



Tether Yourself

The enlightening talk parents aren't having can keep teens from a damaging drift.

by Rachel Macy Stafford

SCOTT AND I purchased a smartphone for our daughter, Natalie, when she began participating in a massive year-round swimming program in a city where we knew no one. Although I felt relieved that she could contact us if practice released early, or in case of an emergency, I felt unsettled by the capabilities and risks the device opened up for her. We immediately implemented the recommended online safety guidelines, installed content filtering software, and discussed cyber dangers, such as online bullying, predators, pornography, sexting, and what to do in each situation. Still, my uneasiness persisted. I continued to read extensively on the subject and was, for some reason, particularly drawn to articles about teen suicide as they related to social media use.

Feeling More Than Uneasy

One night, the uneasiness I'd been feeling reached an all-time high and spurred me to action — preventative action I'd not taken before.

I was contacted by two friends, from places our family had previously lived, whose daughters were

in the same grade as Natalie. These vibrant young women, with whom she had once played with and shared towels during swim meets, were now harming themselves, hating themselves; the light was dimming from their spirits right in front of their parents' eyes.

After learning about their struggles, I read a sobering article in *Time* magazine by Markham Heid titled, "We Need to Talk about Kids and Smartphones." The article was about an outgoing young woman named Nina Langton, who shocked everyone with an attempted suicide. The particular

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details of her story gave me great pause: “After her attempted suicide and during her stay at a rehabilitation facility, Nina and her therapist identified body image insecurity as the foundation of her woe. ‘I was spending a lot of time stalking models on Instagram, and I worried a lot about how I looked,’ says Nina, who is now 17. She’d stay up late in her bedroom, looking at social media on her phone, and poor sleep—coupled with an eating disorder—gradually snowballed until suicide felt like her only option. ‘I didn’t totally want to be gone,’ she says. ‘I just wanted help and didn’t know how else to get it.’”

Despite her professional background in public health, Nina’s mom, Christine Langton, was caught off-guard by her daughter’s suicide attempt. “Nina was funny, athletic, smart, personable,” she said. “Depression was just not on my radar.”

In hindsight, Christina said she wished she had done more to moderate her daughter’s smartphone use. “It didn’t occur to me not to let her have the phone in her room at night,” she said. “I just wasn’t thinking about the impact of the phone on her self-esteem or self-image until after everything happened.”

Nina sounded a lot like my highly driven, very lovable, athletically gifted, brown-eyed girl. With that recognition, I knew exactly what I needed to do.

Taking Action

I went to my daughter’s room and asked her if we could talk. I felt my heart racing at the importance of the conversation we were about to have. Natalie was stretched out on her bed, surrounded by homework and scrolling social media.

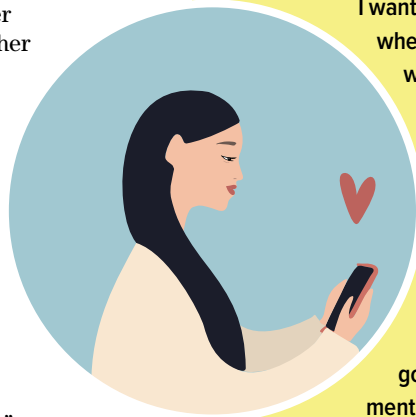
I sat down and told Natalie about the two mothers who had reached out to me for help. My daughter’s face fell as I told her about her former teammate, who discovered her looks had been rated on social media. I relayed some of the painful comments this young woman had read that caused her to harm herself. I explained that she had expressed hating herself so much that she no longer wanted to live.

“I’m worried,” I told Natalie truthfully. “And it’s my job to protect you,” I added.

Natalie assured me she had good friends, a sensible head on her shoulders, and would come to me if anything was wrong.

At that point, it would have been easy to end the conversation, have faith everything would be OK, and walk out of the room. It would have been convenient to reduce the screen limit setting on her phone or to just confiscate it all together. Instead, I chose to do the hard thing. I chose to be the encourager she needed me to be, the person who empowers her with the vital information she needs to navigate this media-saturated world.

The anchor was there; I just had to help her lower it safely into the water. So I offered her the following.



know you are a smart, capable, and resourceful young woman, and those are innate qualities you will call upon time and time again in your life. Those instincts will serve as a compass when the wind is behind you, and they will guide you to safety in rough waters. Unfortunately, the part I can’t teach you is how to trust them.

I want you to know it’s natural to go through difficult periods when you don’t feel like yourself, when you question your worth, when your God-given purpose isn’t clear. During those times of uncertainty and self-doubt, I want you to use your instincts to reset your perspective and reaffirm your beautiful worth and extraordinary potential.

It’s important to understand how others manipulate us when we are online. Social media developers know how to create algorithms to capture and influence our consumption, tap into our insecurities, and ultimately engage further action, such as making a purchase. The goal is to achieve the highest possible amount of engagement in the form of Likes, Shares, and Follows. There is even

a term for this in Silicon Valley: brain hacking. Sadly, these tactics have a negative impact on our mental health — and teenagers are especially susceptible. Here’s why.

The teen brain isn’t done forming, and the part of the brain that manages impulse control, empathy, judgment, and the ability to plan ahead isn’t fully developed. This means you’re more likely to stumble upon disturbing online content or find yourself in troubling situations; it means you’re more likely to become distracted from the important tasks at hand; it means you’re more likely to become addicted to your device.

So, let’s think about this in terms of your life.

Each time the phone alerts you to something, you stop what you’re doing, whether it’s homework or a job you have to do. What used to take you one hour to do might now take you several hours, and it’s safe to assume the work won’t be completed as well, thanks to the distraction. Constant distraction will lead to an inability to focus, which will reflect in your grades and impact the job opportunities you have as you grow. Spending quality time with friends and family will be impacted by the need to check for updates, making you believe your phone is most important, instead of the people right in front of you.

Every time you aimlessly scroll, you’re being influenced by what you see on the screen. Your thoughts and beliefs about what your body or your life should look like are being shaped. The hidden influence of this exposure can create a poor self-image, unrealistic comparisons, and harmful judgments — and it will affect you at a subconscious level, so you won’t even realize it is happening.

But it doesn’t have to happen this way — you have the power to take back control.

You see, awareness changes everything. Awareness is your weapon against the hidden influences and damaging behaviors. While you’re online, your mind, your thoughts, your core values are gravitating to wherever tech companies want you to go. The remedy is to limit the time you spend drifting in the online world and anchor yourself in real life — in real people and real conversations; in furry animals, interesting books, good music, and quiet prayer; in cooking, photography, painting, and moving your body.

When your worth is in question, when you feel lost and alone, when you feel sad and can’t explain why, anchor yourself in what centers you, makes you feel safe, and gives you hope.

I’m with you, and I love you.

After empowering Natalie with this perspective, I suggested she order an alarm clock for her bedroom rather than use her phone to wake up for school. I was surprised there was no pushback when we talked about limiting phone use to a designated time after school and then a little more time after nightly swim team practice. She was also receptive when I asked her to start charging her phone in a separate area of the house until morning.

When we release what controls us, we’re free to choose what matters most.

Almost instantly, I saw a difference. I noticed she was more present in main areas of the house, accepting invitations to play board games and help with the cooking. Her disposition was more cheerful, relaxed, and fun-loving. She began taking walks outside, often inviting me to go along. She was getting homework and household chores completed more efficiently.

It became routine for Natalie to charge her phone in my bathroom at night. Although her facial expression indicated this was something she had never enjoyed doing, her actions indicated she appreciated the reason why. Sometimes after she plugged in her phone she would crawl into my bed and take my hand.

Whenever Natalie did this, I felt a strong sense that her Grandpa Ben, Scott’s father, was looking after us. Our family had gone to see him soon after his cancer diagnosis in 2017, not knowing that would be his final weekend on earth.

We’d spent the whole glorious weekend looking through his keepsake boxes and hearing his favorite life memories. Although Ben was in considerable pain, he continually grabbed my hand and squeezed it tightly.

Tether yourself, his action seemed to say, because in the end, our human connections, our relationships, our love for one another will be the only things that really matter.

Tether yourself, I say ...

So you don’t drift away from what truly matters.

So you don’t forget your worth.

So you don’t miss the moments that make life worth living. *Tether yourself*.

It’s what we must do for ourselves.

It’s what we must do for our children.

It’s what we must do for each other.

I doubt many people would knowingly pick up a device that has been proven to negatively influence our thoughts, choices, actions, and future happiness. Yet people who struggle with digital addiction face this choice every day. The virtual world created by social media and online gaming platforms provides an escape from reality and can have addictive qualities.

But awareness changes everything.

When we release what controls us, we’re free to choose what matters most.

Let’s choose what matters most.

Our lives are far too valuable to let them drift away. □

Rachel Macy Stafford is a *New York Times* bestselling author and certified special education teacher. Her latest book is *Live Love Now: Relieve the Pressure and Find Real Connection with Our Kids*. Connect with Rachel and her supportive community at HandsFreeMama.com.

LIVE LOVE NOW

Relieve the Pressure and Find Real Connection with Our Kids

By Rachel Macy Stafford

In *Live Love Now*, *New York Times* bestselling author Rachel Macy Stafford tackles the biggest challenges facing kids today and equips adults to engage them with humanness and heart, compassion and honesty to discover the deep, life-giving connection everyone is longing for.

What do young people need now more than ever? Adults who are Truth-tellers not task-masters. Encouragers not enforcers. Guides not half-listeners. The good news is, it’s not too late! No matter what’s happened in the past, you can help the kids you love face the top stressors of today, including academic pressure, parental expectations, “technofence”, lack of purpose, isolation, and loneliness.

With illuminating, straightforward strategies, this guide reveals the importance of practicing acceptance, pursuing peace, and exploring wellness and purpose for yourself so you can be the kind of real, relevant, and lifelong role model young people are searching for. Engaging and thoughtful, each chapter includes moving stories from Rachel’s personal journey as a mom of a teen and preteen, along with illustrative narratives and prompts to help you reflect and take steps toward becoming the kind of adult young people admire and trust.

Whether you’re a parent, educator, older sibling, coach, or anyone in a role of leading young people, this book will help you meet the goal of raising and guiding young people to become resilient, compassionate, and capable adults.

Available at lifeway.com.

