

## SCIENCE

# Concerns over kids' screen-time a modern-day “moral panic”, says study

By Rich Haridy  
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*Worries over the effect of screen-time on children may be a modern example of the age-old "kids these days" effect, where an older generation perceives a decline in certain characteristics of a younger generation* [SashaKhalabuzar/Depositphotos](#)

A new study has concluded young people today rate similarly on interpersonal skills compared to those who grew up in the 1990s. The research suggests smartphones, screen-time, and social media have not negatively affected kids' social skills, and modern concerns

over the impact of screen-time recalls past “moral panics” over the effect of new technology on children.

Several years ago Douglas Downey was enjoying a meal at a pizza restaurant with his son Nick. Downey, a sociology professor at Ohio State University, began a classic “kids these days” rant, suggesting the current young generation were suffering a decline in social skills due to the increase in time spent staring at screens.

“I started explaining to him how terrible his generation was in terms of their social skills, probably because of how much time they spent looking at screens,” says Downey, explaining the origins of his new study. “Nick asked me how I knew that. And when I checked there really wasn’t any solid evidence.”

Downey’s research, conducted with Benjamin Gibbs from Brigham Young University, examined data from The [Early Childhood Longitudinal Study](#) (ECLS). This ongoing research project, conducted by the US Department of Education, follows different cohorts of children from kindergarten to fifth grade, with teacher assessments every year.

Downey and Gibbs set out to compare two cohorts, a group of children starting kindergarten in 1998 and another beginning kindergarten in 2010. The research was looking to evaluate the differences in social skills between the two groups of children across the subsequent six years of data for each cohort.

For the purposes of the study, the duo defined social skills as, “the ability to successfully negotiate the expectations of others in social interactions.” Teachers’ ratings of children’s interactions with their peers was the primary measure taken from the ECLS data.

Ultimately, the researchers found no difference in social skills between the 1998 and 2010 cohorts. From kindergarten to fifth grade, both cohorts displayed similar development. The only noticeably different datapoint, Downey notes, was a slight decrease in social skills for children with very frequent use of online gaming and social media.

“But even that was a pretty small effect,” says Downey. “Overall, we found very little

evidence that the time spent on screens was hurting social skills for most children.”

Of course, the researchers are well aware of their study’s limitations, particularly in the abstract nature of classifying a child’s social skills, something sociologists consider a conceptually broad term. Evaluating a child’s face-to-face interactions is admittedly only one subset of developing social skills, however, Downey does suggest that considering the profound technological changes that differentiate the 1998 and 2010 cohorts, it is significant there were no major differences detected in social development.

“There is a tendency for every generation at my age to start to have concerns about the younger generation,” Downey says. “It is an old story. The introduction of telephones, automobiles, radio all led to moral panic among adults of the time because the technology allowed children to enjoy more autonomy. Fears over screen-based technology likely represent the most recent panic in response to technological change.”

## **The "kids these days" effect**

Downey’s research seems to effectively encapsulate a very modern example of what has been dubbed the "kids these days" effect. [A recent study](#) led by UC Santa Barbara psychological scientist John Protzko set out to empirically investigate this phenomena, which he suggests has been around for thousands of years.

“Humanity has been lodging the same complaints against ‘kids these days’ for at least 2,600 years,” Protzko [said late last year](#). “There is a psychological or mental trick that happens that makes it appear to each generation that the subsequent generations are objectively in decline, even though they’re not. And because it’s built into the way the mind works, each generation experiences it over and over again.”

Protzko, along with colleague Jonathan Schooler, conducted a series of different experiments to examine whether particular personal traits influence how strongly someone denigrates the younger generation. The results suggested this trait-specific hypothesis to be correct.

“The more you respect authority as an adult, the more you think kids no longer respect their elders,” explained Protzko, “... the smarter you are, the more you think kids these days are getting dumber. And people who are well-read tend to think that kids these days no longer like to read.”

Protzko says underpinning the “kids these days” effect is something memory researchers call “presentism.” This is our tendency to project our current self onto the memories of our younger self. This tendency also extends past our subjective perception of ourself, and onto our peers, meaning an older person who enjoys reading will not only remember themselves enjoying reading as a child, but feel all children of their generation enjoyed reading as much as they did.

“It’s a memory tic – you take what you presently are and you impose that on your memories,” said Protzko. “It’s why the ‘decline’ seems so obvious to us. We have little objective evidence about what children were like, and certainly no personal objective evidence. All we have is our memory to rely on, and the biases that come with it.”

## **Kids these days, in the 21st century**

The dramatic technological advances that have taken place over the past couple of decades present perhaps one of the more significant single generational fissures ever seen. The sheer prevalence of screens in modern life today results in a childhood decidedly alien to older adults, and as Downey suggests, a nostalgia for one’s own childhood often leads to a sense that something is lost in a new generation.

“The historical commonalities in response to new technology are difficult to ignore – parents recall their own childhoods with nostalgia, worry about the addictive nature of new media, and complain that children do not play out-side or engage their imaginations enough,” Downey and Gibbs write in the new study. “Resistance to new technologies tends to be strong initially but eventually fades as the technology becomes embedded in everyday life. This historical recognition alerts us to the possibility that cell phones and computer usage may inspire the latest manifestation of parental anxiety regarding changes in children’s autonomy.”



The duo are clear in noting this kind of "kids these days" effect does not preclude the possibility that modern concerns over the negative effects of technology on children could be legitimate. However, this new study suggests our long-held bias against younger generations makes it all the more important to rely on empirical, data-driven investigations to better understand exactly what kind of effect screen-time and modern technologies are actually having on children.

While Downey's current research has only focused on face-to-face social skills in children, he says digital social skills are an entirely new frontier and worth investigating in future research. In fact, Downey says good social relationships in the 21st century may fundamentally require a degree of screen-based literacy, and it could be detrimental for a child to lack those modern skills.

"You have to know how to communicate by email, on Facebook and Twitter, as well as face-to-face," says Downey. "We just looked at face-to-face social skills in this study, but future studies should look at digital social skills as well."

The new research was published in the *American Journal of Sociology*.

Source: [Ohio State University](#)



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Rich has written for a number of online and print publications over the last decade while also acting as film critic for several radio broadcasters and podcasts. His interests focus on psychedelic science, new media, and science oddities. Rich completed his Masters degree in the Arts back in 2013 before joining New Atlas in 2016.