



Plugged in & tuned out

WHEN GAMING AND SCREEN USE BECOMES A PROBLEM...

A MASTERCLASS WITH
MAGGIE DENT & BRAD MARSHALL

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT OF COUNTRY

From Maggie...

I wish to acknowledge that I am hosting this webinar from the lands of the Dharawal Nation. We acknowledge that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples are the first peoples of Australia and they are proudly the longest surviving culture in the world. I pay my respects to the elders past, present and emerging and who maybe participating in this masterclass and I acknowledge their continuing connections to their ancestral lands and culture.

From Brad...

I acknowledge that I am on the Country of the Garigal Clan of the Guringai Nation - the Wanangini, the Salt Water People, the Stingray people of the Central Coast of NSW. I want to take a moment to acknowledge their ancestors and elders and any First Nations persons that are with us today.

May we all walk with gentle feet and compassionate hearts wherever we are in this global village.

SECTION 1

NOTES FROM BRAD MARSHALL



Brad is recognised as one of Australia's leading experts in excessive internet use or 'Internet Addiction' otherwise known as Gaming Disorder and related disorders. As the Director and Founder of The Screen & Gaming Disorder Clinic —Australia's first established specialty clinic — he is a well-respected presenter and speaker on the topic, frequenting schools, corporate and staff training, and parent seminars. He is the author of the parenting book *The Tech Diet for your Child and Teen* which has been published in over a dozen countries and languages world-wide. In his spare time Brad is doing a PhD research program at Macquarie University, running clinical trials for Gaming Disorder.

Brad's top 4

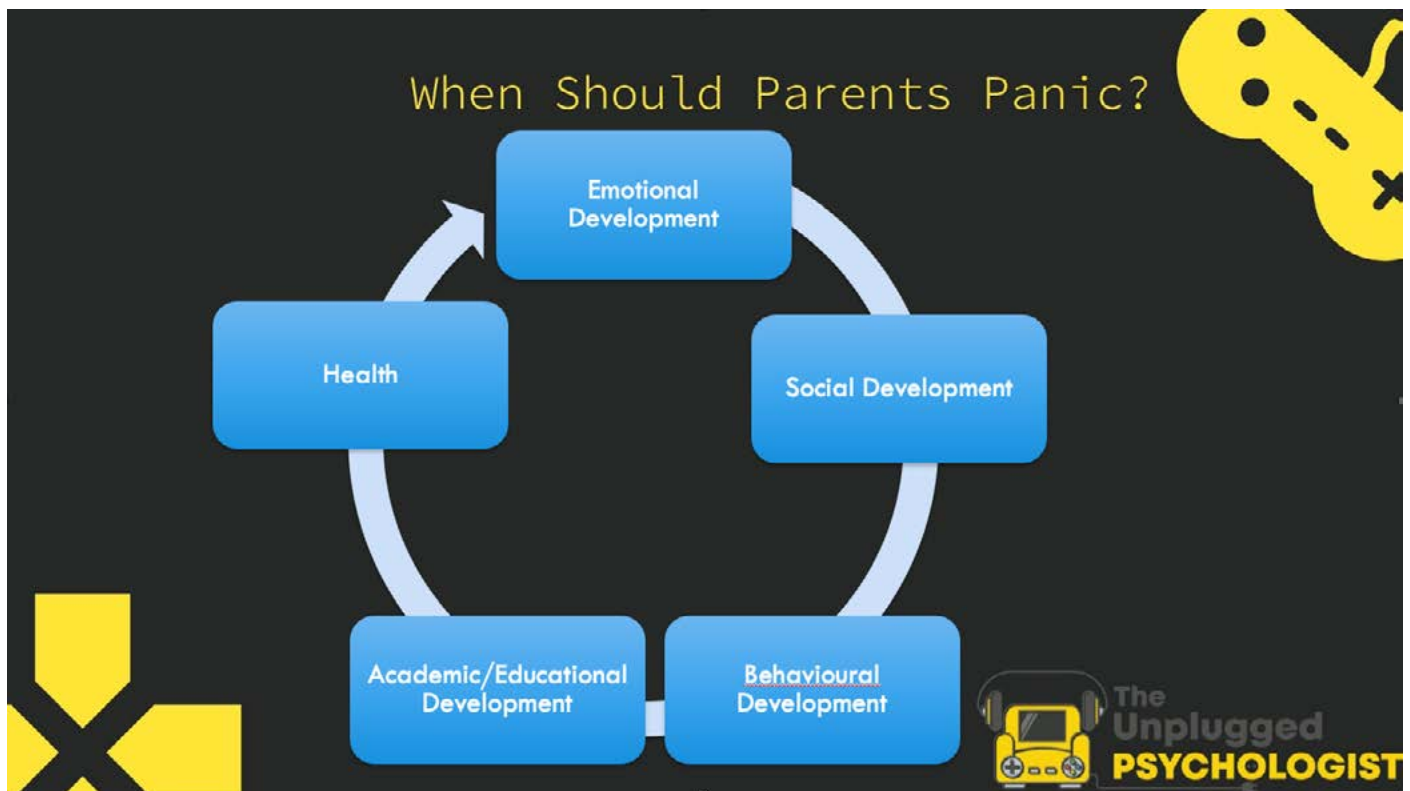
The number one thing I have learnt after 15 years working in this space is that parents are stressed, busy, overwhelmed. Parenting is hard! At least I think it is at times.

As professionals, it's our job to be evidenced based, but straight to the point and practical.

Some of you will want to do a deep dive into my book, videos, podcasts, or attached resources. But many of you have given your time tuning into the masterclass and want a few quick go to points. If that's you, here is my top 4.

1. **Sleep is sacred.** If there is one thing, one warning sign you watch, one so-called "canary in the coal mine" indicator it's sleep. If screens or gaming impact your child's sleep it will unravel. Maybe not today or in a week, but at some point, the dominoes will tumble. So if what Maggie and I have talked about is too much, and you want a starting point then make the 'sleep hours' screen free. That includes turning the WIFI off as insurance.
2. **Most children and teens can't manage their own screen use.** Fact. Neurologically they don't have the brain development required to make those decisions. For some this is mildly difficult, and others it's impossible. So the idea that "they need to learn how to manage their own tech use" is akin to me suggesting you let your teen have 100% control over their diet and nutrition. It would be a disaster! They need boundaries and at times won't agree with those boundaries. And that's okay. It's part of parenting a digital generation.
3. **It's not their fault.** Many parents agree to the terms of a healthy tech plan with their teen only for their child to break that agreement. Repeat after me- "*it's not their fault. Our children are attracted to devices and preyed on by the industry*". Once you accept that your teen or tween is not out to ruin your life, and instead is a victim of seriously well-researched persuasive design, you can step towards a view of helping your child navigate the digital world.

4. **WIFI and Mobile Data are key.** Many have tried to take devices, and used the software controls we are sold only to give up when this doesn't work. At their core, the 7 Unplugged Steps encourage parents to look at the core element driving dopamine delivery. The WIFI and Mobile data.



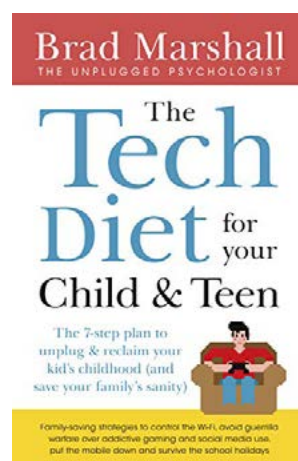
The 7 Unplugged Steps

For the full details of each step check out:

Brad's Online Parenting Tutorial Video Series:

<https://unpluggedpsychologist.com/courses/video-series-part-one-two/>

The Tech Diet for your Child and Teen Book:

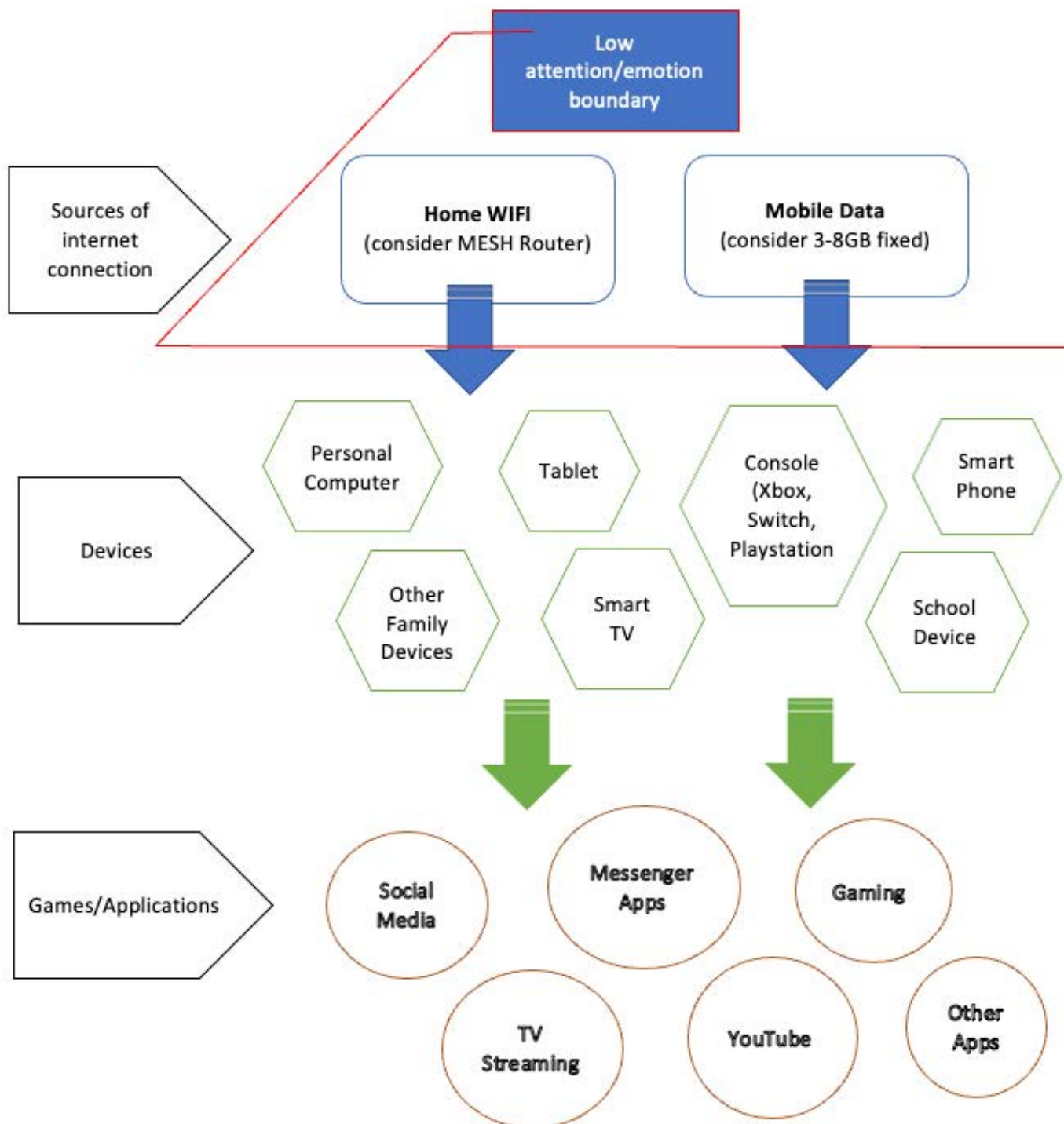


For a brief overview of some of the things we covered in this masterclass

Step 1: Manage the WIFI (Handout)



Handout 2- Controlling the WIFI and Phone





Step 4: Always Read the Fine Print

UNPLUGGED STEP 4: Always Read the Fine Print

- If you decide on a total of 2 hours per night, that means 2 hours. Total.
- This includes any homework or other “educational needs”
- This also includes streaming TV
- And suddenly wanting to Facetime Grandma

"But Mum!
I really need to do
my history homework!"



Step 5: Example Sheet


UNPLUGGED STEP 5: Name Your Price

My 3 Rules


1. No physical aggression
2. Must go to sport
3. Do homework first

If I don't do these, I'll lose 30 mins of my internet time.

Maximum penalty: 24 hours



7am: Wake up
7:30am: Leave for school
8:30am: School
3:30pm: Sport training
5:30pm: Arrive home
5:30-6:30pm: Homework
7-9pm: Internet
9pm: Shower
9:30pm: Bed



MORE RESOURCES

Some great Videos featuring Brad:

Watch Brad's chat with Leonie Smith on [The Digital Families Podcast](#).

Watch Brad's chat with Lukas Ritson on [Wearthy's Play It Forward Podcast](#).

Watch Maggie and Brad's chat on [Instagram Live](#), recorded during the pandemic.

Some great Podcasts featuring Brad:

Brad joined Tanya Hennessey on her podcast Hennessey's '[Help! I am an addict!](#)'

Brad spoke to the ["I've got news for you" podcast](#), about internet gaming addiction in an episode that also featured a 21yo Aussie gamer who's winning a lot of money playing e-sports.

Brad spoke with Dr Justin Coulson on [The Happy Families podcast](#) about whether screens are really as bad for our kids as we think they are.

Brad joined Maggie on her Parental As Anything podcast to talk [kids and online gaming](#)

Also check out Brad's book:

<https://unpluggedpsychologist.com/books/>

Questions?

For more hints, tips, videos and blogs, follow
[@unpluggedpsychologist](#)

[www.northshorekidspace.com.au](#)
[www.unpluggedpsychologist.com.au](#)

The Unplugged PSYCHOLOGIST

Brad Marshall
THE UNPLUGGED PSYCHOLOGIST

The Tech Diet for your Child & Teen

The 7-step plan to unplug & reclaim your kid's childhood (and save your family's sanity)

Family saving strategies to control the Wi-Fi, avoid guerrilla warfare over addictive gaming and social media use, put the mobile down and survive the school holidays

For more resources from Brad:

Visit: www.unpluggedpsychologist.com.au

Facebook/Instagram/YouTube: [@unpluggedpsychologist](#)

Twitter: [@unpluggedpsychologist](#)

SECTION 2

NOTES FROM MAGGIE DENT



Maggie Dent is one of Australia's favourite parenting authors and educators, with a particular interest in the early years, adolescence and resilience – as well as being an undisputed 'boy champion'. Maggie's experience includes teaching, counselling, and working in the palliative care/funeral services and suicide prevention. She is the author of nine major books, including her 2022 book *Girlhood: Raising our little girls to be healthy, happy and heard*, the bestselling *Mothering Our Boys* and the 2020 release *From Boys to Men*. She hosts the ABC podcast, *Parental As Anything* and in 2021 released a book of the same name.

Life experience and research shows that adolescence is a time of confusion, massive change and serious risk. It is also a time of enormous potential in the development of new skills, knowledge and abilities. Each adolescent from 12-25 will experience and navigate this time of transformation differently.

► **“Expecting the adolescent to forever remain a child sets you up for disappointment, disillusionment and hurt. Accepting the fact that the child-parent relationship is over and embracing the different but potentially wonderful one that lies ahead is a giant leap toward getting along with a teenager.”**

— Sheryl Feinstein, *Parenting the Teenage Brain* (2007).

TODAY'S ADOLESCENTS

Today's adolescents are experiencing more change, more rapidly than any previous generation as they have been raised in a digital world – a very different world to their parents. They are potentially living in a more risky, stressful world than ever seen before.

The digital world – while I acknowledge that it has brought many benefits – has created some additional challenges particularly for our emerging adults and how they see the world and themselves.

► **One of the things that makes my blood boil is the fact that the largest tech companies in the world have deliberately created algorithms that marinate us in more negative content.**

It seems the more negative the content, the more people stay engaged and that means the more advertising that they are exposed to and the more money the companies make. Why are we more drawn

to negativity? Well it's all down to a function of our evolution called '[negativity bias](#)', which means we're designed to look out for threats to our survival. In his book, *Stolen Focus*, Johann Hari urges us all to put pressure on tech companies to demand that they change these algorithms (You can hear him talk about that [here](#).)

The main drivers in adolescence – regardless of gender, culture or postcode are:

- Seeking autonomy
- Identity searching
- Needing to belong
- Immature brain driving a mature looking body
- Separation from parents
- Forming relationships.

WHAT'S GOING ON UP THERE IN THE ADOLESCENT BRAIN?

- Overproduction of dendrites and synaptic connections.
- Pruning – use it or lose it!
- Myelination – the process of insulating the neurons and synaptic connections.
- Adolescents are relying on their amygdala rather than the pre-frontal lobe – **flight, freeze or fight** responses are more likely.
- **GABA and risk – hunting dopamine**
During adolescence, the executive functioning brain is still growing – the part that manages our impulses, allows us to assess risk and consequence, and socialise with other human beings.

As David Gillespie writes in his book *Teen Brain* (2019):

“But in order to develop these impulses the brain turns off a mechanism called **GABA, which stands for gamma amino butyric acid, that would normally stop us being addicted to things that we like. When GABA switches off, adolescence becomes a time when the human brain is particularly prone to addiction.”**

Gillespie writes that when adults eat, drink, socialise or have sex the brain is rewarded, neurons become electronically excited, and then GABA kicks in to shut down the reward system.

In teenagers however, “GABA does not exist and so the reward keeps occurring, the neurons continue to be excited, and this process then opens up the brain to addiction.”

That's why teens have always been susceptible to risky behaviours, including drugs, alcohol, driving fast, and teenage sex.

- **Emotional illiteracy** – This is the norm for many, including intense mood swings and confusion.
- Window of sensitivity.
- Hot cognition.

The world now appears as if through a cracked windscreen.

Adolescents need more sleep than pre-pubescent or adults

I have written [here](#) about some of the challenges to adolescent sleep. What are the consequences of insufficient sleep in adolescents?

- Missed school.
- Sleepiness (including micro-sleeps)
- Negative synergy with alcohol
- Weakened immune system
- Tiredness (decreased motivation)
- Irritability and low-frustration tolerance.
- Over-eating, and yearning for high fat foods
- Difficulties with self-control of attention, emotion, and behaviour
- Difficulties with focused attention, irritability, emotional ability
- Affect regulation and Cognitive Emotional Integration
- Direct effects on learning, memory consolidation.

The impact on wellbeing

I wrote in a [blog](#) recently that one of the things that makes my blood boil is the fact that the largest tech companies in the world have deliberately created algorithms that marinate us in more negative content. It seems the more negative the content, the more people stay engaged and that means the more advertising that they are exposed to and the more money the companies make. Why are we more drawn to negativity? Well it's all down to a function of our evolution called 'negativity bias', which means we're designed to look out for threats to our survival.

So if you've got a tween using TikTok or YouTube... that negativity is what they're marinating in and that cannot be good for their wellbeing. So what can we do?

Dr Mari Swingle is a Canadian neuroscientist and researcher and author of *i-Minds: How and why constant connectivity is rewiring our brains and what to do about it* (2016).

Her research and practice includes neurotherapy and electroencephalography (EEG) and her research spans well before this army of technology inundated our homes and schools. That means Swingle has been able to compare the changes in the brain and the brain's efficiency and quantitatively explore the differences.

One of the concerns that Swingle has is that brain mapping shows many digital children and adolescents of today are largely "bored by reality". Essentially this is because, with excessive screen use, these young people have rewired their brains to function on different levels of arousal – both dopamine and adrenaline. Swingle argues that rather than feeling genuinely 'happy' (which has a different blend of homeostasis in the human brain), many of those using gaming or Esports frequently or excessively are experiencing a 'high'. This high is an artificially or purely chemical generated neurophysiological state – not an authentic emotion.

In her research on the adolescent brain from 2005-2008, Swingle became aware that the "higher arousal state and the dual or divided attention required for multi-tasking on multiple devices in multiple modes" was slowing the growth of the prefrontal cortex! Think for example if you're teen is doing homework on a laptop, while checking their Insta feed on their phone and listening to music. The divided attention thwarts the development of judgement and the ability to see the big picture.

Swingle also shows that keyboarding rather than writing is having a negative impact on not only motor skills but also 'cognitive skill divergence'. Basically, writing involves learning to slow down the brain to the speed of the hand thus allowing more depth of thought or better metacognition.

Victoria L. Dunckley M.D. writes in her excellent article for *Psychology Today*: [Gray Matters: Too much Screen Time Damages the Brain](#) that research into video games has shown that during gaming, dopamine

is released and this brain chemical is associated with reward and addiction. Because the addicted brain has been so overloaded with dopamine, it adjusts by reducing the number of dopamine receptors – so the reward is no longer as satisfying, causing users to crave more and more.

BOYS AND GAMING

If you have tween/teen sons and you haven't read my article on [10 Agreements for Healthy Balance](#), I recommend you do.

There are a number of reasons why our beautiful sons can disappear down the rabbit hole of excessive gaming that can be helpful for parents to understand. (This may also help you understand why you are wasting valuable time on your phone as well).

- **The state of insufficiency** – there is no clear endpoint in gaming. If one game ends there are all sorts of prompts and intermittent variable rewards that encourage kids to keep going because they almost won. When you read a book there is an ending. Online activity does not have a clear-cut ending, and leaves us psychologically wanting more.
- The **state of flow** – where our boys lose track of time and have absolutely no idea how long they have been gaming for, despite having given you a timeframe. This is not intentional disobedience, they genuinely lose all sense of time. Remember it is better to give a boy directions on how many more games he can play, rather than a time limit because no one will want to leave a game that is incomplete.
- **GABA** – as mentioned earlier, this helps control our reward centre and stops us getting addicted to things, but it's switched off during adolescence.
- **FOMO (or fear of missing out)** – this is a real thing for teens as well as many adults. If you are playing with your mates online and having a fabulous time, there is no way on earth that you would want to walk away and miss out on some fun. It can be helpful if groups of boys and their parents work out some regular gaming times that fits in with family boundaries. This means that they game with their mates with your blessing which will always be much better than the opposite. This can also help protect your sons from being groomed online.

Gaming is also a way to escape and that's something we all do from time-to-time – whether through reading books, going for walks, possibly a Netflix binge or a trip to the movies. Given that many of our teens are struggling with heightened levels of stress we need to appreciate that gaming is meeting yet another psychological need. Research suggests there is a correlation between problematic gaming and existing mental health issues like anxiety or depression, however it does not prove causation. If you are worried, please seek professional help around problematic usage.

The best book I have read about understanding unhealthy technology usage is *The Tech Diet for Your Child & Teen* by Brad Marshall. This incredibly easy-to-read and practical book will give you the answers you are looking for.

► “I see the children and families whose lives are often torn apart by technology. I'm less concerned about the semantics of what to call the problem and more interested in helping parents and families reclaim their children.”

— Brad Marshall, *The Tech Diet for Your Child & Teen: The 7-step plan to unplug and reclaim your kids childhood (and save your family sanity)*, 2019.

Marshall offers up an uncomplicated, seven-step plan to unplug excessive digital usage – and your teen can have some input into it.

DANGER SIGNS OF TEENS AT RISK

- Isolation from family and friends
- School refusal
- Sudden changes in schoolwork, job performance or athletic activities
- Drastic mood swings
- Lack of interest in outside school activities
- Family conflict that escalates
- Living in a community with high crime and easy availability of alcohol and drugs
- Delinquent friends
- Academic failure
- Change in eating and sleeping habits
- Cutting or hurting themselves



If you need someone to help you feel safe, accepted and heard, please call or visit:

Kids Help Line	1800 55 1800
Lifeline	13 11 14
Suicide Callback Service	1300 65 94 67

kidshelp.com.au • reachout.com.au
headspace.org.au • youthbeyondblue.com

Some of these services also offer email or web counselling and live chat.

www.maggiedent.com

Please see the list of [Support Services & Helplines](#) on my website for more services.

All adolescents need lots of support and encouragement to navigate the bumpy road — the journey from childhood to adulthood.

Parents can support adolescents by using caring, empowering communication

- Use words of suggestion not direction
- Avoid shame-based language
- Encourage thinking and making choices
- Lighten up!
- Remember they are temporarily brain impaired
- Choose right time to talk and use door openers
- Avoid using don't — try "next time"
- Ensure they are listening
- Never argue with an adolescent
- Co-parent your teen's friends and vice versa

► “The key is for the adolescent and the adult-who-once-was-an-adolescent to recognise those important brain changes and learn to navigate these years constructively and collaboratively in order to keep communication open between them, to optimise life for everyone and to avoid tragic endings or risky behaviours. The challenge is not easy but it at least should be made clear.”

– Daniel Siegel, *Brainstorm* (2013).

“Lighthouses” – **significant adult allies** – are essential for adolescents to make it to the end of the journey – healthy and on track to realise their full potential.

They shine a light on the invisible sign around an adolescent’s neck that says
“Make me feel I matter”

These are some of the key needs that allow our children and teens to grow, to flourish and thrive. We need to be mindful of meeting all these needs all the way through to adulthood. The basics will always matter no matter how our world evolves.

1. Relationships
2. Language
3. Nutrition
4. Play
5. Physical movement
6. Sleep
7. Executive functioning

Doing things you enjoy, in the non-digital world - which are respectful of yourself and others, **creates positive brain chemicals – ie empties the emotional barometer**. Here are some that work:

- Athletic success & sport – team and individual
- Artistic & creative expression – drama, dance, music, art
- Deep relaxation & stillness – calming audios, quiet time at beach
- Pets that love unconditionally!
- Safe, honest human connection – deep human connectedness, family, friendship
- Significant immersion in nature – walking, surfing, fishing, walking the dog
- Acts of service – helping others
- Discovering new purpose & meaning – starting something new such as gratitude journal, fitness program.

Gaming

There is so much about boys’ wiring and socialisation in particular that draws them to gaming more so than girls, and I often hear from worried parents concerned about excessive gaming.

So a few tips for managing gaming in your household (additional to the other tips shared here, which also apply to gaming):

- **Keep an eye on what your kids are playing** Before you approve their purchase/use of a game, you can find reviews and information through online guides such as commonsensemedia.org
- **Negotiate gaming privileges** – for tweens in particular, have an agreement that if they want to

spend time gaming they also need to ensure they are doing chores, spending time with friends in real life and getting schoolwork done.

- **Have conversations and boundaries around what's acceptable, age-appropriate content** – i.e. around swearing, sexualised content, violence and gore, misogynistic content.

Read my [Ten Agreements for Gaming](#) article for more on this and for a sample agreement you might use with your tween. Listen to my Parental As Anything episode featuring Brad on Kids and Online Gaming [here](#).

A HANDFUL OF GREAT SITES FOR YOU TO FOLLOW:

DiGGi Social

The ^{DiGGi} Home platform is a wonderful way for families to learn together. <https://digiisocial.com/>

eSafety Commissioner

Excellent advice for parents and action steps for parents on parental controls, cyberbullying, sexting and sending nudes, children under 5, online safety and more. <https://www.esafety.gov.au/parents>

Sex Ed Rescue with Cath Hakanson

Cath has some great tips for how to talk to your kids & teens about porn. <https://sexedrescue.com/>

The Australian Federal Police

The AFP have some great resources including:

- an online blackmail and sexual extortion response kit to aid victims of sextortion, along with their parents and guardians. <https://www.afp.gov.au/news-media/media-releases/police-warning-sexortion-profit-rise-:~:text=Sextortion is a crime that,unless their demands are met>
- excellent posts on their FB page about cyber safety: <https://www.facebook.com/AusFedPolice/>

Safe on Social

An essential resource if you've got tweens venturing into the social media landscape. In particular check out their blog for some fabulous, up-to-the-minute articles (some written by young people) about issues that we all need to know about in the online space: <https://www.safeonsocial.com/blog>

Here are two blogs from them I think parents should read:

- [Why my new high schooler won't be having a phone](#)
- [Account security: How to minimise your risk](#)

Digital Families Parent Coach – Leonie Smith

"The Cyber Safety Lady" Leonie Smith is now offering coaching for families. She also has an excellent podcast which both Claire and I have been on. Find her here: www.thecybersafetylady.com.au

Dr Kristy Goodwin

Kristy has some wonderful content, not just for how you can support your kids to navigate the digital world, but for how can take charge of your own digital distractions and stop screens from adding to your stress. Her new book Dear Digital, We Need to Talk is a must-read. <https://drkristygoodwin.com/>

The Unplugged Psychologist – obviously!!

Obviously I love what Brad does which is why we're hosting this masterclass, but also check out his Insta account as she puts some great tips on there: <https://www.instagram.com/unpluggedpsychologist/>

EXTRA RESOURCES FROM MAGGIE

Articles:

[Teen boys and gaming \(good for Tweens too!\): Ten Agreements for Healthy Balance](#)

[The scary reality of a teen's search for identity in a world of socials, selfies and fake news](#)

[Why today's teens might surprise you](#)

[The very real crisis for today's tween and teen girls](#)

[Leaning in with light for our tweens and teens](#)

Videos:



Teens, Tweens and Phones



Boys and Fortnite



Why teens don't like to leave their comfort zone



Moody teen or a real worry?



My TEDx talk: Exploring the big question, why am I here

Relevant Parental as Anything podcast episodes

[Kids and online gaming](#)

[Why our teens simply must sleep](#)

[Teens, smartphones and how to get it right](#)

[Cyberbullying: What you need to know before you give your child a smartphone](#)

[Should I give my tween a mobile phone?](#)

[Life outside screens has no meaning](#)

Thank you for joining us!

For more resources from Maggie:

Visit: www.maggiedent.com

Facebook/Instagram/YouTube: @maggiedentauthor

Twitter: @queenofcommonse