

When smartphones go to school

Work and grades tend to suffer when there is off-task use in the classroom

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Some 73 percent of teens use smartphones, many times even at school. Studies find some use of smartphones can help class performance — others merely hurt it.

If you're like most kids these days, you use a smartphone, and you use it often. You may even use that phone to text, tweet or go online during class.

In the United States, 73 percent of teens own or have access to a smartphone. A mere 12 percent have no cell phone. Those numbers come from a 2015 survey by the Pew Research Center in Washington, D.C.

Some 90 percent of teens with cell phones send texts. The typical number is 30 texts per day. That's the *median* number from the Pew data. Additionally, the Pew report shows, 92 percent of teens go online daily. Almost one in four claims to be online "almost constantly."

You need to be tech-savvy, both in and outside of school. But too much tech time at school for things other than classwork can cost you, new studies show. Unfortunately, kicking the habit of using cellphones and other mobile devices in class can be a hard.

Read on to see what scientists say about the use of smartphones and other mobile devices in class and what it could mean for today's teens.

How mobile devices can help in class

Smartphones, tablets and other devices can be very handy at school. Curious about something the teacher said? A quick Internet search can turn up more facts. Want to prepare charts and present top-notch class reports? As the saying goes, there's an app for that.



The typical U.S. teen uses a smartphone to send texts or browse the Internet, even at school. Sometimes that can help probe a class topic in greater depth.

Mobile devices make it easy to type and organize notes. Calculator apps can help with math problems. Devices can even replace heavy, paper textbooks.

And that's not all. "If we have these devices, we can do a lot of things around student interests and projects," says Vincent Cho at Boston College in Massachusetts. For example, mobile devices often are cheaper and less bulky than regular computers. But, like regular computers, they allow Internet access. With that, students can share ideas and opinions within — or beyond — the classroom. Devices can connect interested students with groups and experts in that field as well.

Cho and Joshua Littenberg-Tobias, also at Boston College, recently surveyed teachers at a high school that urges all students to use mobile devices. In general, teachers felt these devices could improve learning, the Boston College team reported last April at a meeting of the American Educational Research Association. But teachers at that high school also were worried about their students becoming distracted.

Concludes Nowak, “People believe they are better at multitasking than they are and this is leading them to bad study habits.” Her group shared its findings in the December 2015 issue of *Computers in Human Behavior*.

Drawn to distraction?

The classroom isn’t the only place where students use mobile devices when they should be focusing on something else. Talking and texting on cell phones play a role in more than one of four U.S. motor vehicle crashes. The National Safety Council in Itasca, Ill., made that estimate last May after reviewing 2013 data on road accidents.



Some 24 percent of traffic accidents involve drivers who were talking or texting on the road. Here’s one time when a phone’s distraction could turn deadly.

In another recent study, many college students admitted that they often text, even when they know they shouldn’t. Examples included texting during prayer services or in romantic situations.

College students “seem to have almost a compulsion” to use their cellphones, says Marissa Harrison. “They can’t resist checking their cellphones for texts.” Harrison is a psychologist at Pennsylvania State University in Harrisburg who worked on this college-student study. *Social Science Journal* published her team’s findings in June 2015.

In extreme cases, using mobile devices and social media too much can turn into an *addiction*. By that, scientists mean people develop a compelling need to engage in some behavior, even when they know the consequences can be bad.

One August 2014 study showed that college-age cellphone users can show some of the same symptoms that drug addicts do. For example, some students felt *anxious* when their phone was not available. Students showing signs of addiction also spent more and more time using their phones. Many admitted their phone use was excessive. A second study that same month concluded that students can become addicted to Facebook (although better ways to measure that addiction are needed). The *Journal of Behavioral Addictions* published [both studies](#).



Twenty-four percent of teens say they're online "almost constantly," reports the Pew Research Center. In some cases, they're so anxious to lose a mobile connection that their habit takes on addiction-like qualities.

Even where phone use isn't quite addictive, the habit of using mobile technology can pull at our attention, notes Jesper Aagaard. He's a graduate student in psychology at Aarhus University in Denmark. He recently interviewed 16- to 20-year old business-school students about their "off task" use of phones and tablet computers in class. "Off task" means that their use didn't deal with the subjects being discussed in class. This scientist also spent six months observing students in class.

His conclusion: The habit of using mobile devices can pull students towards tasks "that tend to conflict with school use."

For example, you might type your PIN, or personal identification number, without thinking whenever you pull out the phone. "The PIN, in other words, became embodied in your hand through practice," says Aagaard. In the same way, you might unthinkingly open the texting screen, email or some app.

That process becomes even easier with shortcuts, such as typing "F," "A," and "enter" to open Facebook. So whenever they let their guard down, students quickly — and without thinking — log onto Facebook to check their notifications, Aagaard says. "In other words, they are drawn to distraction." His study appears in the September 2015 issue of *Computers & Education*.



New research suggests the habit of using cellphones and other mobile devices draws teens to use them almost automatically.

What should you do?

“Try to avoid splitting your attention” between what’s going on in class and whatever you might feel a need to do with your mobile device, advises Kuznekoff at Miami University. Otherwise, he says, “there’s a danger you’re spreading your attention too thin.”

“In order to pay more attention in class — or even outside of school — I recommend trying to obstruct your habits,” says Aagaard. For example, turn your cellphone or tablet off, or at least put it in airplane mode. Then you won’t wind up checking texts or using social-media sites without thinking.

Closing your laptop or tablet and putting your phone away more often could be good advice even outside the classroom. Stresses Harrison: “You’re going to miss out on a whole new and exciting world if you can’t get your head out of your phone screen.”