

CLAYFIELD COLLEGE · TEACHING WELLBEING

Teaching Wellbeing in 2026

Hooked and Hypervigilant :The rising social, emotional and digital pressures affecting young people's wellbeing



Clayfield College

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1

TONIGHT

Four pressures, one framework, five things to do

And a promise: no scaremongering, no screens-are-evil sermon



Digital

How these products are built to hook, what the under-16 laws changed, and what they didn't.



Social

Comparison, belonging, body image - and the difference between conflict and bullying.



Emotional

What is happening inside the adolescent brain, and why avoidance is the engine of anxiety.



Artificial intelligence

Already in their pocket, already answering questions no adult knows are being asked.

Then: five things that make the real difference. Not twenty. Five. Young people supported by one or two consistent changes, held for a term, do better than those facing a fortnight of sweeping new rules.

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PART ONE

The picture

What the data actually says -
and what it doesn't



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3

WHERE WE ARE

The numbers, before we interpret them

49% 

of young Australians report high or very high psychological distress

headspace National Youth Mental Health Survey, 3,000+ respondents

1 in 6 

adolescents report problematic levels of loneliness

Young Australian Loneliness Survey, VicHealth

50% 

of lifetime mental health conditions have begun by age 14

Consistent finding across international epidemiological studies

Read these as a signal, not a sentence. Distress is not diagnosis, and rising help-seeking is partly a good news story - young people are naming things their grandparents endured in silence.

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4

4

PERSPECTIVE

What has actually changed - and what hasn't



Genuinely new



- An always-on audience - social evaluation no longer stops at the school gate
- Sleep displaced by devices at exactly the age sleep matters most
- Algorithmic content selected for engagement, not wellbeing
- A conversational AI in their pocket that answers anything, at any hour



Completely unchanged

- Adolescents need one reliable adult who is not their parent
- Belonging beats achievement, every time
- Sleep, food, movement and routine still do the heavy lifting
- Warmth plus clear limits still out-performs every other parenting style

The mistake is assuming everything is new. Most of what works for a teenager today would have worked in 1985. The delivery has changed; the fundamentals have not.

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5

5

PART TWO

Hooked

How these products are built - and why willpower was never the answer



In late 2010, New York Times reporter Nick Bilton asked Steve Jobs, "So your kids must love the iPad?" Jobs replied: "They haven't used it. We limit how much technology our kids use at home."



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6

6

DESIGNED TO HOOK

This loop was built on purpose

Variable ratio reinforcement - the same schedule that makes poker machines work



1

Trigger

A notification. Boredom. A flicker of social anxiety.

2

Action

Open the app. Scroll. Post. React.

3

Variable reward

Likes and comments - arriving unpredictably. That is the hook.

4

Investment

More time, more photos, more streaks. Leaving now costs something.

The people who built it have told us what they built. This is not a conspiracy theory - it is a design document.

The design ethicist at Google Tristan Harris: "If you're not paying for the product, then you are the product."




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7

MY OPINION - CLEARLY LABELLED AS SUCH

Platforms operate with the ethics of a cash register




Not guided by what is best for young people

They are guided by what makes money. That is not a scandal; it is a business model. It becomes a scandal only when we pretend otherwise.

A marketplace that trades in human futures

What is bought and sold is not content. It is a young person's attention, their time, and their developing identity.

Algorithms do not have a conscience

No moral filter. No duty of care. The question is never 'is this good for this young person?' - only 'will this keep them watching?'

They thrive on time spent, not time spent well

Driven by profit, not pedagogy. These are not educators and they are not health services. They are businesses.

Businesses respond to regulation, not to politely worded requests. Which is exactly why the next few slides matter.

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THE SECOND WORD

Hypervigilant - the threat-detection machine that never switches off

Social comparison

Continuous and upward, against curated highlight reels - peers, influencers, strangers.

Approval monitoring

Likes, views and follower counts standing in as a proxy for self-worth.

Cyberbullying vigilance

Scanning for hostile comments and signals of social exclusion. Never fully off duty.

Cancel-culture anxiety

Fear of being called out, screenshotted or publicly shamed for one misjudgement.

Watch a young person's face after an hour of scrolling. They are not relaxed - night watch - held for hours, daily, for years.

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9

THE HARMS

What the research shows - and what it doesn't



- **Anxiety and depression in 14-17 year olds have roughly doubled since 2011**
Tracking almost exactly with smartphone and social media adoption.
- **More than three hours a day: a 35% increase in suicidal ideation in girls**
JAMA Pediatrics. Effect sizes in this literature are not subtle.
- **Body image dissatisfaction is strongly linked to image-led platforms**
Research in Body Image found even brief exposure to appearance-ideal content shifts how girls see themselves.
- **Heavy users report more loneliness and less face-to-face connection**
The tool sold as connection is, at volume, associated with less of it.

No single study is the whole story. Together they are a very consistent story - and it is a health story, not a moral panic.

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10

10

WHERE THE LAW LANDED

Australia's under-16 restrictions, eight months on

Online Safety Amendment (Social Media Minimum Age) Act - in force 10 December 2025



In force since December 2025

Platforms must take reasonable steps to stop under-16s creating or keeping accounts. Penalties reach roughly \$50 million for systemic non-compliance. No penalty applies to children or parents.



The three-month evaluation

Use of age-restricted platforms fell from 85.9% to 81.5%. Account ownership fell from about 52% to 42%. Most under-16s who had accounts kept them or made new ones.



Enforcement is now the live question

The regulator has opened non-compliance investigations into the major platforms, and the rules have been widened to capture addictive design features by name.

Source: eSafety Commissioner, 'Early days, early insights' (31 July 2026) - baseline plus three-month follow-up, 803 children aged 10-15 and their parents.

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WEDNESDAY, NOVEMBER 5, 2025 THE AGE 9
NEWS

Gaming site escapes teen social media ban

BRIAN BUCHAN

Popular gaming platform Roblox, which is in the sights of Australia's federal police chief for facilitating abuse, will escape the government's new social media ban when it is implemented.

Minister for Communications Angus Tyronne said Roblox, which has over 100 million users, is not a social media platform.

They will join Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and X, which the government has already indicated would be covered by the ban.

The platforms will have to either remove content from using their sites or risk fines of up to \$45 million.

But children have been warned an average of eight despite Roblox's reputation as a safe place for kids, and many of its users are under 16.

There is a question about whether or not the legislation gives the power to designate which companies are in and which are out.

It answers some of the questions that have plagued some multiplatform platforms that have social media elements, but did not clearly state the new definition of being "social or significantly" for the purposes of online social interaction.

Experts have called for clear such an addition to be included, arguing the platforms have created loopholes by having social media within games, and last week Australian Federal Police commissioner Andrew Barr said the government's new ban would target value-added services and not just the platforms themselves.

The children's commissioner has been assessing platform's suitability for the ban and has identified the ban as a key issue.

Roblox is an American-based company that has become the main competitor to America's YouTube, which is still being assessed by the government for the social media ban. YouTube recently explicit material and gambling content can be removed from the site.

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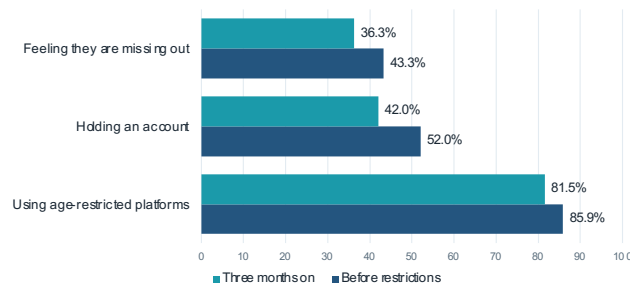
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THE EVIDENCE

What moved in the first three months



Read it this way

- The behaviour barely moved
- The account numbers moved a little
- The feelings moved most of all
- Age assurance is the failure point, not parental resolve

eSafety Commissioner, three-month follow-up, July 2026. More than half the children surveyed reported no age check at all; 37% simply told the platform they were older.

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12

THE OBVIOUS OBJECTION

'Some kids are still on it - so hasn't it failed?'

Partial success still delivers real protection



It resets the social norm

Every account not created is developmental time protected. Norms move before behaviour does.



It shifts responsibility to the platforms

For fifteen years this was framed as a family problem. It never was.



Behaviour change always lags policy

Seatbelts. Drink-driving. Smoking. In every case the law rewrote the norm - slowly, then all at once.



It supports the adults in the room

Parents are no longer the only obstacle between a young person and the platform. That is not nothing.

The question was never 'is it perfectly enforced?' It is 'is it shifting the environment in the right direction?' Abandon it because it is being evaded and we hand the field back to the most persuasive technology ever built.

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13

13

THE WIDER SHIFT

Courts and parliaments are moving in the same direction



The courts

In March 2026 a United States jury found major platforms legally responsible for harm to a young user, ruling that the apps had been negligently designed. The issue was not a piece of content - it was the addictive features themselves: infinite scroll, autoplay, the algorithm.

In plain terms: the court treated social media rather as the courts once treated Big Tobacco.



The parliaments

Australia went first. Indonesia followed with its own regulation in March 2026 - under-13s barred, 13 to 17-year-olds requiring parental consent. Malaysia has acted. France, Denmark, Germany, Greece, Spain, Norway, Slovenia, Brazil and the United Kingdom are among the 40 countries are all somewhere in the same debate.

This is no longer a Western experiment. It is a direction of travel.

The unfinished business is algorithmic amplification. Design choices drive harm, and design remains the least regulated part of the whole system.

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14

14

ATTENTION

Multitasking is a myth - and the school data now proves it

72%

decline in mobile-phone-related incidents following Australian school phone bans

~80%

drop in social-media-related incidents over the same comparison period

1,000

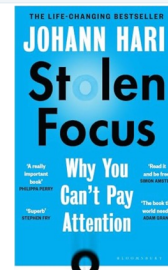
NSW principals surveyed a year on: better focus, and more talking at break times



The brain cannot process two information streams at once

What we call multitasking is rapid switching, and every switch costs working memory. A phone on the desk taxes attention even when it is face down and silent. The same principle applies at the kitchen table: the phone goes in another room, not face down on the placemat.

Johann Hari's argument in Stolen Focus: we have an epidemic of people who cannot focus, and we keep treating it as an individual medical problem when it is a social and political one.



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15

15

THE BIGGEST LEVER

If one thing changes this term, make it sleep



8-10

hours a night is what adolescents need. Most Australian teenagers are running an hour or more short, every school night.



● Their body clock genuinely shifts

Melatonin release moves later in adolescence. Your teenager is not being difficult at 11pm - they are being fifteen.

● Short sleep looks exactly like a mood disorder

Irritability, poor concentration, low motivation, emotional volatility. I have seen sleep debt misread as depression more times than I can count.

● The device is the problem more than the light

The blue-light story was oversold. What keeps them awake is the content, the conversation and the 2am notification - not the wavelength.

● Charge phones outside the bedroom

One rule, applied to the whole household, adults included. The highest-yield change any family can make.

Sleep is not a wellbeing add-on. It is the platform everything else sits on - mood, memory, immunity, appetite regulation, and the capacity to tolerate a bad day at school.

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16

16

PART THREE

Social pressure

Comparison, body image, belonging - and the difference between conflict and bullying



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17

17

COMPARISON CULTURE

The audience never goes home

- 
Social evaluation used to have a curfew
 School ended and the judging stopped. Now the audience follows them into the bedroom and stays until they fall asleep.
- 
They compare their inside to everyone else's outside
 Curated highlight reels against their own unedited Tuesday. It is a rigged comparison and they lose it every time.
- 
Exclusion is now visible and timestamped
 Young people no longer just hear about the party they missed. They watch it happen, live, from their bedroom.
- 
Achievement culture stacks on top
 ATAR anxiety, selection pressure, the belief that one number decides the rest of their life. It won't - and they need an adult to say so.

The antidote is not a lecture about authenticity. It is a household where the child is unmistakably valued for something that has nothing whatsoever to do with performance.

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18

18

BODY IMAGE

The most personal harm, and the least discussed at home



Appearance-ideal content works fast

Research in the journal Body Image found that even brief exposure to short-form video showing unattainable appearance standards is enough to shift how a young person sees themselves.



The algorithm amplifies extremes

Beauty ideals, diet culture, fitness content, the 'perfect' life. Ordinary bodies do not hold attention, so the system does not serve them.



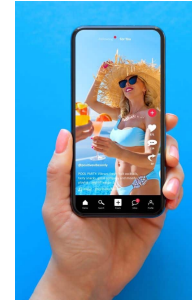
Teach three questions, not a ban

Who made this? What do they want from me? And how do I feel about myself after watching it?



Curate rather than confiscate

Help them follow accounts that widen the picture - different bodies, real skills, actual interests. Unfollowing is a skill worth teaching.



Watch for withdrawal, secrecy, changed eating or exercise patterns, and distress tied to time online - and seek help early rather than waiting to be certain.

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19

19

WHAT PROTECTS THEM

Belonging outperforms any programme we can buy



One safe base

A home where the worst news can be delivered without the roof coming off. That is the whole test.



One charismatic adult

Werner's Kauai study: the children who thrived almost all had an adult, often not a parent, who was unshakably in their corner.



One thing they are good at

An island of competence outside academics. Sport, music, cadets, coding, debating. It matters that it exists, not which.



One reliable friendship

Not popularity. One. The research is remarkably consistent and remarkably reassuring.

None of these four require money, an app, or a specialist. They require time, attention, and an adult willing to be dull and dependable for several years running.

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20

20

GETTING THE LANGUAGE RIGHT

Not everything that hurts is bullying

The distinction matters, because the two need completely different responses

Bullying

- Repeated, not a single incident
- Deliberate intent to cause harm
- A genuine power imbalance
- The target cannot easily make it stop
- Requires a formal school response

Conflict or unkindness

- A falling-out between equals
- Rudeness, thoughtlessness, a bad day
- Both parties have room to move
- Being disliked is not being bullied
- Requires coaching, not a case file

Both deserve to be taken seriously. But calling ordinary social friction 'bullying' inflates the word until it means nothing - and leaves the genuinely bullied child holding a term that no longer commands a response.

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21

21

PART FOUR

Emotional pressure

What is actually happening inside the adolescent brain



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22

22

A FRAMEWORK YOU CAN USE

Four systems, arriving on four different schedules

**The Smoke Alarm**

Threat detection. Fast, loud and fully online early. 'Am I safe?' It cannot tell the difference between a tiger and a group chat.

**The Narrator**

Meaning-making and identity. 'What does this say about me?' In adolescence it is loud, absolutist and frequently wrong.

**The Control Tower**

Planning, impulse control, consequences. 'What should I do?' The last to mature - under construction into the mid-twenties.

**The Reward Motivator**

Novelty and peer approval. 'Is this worth it?' Runs well ahead of the Control Tower for roughly a decade.

The gap between an early, powerful Reward Motivator and a late-arriving Control Tower is not a defect. It is the design - and it is why a reasonable teenager makes an unreasonable decision at 11pm on a Saturday.

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23

23

PUTTING IT TOGETHER

Social media hijacks all four systems simultaneously

**Smoke Alarm**

Turns up the threat

Am I being excluded? Is someone talking about me? A permanent, low-grade social danger signal.

**Narrator**

Hands it a distorted mirror

Identity built in public, with a live comment thread and a visible score attached.

**Control Tower**

Weakens the brakes

Engineered to defeat exactly the regulation system that is still under construction.

**Reward Motivator**

Floods the reward system

Variable, unpredictable social approval - at the most reward-sensitive point in the lifespan.

Social media was not designed for the adolescent brain. But it could not have been designed better to exploit it - all four systems, at once, at exactly the wrong age.

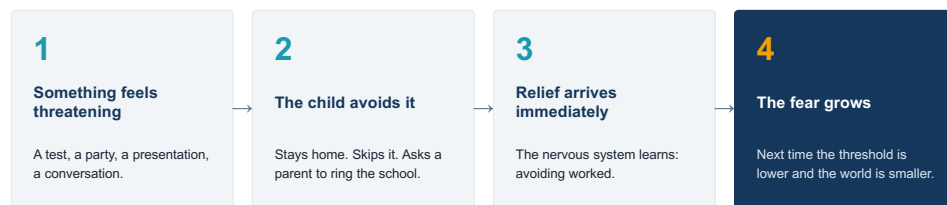
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24

24

ANXIETY

Avoidance is the engine, reassurance is the fuel



Break the cycle: warmth, plus the expectation that they go anyway.

Not 'you'll be fine' - they don't believe you. Try: 'I know this feels awful, and I know you can do hard things. I'll be here at 3.30.' Confidence follows courage; it never precedes it.

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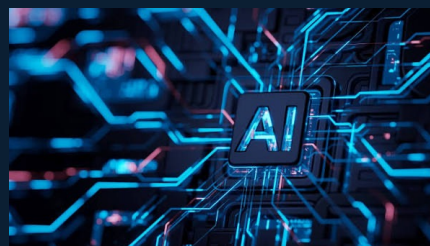
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25

PART FIVE

Artificial intelligence

Already in their pocket, already answering
questions no adult knows are being asked



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26

26

WHAT PARENTS NEED TO KNOW

It sounds human. It isn't.

Around half of Australian adults now use these tools - and young people are the fastest adopters

**It does not know the young person using it**

It generates patterns, not insight. It has no idea about their history, their vulnerabilities, or what is going on at home.

**It hallucinates - with total confidence**

A US lawyer once filed a court brief full of citations produced by a chatbot. The cases looked perfect. They did not exist.

**No accountability whatsoever**

A teacher who gives poor advice is accountable. A doctor is accountable. These systems are not. It feels like a trusted voice; it is not a trustworthy one.

**Already shaping their world alongside every adult in their life**

Every time a child asks a chatbot about a friendship, a body, a drug or a feeling, that is a conversation happening without any adult in the room.

This is not an anti-technology message. AI is not inherently good or bad - it is powerful. The same technology that can read a mammogram can mislead a fifteen-year-old at midnight.

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27

27

LEARNING

The real risk isn't replacement - it's bypass**How thinking actually develops**

- Struggle
- Trial and error
- Making mistakes and noticing them
- Working it out step by step

**What over-reliance costs**

- Less tolerance for effort
- Less confidence in their own thinking
- A default habit of outsourcing decisions
- Good answers they do not actually understand

AI should assist thinking, not replace it. The risk is not the tool - it is over-reliance without understanding, at precisely the age when the struggle is the whole point.

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28

28

THE PART THAT WORRIES ME MOST

Companion chatbots and emotional dependency

Apps designed to feel like a friend - remembering, responding, always available



It meets the young person at their most vulnerable point

Lonely, anxious, excluded, awake at 2am. The children who most need a human being are the ones most drawn to a machine.



It never challenges - it mirrors and amplifies

A good friend will disagree with you sometimes. So will a trusted adult. These systems are built to keep the user engaged - which means agreeing.



It creates dependency by design

It remembers, it follows up, and it is never tired, busy or disappointed. No human relationship can compete on those terms.



It operates without oversight

Litigation is underway internationally after the death of a teenager attached to a companion bot. The safeguards were not there.



If a young person has a favourite chatbot, that is worth a calm, curious conversation - not a confiscation. Ask who they talk to and what they talk about.

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29

29

WHAT TO DO

Boundaries without banning



Co-use

- Use the tools together before they use them alone
- Ask it something familiar, then assess the answer together
- Model scepticism out loud: 'let's check if that's true'



Clear rules

- Homework and brainstorming are not the same activity
- No AI on assessment without disclosure - know the College's rules
- Screen-visible use only: no secret conversations



Ongoing conversation

- 'What did AI get wrong today?' is a wonderful dinner question
- Talk about privacy - many tools keep whatever is typed into them
- Know which tools they use, including the companion apps

Outright bans rarely work. Unlimited unsupervised access certainly doesn't. AI has no conscience and no accountability - those remain our jobs.

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30

30

PART SIX

What actually works

Warning signs, conversations that open rather than close, and five things to start this week



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31

31

WARNING SIGNS

What to look for - and what is just adolescence

Sleep disruption Up late on the device, exhausted and irritable by morning. Usually the first sign, and the most easily explained away.	Social withdrawal Choosing online interaction over the people physically in the room. Declining what they used to enjoy.	Panic without the device Distress out of all proportion when the phone is confiscated or the battery dies. Watch what happens; it is data.
Mood driven by metrics Emotional state rising and falling with likes, views, followers and who replied.	Secretive behaviour Angling the screen away, multiple accounts, deleted history, a second profile no one was told about.	Physical complaints Headaches, eye strain, neck and shoulder pain from hours held in the same position.

One or two of these, occasionally, is adolescence. A cluster that persists and worsens is a pattern - and patterns deserve a conversation, not a confiscation.

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32

32

STARTING THE CONVERSATION

Four questions that open rather than close

“What would it feel like to not check your phone for a whole day?”

Surfaces dependency without accusation.



“How do you feel after you've been scrolling for a while - be honest.”

Invites reflection on the aftermath, not the act.



“Is there anything you've seen online lately that's been hard to shake off?”

Opens the door to bullying, disturbing content and comparison.



“Who makes you feel good when you follow them - and who makes you feel worse?”

Begins a curation conversation without banning or shaming.



Timing matters as much as wording. Side by side, not face to face - in the car, walking the dog, standing at the sink. And when they answer, do not lecture. The first lecture is the last conversation.

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33

33

COMMON TRAPS

Well-intentioned parenting that quietly backfires

The snowplough

Removing every obstacle before they reach it. They arrive at eighteen fluent in comfort and illiterate in setback.

The interrogation

Twenty questions in the car at 3.30. You will get monosyllables. Try shoulder-to-shoulder instead.

The instant fix

Solving it before they have finished describing it. Most of the time they want a witness, not a solution.

The comparison

'Your brother never had this trouble.' It has never once produced motivation in the history of families.

The double standard

Phone rules that apply to young people but not to the adults enforcing them. Adolescents have world-class hypocrisy detectors.

The catastrophic response

Reacting to the first disclosure so strongly that there is never a second one.

Every one of these comes from love. That is exactly why they are hard to see - and why naming them from a stage is more useful than any list of rules.

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34

34

THIS WEEK

Five changes, in order of return on effort



Charge every phone outside every bedroom

Including the adults'. The single highest-yield change any household can make.



Delay access as long as possible

Every year of delay is a year of protected brain development - and the law now supports that choice.



Ask sideways, not directly

Drive them somewhere. Walk the dog. Stand next to them at the sink. Then listen.



Name one charismatic adult

Who is unshakeably in this young person's corner, beyond their parents? If no one comes to mind, that is this term's project.



Keep the relationship stronger than the algorithm

Judged children go underground; understood children let adults in. Every rule sits inside a relationship.

Pick two. Not five. Young people supported by one or two consistent changes, held for a term, do better than those facing a fortnight of sweeping new rules.

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35

35

WHEN TO GET HELP

The threshold is change, duration and function



Duration

A bad fortnight is adolescence. A change that has persisted for a month or more and shows no sign of lifting is different.



Function

Is it interfering with school, sleep, friendships or food? Distress that stays in its lane is one thing. Distress that shrinks the life is another.



Act now

Any talk of not wanting to be here, any self-harm, any sudden withdrawal from everything they used to love - that is a same-week GP appointment, not a wait-and-see.

Start with the GP and ask about a Mental Health Treatment Plan. The College counselling team is the other front door, and often the faster one.

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36

36

WHERE TO GO

Free, credible, and available tonight

**Kids Helpline**

1800 55 1800 - 24/7, for ages 5 to 25. Phone, web chat and email. The single most useful number in the country.

**ReachOut and headspace**

Free, evidence-based, written for young people rather than at them. Send the link; don't read it aloud to them.

**Common Sense Media**

Independent age guidance and reviews for apps, games and AI tools. Check it before the next download request.

**Lifeline**

13 11 14 - 24/7 crisis support for any Australian, including any adult at 2am who cannot sleep for worrying.

**eSafety Commissioner**

esafety.gov.au - reporting pathways for image-based abuse and serious cyberbullying, plus genuinely good parent guides.

**SchoolTV and a GP**

Whole-of-school wellbeing resources by topic; and the GP remains the front door to a Mental Health Treatment Plan.

Put Kids Helpline in every young person's phone tonight, under that name, without making a speech about it. Then say nothing more about it.

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37

37

IF YOU REMEMBER NOTHING ELSE

**This is a design problem,
not a willpower problem.**

Sleep, belonging, one charismatic adult, and a relationship
stronger than the algorithm. Everything else tonight was
detail.

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Child, Adolescent and Family Psychologist | Camberwell Road Medical Practice, Hawthorn East



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38

38