



84%

of high school students used AI for school work in 2025

College Board, 2025

80%

of high school students say no teacher has taught them how to use AI

RAND Corporation, 2025

83%

of ChatGPT users couldn't recall their own AI-assisted writing minutes later

MIT Media Lab (2025 preprint)

8.5hrs

average daily screen time for teens (beyond school)

Common Sense Media, 2021

THE GUIDED VS. UNGUIDED DIVIDE

Two Paths. Two Outcomes.

✔ Guided AI

Used responsibly, AI can deepen reasoning, expand creativity, and strengthen agency — by teaching kids when and how to use these powerful tools.

● Clarifying Understanding

AI helps kids explore complex ideas from multiple angles and work through confusion — *after* they've attempted the task themselves.

● Improved Access & Learning Support

Scaffolding for kids with learning differences—differentiated practice that meets them where they are.

● Timely Feedback & Iteration

Immediate, constructive feedback on drafts guiding kids to revise, reflect, and improve before they call it done. Increases user interest and engagement.

● Metacognition & Reflection

Prompts kids to explain their reasoning, identify gaps in understanding, and reflect on their learning process. Students learn to critically analyze AI.

● Curiosity, Creativity & Exploration

Brainstorming and creative exploration that expands original thinking, while never replacing student voice.

● Agency Through Intentional Use

AI as a thought partner to amplify human thinking, not a shortcut. Kids build awareness of AI's limits and learn *when* to use it, and *when not* to.

● Learning Gains with Socratic Tutors

When AI asks questions and requires justification, it can have a significant impact on critical thinking performance, test scores, and engagement.

! Unguided AI

Without guidance, AI dependence can erode the agency, memory, and motivation that learning actually requires.

● Weakened Critical Thinking

When AI delivers instant answers, kids skip the productive mental struggle that builds reasoning, analysis, and problem-solving skills.

● Poor Memory & Retention

Kids remember less when AI writes, summarizes, or completes work for them. Without productive struggle, learning doesn't stick.

● Drop in Motivation & Effort

Overreliance triggers metacognitive laziness — kids struggle to self-regulate and engage deeply in learning, often resorting to copy-paste shortcuts.

● Social Use, Not Just Academic

72% of teens have tried AI companions; **34%** reported feeling uncomfortable after AI-companion interactions.

● Lowered Self-Confidence

When kids compare their authentic work to AI-polished outputs, they experience a measurable drop in self-confidence and perceived ability.

● Erosion of Agency

When decisions, wording, and problem-solving are outsourced to AI, kids lose practice making choices independently.

● Skill Gaps

Foundational skills — writing, calculation, reasoning — can't develop when AI does the work. The reward loop of instant answers makes patience, research, and productive struggle feel unbearable. The work that builds the brain feels too hard when AI offers instant answers.

PROTECT THE PAUSE

It takes **23 minutes and 15 seconds** to return to the original task after a digital interruption, while the typical user feels cortisol-driven anxiety to check their phone within **15 minutes** of pausing. Even when we're "off-screen," the self-interrupting pattern of use leaves cognition fragmented with "**Continuous Partial Attention.**"

— Gloria Mark, Larry Rosen & Linda Stone

What brilliant ideas could come out of your brain — if you only gave yourself the time to imagine them?



None of us grew up with this. This is a starting point. The rest, we write together.
Counterweights to technology are the foundation. Intentional technology use is the direction.

COUNTERWEIGHTS TO SCREENS & AI

10+ evidence-based counterweights to start now — showing up in homes of families rethinking screen use together.

The Screen Reality

PROJECTION FOR TEENS

33% of a lifetime → **50%** of waking hours → **93%** of free time

✓ Read Beyond the Scroll

Sustained reading strengthens circuits for comprehension, empathy, and focus — all softened by short-form scrolling.

Read long. Discuss deeply. Protect sustained attention.

✓ Write It, Don't Type It

Handwriting builds memory, reasoning, and self-regulation pathways that typing bypasses. Journals, sketches, letters, creating comics — all count.

The slower pace strengthens reflection and retention.

✓ Get Outside

Unstructured play and time in nature build planning, creativity, and emotional regulation. **Even 20 minutes daily restores attention.**

Play strengthens the executive-function skills screens quietly replace.

✓ Phone-Free Sleep

Protect **30 minutes** after waking and **1 hour** before bed. Charge phones outside the bedroom — sleep, memory consolidation, and morning mood depend on it.

A rested brain learns. A tired brain reacts.

✓ Talk It Through

Family debates, analyzing headlines, or diving into a shared text cultivates skepticism, curiosity, and perspective-taking. **Trains kids to think critically instead of consuming passively.**

Talk through ideas, not just about them.

✓ Play the Long Game

Chess, Catan, Sudoku, D&D, Monopoly. Games that reward planning and patience balance the "instant feedback" habits screens build in.

Learn to wait, think ahead, and adjust.

✓ Family Meals, Phones Away

Family dinners without phones build attachment, language, and emotional regulation. Kids with regular family meals show stronger vocabulary and lower anxiety rates.

Eat together. Talk together.

✓ Practice Boredom

Waiting without screens — a quiet car ride, creative moments, time at a restaurant or grocery checkout line. Periods without input let daydreaming and self-directed thought take over.

Boredom trains the brain to generate, not just consume.

✓ Earn the Answer

"Desirable difficulties" research shows that effortful learning enhances long-term retention. Encourage tasks that feel slightly hard — complex puzzles, mental math, and crosswords.

If it feels hard, the brain is growing.

✓ Model Tech Balance

Adults check their phones **186 times a day** on average. Kids absorb this long before any lesson about media balance.

Share your own struggles.

+ Beyond Screens + bonus

Build the same cognitive and creative muscles screens compete with:

Makers & Builders Debate Mock Trials Chess Robotics Dance Sewing
Cooking Instruments Gardening Sports Art Volunteering Woodworking

Moderation & Balance. A 2026 study found a U-curve: too much digital use harms — but so does none at all, for both adolescent girls and boys. **The healthiest teens were intentional, moderate users.** Well-being was measured across **8 validated domains** — happiness, optimism, life satisfaction, worry, sadness, perseverance, emotional regulation, and cognitive engagement. — JAMA Pediatrics 2026 (Singh et al., **100,991 kids**)

Take A Break. In just **2 weeks**, a study found that blocking mobile internet improved well-being, lifted mental health (larger effect than antidepressants), and **restored sustained attention matching 10 years of age-related decline.** — PNAS Nexus, 2025