity.

In addition, being mindful should be a part of the front line against digital stress, providing a level of awareness that will be helpful during adolescence and across the lifespan. Mindfulness can reduce stress while also helping to create a healthier body, mind, and brain (Willard, 2016). When the body is under stress, it acts to attain homeostasis (McEwen & Lasley, 2002). Being alert to this need for balance is important in helping adolescents to begin taking responsibility for personal care and well-being, while it also has a broader reach on bettering the individual's relationships and environments. Remembering the device free family dinner ad, if the concept of wanting to spend time together isn't enough, how about the rules of society

regarding the fact that it is not polite to multitask at the table? Instead of demanding adherence to a shut-down rule perceived as negative, adults can help adolescents find the value and reward in connectedness, to develop a well of empathy, and to hold a positive regard for common manners. This is just one possible solution following a thought process that we deserve kindness as do others.

Which Way Do We Go?

What do you want to be when you grow up? This is a light-hearted question we ask of cute little children and then rarely bring it up again until expecting, even demanding, a real answer for it from a high schooler. But what about the in between years? Does it have value in giving it to an early adolescent to ponder? Can adults do that without adding stress, and instead allow them to dream of their potential, or I daresay dream out loud? These questions seem to suggest conversation that can build and strengthen a teen, offering guidance and opportunity for reflection, which is supposed to increase thinking and develop decision-making skills. In what is rarely an all-or-nothing world, this is about offering knowledge to better understand and make good choices. When it comes to differing contexts, understanding expedites healthy choices. Instead of viewing different online personas created by an adolescent as a pathology of multiple identities, we can link it to a varied and ever-changing identity quest that shifts throughout the lifespan. Recall one of the great mysteries of life to be what will become of me in the future. The most helpful and hopeful time is when this mystery leads to excitement for the unknown potential.

On the other side of the equation, we need to do better for the individuals that meet this unknown fearful and despondent. Maslow (1943) maintained that an individual's inability to develop self-esteem resulted in that person feeling weak, helpless, and inferior. Combined with

his belief that maladjustment results from obstruction of the path to love and belonging, it becomes clear why he promoted the meeting of such needs. Belonging to different groups and having different areas of expertise to share with like-minded people, or even those who haven't a clue on the subject, can build self-esteem and promote a deeper level of thinking that is reinforced through sharing of interest and possibly even knowledge gained from that experience.

SCT proposes the individual "is just as much an agent when one is reflecting on one's experiences and exerting self-influences as when one is executing courses of action" (Bandura, 1997, p. 5). In this theory, Bandura (1997) presented human agency as operating within a triadic reciprocal causation where the relationships between three classified domains – behavior, internal personal factors, and the external environment – interact and influence each other. By advocating for the reciprocal nature of the individual's level of function as both a producer and product of his or her environment (Pajares, 2004), the case for developing self-efficacy is bolstered. Offering guidance and room for exploration and development are essential if we want to offer teens' healthy development and bright opportunity. The delicate balance of finding autonomy while keeping connected is prominent at this stage of life, both on and off social media.

Focusing on brain health, Nussbaum (2015) shared his belief "that a change in behavior requires two factors: First, a person needs to understand why change is necessary. Second, the change needs to be personal" (p. 32). Taking care of the brain and developing self-efficacy go hand in hand during the adolescent growth period and search for identity. Empowering a teen to take care of both body and mind not only helps them during their transitions to and from adolescence, but also has the power to enhance the years of adulthood to follow. The five Social Emotional Learning (SEL, 2016) competencies embody the development of coping skills, which

point a person in the direction of a deepening level of awareness. Being mindful and aware gives a teen the opportunity to make better choices. Asking the following questions can help lead an individual in the right direction: Is it helpful, is it stressful, is it necessary?

Another key facet relates to audience, imaginary or real. Boyd (2014) wrote about the importance of knowing your intended audience, bringing to mind the question of, what audience should they choose? My goal is to share information, to foster positive development among teens thereby raising awareness and reducing digital stress. Research tells me that adolescents need to develop their skill set to not only advocate on a personal level, but also to develop compassion for themselves and others. Being a mother allows me to see that while adults can take on the role of mentor or guide, ultimately each adolescent is responsible for his or her own behavior. Being a person makes me want the world to be filled with individuals loaded with good intentions and the desire to share good will. Being a facilitator, I wish to develop solutions supporting humanity.

Solutions: Downloading Humanity

I have a confession to make. During this past election cycle, I “unfollowed” a great number of people on social media. My action was not aimed at people who didn’t agree with me; in contrast, it was actually quite a bipartisan effort. I simply could not tolerate people spewing hate and ill-will at one another, their very own friends and family members, because they didn’t agree with them. Talk about fracturing an individual’s sense of belonging. I witnessed an adult female “like” a comment that not only publicly shamed her baby brother, but also accused him of behaving atrociously when all he posted was he hoped they could all agree to disagree on the political candidates in order to maintain a strong sense of family. My main point is that these are adults I am talking about here, and if they can’t handle communicating and

treating others kindly, what is our expectation for future generations? Learn what not to do? We certainly don't always model appropriate behavior.

This is where my plan begins. My goal is to provide guidance and information in support of adolescents. These efforts are intended to increase awareness and knowledge, and to decrease digital stress. The projected outcome is facilitation of healthier relationships – between a teen and social media, and among others within his or her circle of friends and family. While my focus and purpose for this thesis work addresses the influence digital stress has on the shifting relationships of adolescence, it should be known that the benefits of my plan have the potential to be more far-reaching. With that in mind, my work is a piece of a bigger puzzle, a bigger plan that incorporates knowledge gained in my quest to offer information and resources to foster healthy development. The overarching goal is to promote the use of social media in a most humane way for the individual and for his or her interactions with others.

By exploring the topic directly through interview, survey, and observation, I hope to gain data and insights on the influences. It will be important for me to review the works of others in combination with my own research, so that I can fully reflect on my own work against that of other theorists and researchers. Drawing from similar work and other investigatory endeavors will enhance my ability to cultivate a response to share with my target audience in a most effective manner. The integrative nature of my thesis work will include a presentation model that is intent on starting a conversation with parents and adults who share their lives with teens. I propose to share knowledge in hopes an exchange will occur that uncovers further questions, concerns, insights, and solutions. I believe it is important to explore this topic with adults as we can help chart the course by exploring what we think teen digital natives might be missing with an understanding that extends beyond a technology free adolescence to developmental work.

It is my hope that my thesis will lay the foundation for future work, an eventual book promulgating my desire to foster a kinder, gentler way of treating ourselves and others both online and off-line. In preparation for that book, my integrative thesis project will include the creation of a website that shares research results and pertinent information with adolescents. The concept is to offer them a place that is both reflective and interactive. The preliminary stages, as part of my integrative project, will include a presentation of material that will allow teens to gain knowledge in the hopes it will have a reflective quality that helps them as they set goals, make choices, and travel through development. By fostering healthy development, it is my hope that I will minimize any negative influences from digital stress.

CONCLUSION

A basic tenet of guiding adolescents towards a full and quality life should include this formidable goal: gaining self-efficacy. An exploration of interconnected ideas – health, developmental, and educational research – demonstrates the reason positive youth development benefits from an understanding of relational and environmental impacts, and establishes why promoting self-efficacy is imperative. Investigating the options and opportunities that exist surrounding social media helps to offer up information that has the potential of enhancing the development and relationships of teens. The exact route may not be mapped out, but the ability to find a/the way that works for an adolescent can be strengthened.

This is not a case in which going to extremes applies; social media is not going away. Realistically, social media is not all bad. However, it requires a level of awareness and understanding to facilitate better choices. Early adolescence is a good place to start sharing

knowledge in pursuit of stronger choices. Bronfenbrenner (1979) described development as “a lasting change in the way in which a person perceived and deals with his environment” (p. 3). Because his model asserts that influence within the system is reciprocal (Woolfolk & Perry, 2012), he emphasized the importance of relationships. Viewing the adolescent as the center of the model easily demonstrates how perception and actions are pivotal to his or her development. Understanding relational and environmental influences that help define individuals infers the role ecology plays on identity formation. “Culture, family, school, work, church, and community are the contexts that are identified as the major institutions of socialization for identity development” (Pajares, 2004, p. 237); add social media to this list. When adolescents have the good fortune of feeling safe at home and elsewhere, they “feel comfortable to more fully explore their identity options” (p. 240). This comfort indicates the importance of having a safe haven as it gives them a secure place of support from which to engage in more robust exploration, allowing them to reap the benefits of a stronger identity.

The true question should not be whether digital stress from social media influences the shifting relationships of adolescence, it is the how, when, and why of how to help adolescents deal with the complexities of social media that need to be answered. Maslow’s (1987) supposition about deficiency needs makes sense for this age group that is on a quest for belonging and connection, factors that influence an individual’s development. By inference I can postulate the significance of social media use, but further research is warranted to examine the direct influences of social media participation on the shifting relationships of adolescence. Finding your identity and figuring out what you think are pivotal in finding your place in the world. I hope to play a supportive role in helping adolescents on this journey.

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