Helping kids navigate the digital world together

EDITORIAL

The scene inside Almonte District High School should give every parent pause, as described in our recent story 'Curious parents join kids digital health discussion.' Teenagers on a big screen—sometimes tearful, always honest—spoke directly to the camera about their lives online: the pressures, the comparisons, the anxiety. In the audience, parents watched, many recognizing echoes of conversations that have played out at their own kitchen tables, or perhaps realizing those conversations haven't happened at all.

The documentary Screenagers: The Next Chapter doesn't argue that technology is inherently bad. That's an easy conclusion—and a lazy one. Instead, it offers something far more useful: a path forward. The message is not to pull the plug on devices, but to plug in as parents, to stay engaged, curious and present as children navigate a digital world that is as real to them as any playground once was.

That distinction matters. Too often, the instinct when faced with online risks—cyberbullying, addiction, exposure to harmful content—is to clamp down. Take the phone away. Shut off access. End the problem.

But as counsellors from Open Doors Mental Health pointed out during the event, that approach may soothe a parent's anxiety while quietly intensifying a child's. Control is not the same as guidance, and it rarely teaches the skills young people actually need.

Those skills are the heart of the advice shared that evening—and they deserve to be taken seriously in households across the region.

For teenagers, the idea of shifting from passive to active screen time is deceptively simple. It means asking: why am I picking up this device right now? Is it boredom? Loneliness? Habit? Setting an intention—even something as basic as "I'm going to message a friend" or "I'm going to watch one video and stop"—can transform a mindless scroll into a conscious choice. It's a small act of self-awareness that builds over time into resilience.

Equally powerful is the concept of "opposite action." When social media provokes anger, jealousy or insecurity, the instinct is often to react in kind—to snap back, withdraw or spiral inward. Teaching young people to respond with kindness, or at least restraint, is not about denying their feelings. It's about helping them take control of their response. In a digital environment designed to amplify emotion, that's a critical life skill.

Physical boundaries matter too. Keeping devices out of bedrooms may not be popular, but it is practical. Sleep is foundational to mental health, and the glow of a screen at midnight is rarely a source of comfort. These boundaries are not punishments; they are guardrails.

But if children are expected to change their habits, parents must change theirs as well.

The advice to lead with curiosity rather than judgement may be the most challenging—and the most important. When a child shares a negative online experience, the urge to fix it immediately is strong. Call the other parent. Contact the school. Remove the device. Yet jumping straight to solutions can shut down the very communication parents are trying to build.

Instead, ask questions. How did that message make you feel? What do you think you should do next? Listening without rushing to act tells a child that their experience matters, even if their behaviour still needs guidance. Validation is not agreement; it is acknowledgment. And that distinction can be the difference between a child opening up or shutting down.

There is also a deeper truth running through the discussion: today's parents are navigating uncharted territory. Previous generations worried about television or music or the influence of peers, but the scale and intimacy of the digital world is different. Social lives now unfold in real time, 24 hours a day, often in public and permanent ways. Pretending it can be eliminated is unrealistic. Ignoring it is irresponsible.

That's why the goal cannot be perfection. It must be partnership.

"Trust begets trust," one facilitator noted. That trust is built not through surveillance or strict rules alone, but through consistent presence. It's in the conversations that happen after school, in the willingness to sit with discomfort, in the admission that parents don't have all the answers either.

There will always be debate about when children should get phones or how much access is too much. Reasonable people will disagree. But those debates, while important, risk missing the larger point. Devices are not going away. The question is whether young people will learn to use them wisely—and whether parents will help them get there.

Communities like Carleton Place, Mississippi Mills and across Lanark County are fortunate to have resources and professionals willing to guide these conversations. The challenge now is for families to take that guidance home.

Watch the film. Start the conversation. Ask one more question than you normally would. Resist the urge to immediately fix. Set a boundary and explain why it exists. Model the behaviour you hope to see.

The digital world is not a passing phase in childhood. It is part of growing up. The sooner families treat it that way—not as an enemy, but as an environment to be understood and navigated together—the better equipped young people will be to face it.

And that work cannot wait.

Submitted photo

Planet Youth Lanark County's Rebecca Shams, left, sits on the professional panel with Open Doors Mental Health's Gillian Martel and Kaili Warmington, Carleton University's Dr. Andrea Howard, and Open Doors Mental Health's Ella West.

Your Community Voice
Your Community Newspaper
PUBLISHED BY 1000417317 ONTARIO INC. | 613-458-6423 | 7-2805 RICHMOND RD, OTTAWA ON, K2B 6S4

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