

The Solution to Digital Harm Is Real-Life Connection

Much of the discussion about young people and social media understandably focuses on what we want them to do less of: less scrolling, less isolation, less exposure to harmful content, and less time spent in digital environments that can intensify anxiety and social comparison.

But if we are serious about the well-being of young people, we also have to answer a more important question: What do we want them to do instead?

As a social worker, school counselor, and educator, I have spent much of my professional life thinking about the environments in which young people develop. One lesson is remarkably consistent: healthy development does not happen in isolation. Young people need relationships with caring adults. They need opportunities to belong, to contribute, to solve problems, to develop competence, and to discover that their choices matter to other people.

In other words, they need a life that exists beyond a screen. This is the difference between living within a community and experiencing community.

This idea has received renewed attention through books such as Jonathan Haidt's *The Anxious Generation*, but it should also sound familiar to parents, teachers, coaches, youth workers, and anyone who has watched a child grow. Part of building resilience is giving young people safe, supportive opportunities to experience independence, take on challenges, and learn from failure.

A basketball practice, an art project, a conversation with a trusted adult, a first job, volunteering, learning a skill, or simply spending time with friends in a safe environment may seem ordinary. Developmentally, they are anything but ordinary.

Data from Boys & Girls Clubs across Tennessee illustrate the point. Among more than 3,000 young people surveyed, 91 percent reported that adults at their Club take time to talk with them and 89 percent said adults listen to what they have to say. Young people reporting stronger adult support also reported substantially better ability to understand and manage their emotions. They were more likely to say they consider how their actions affect others and more likely to report abstaining from substance abuse.

We should be careful not to reduce healthy development to any single program or statistic. But the larger pattern matters. Relationships, belonging, voice, and meaningful activity are protective factors in the lives of young people.

That makes Tennessee's decisions about social-media settlement funds especially important. If these dollars exist because of concern about the effects of digital environments on children, then

some meaningful portion should be invested in creating stronger real-world environments for those same children.

A statewide investment in out-of-school-time programs—through an initiative such as BOOST, Building Opportunity Through Out of School Time—would do exactly that. It could strengthen community organizations that already provide mentoring, recreation, academic support, mental health support, social emotional development, workforce preparation, leadership opportunities, and places where young people are known by name.

This should not be framed as technology versus children. Technology is part of their world and will remain so. The goal is balance—and ensuring that the digital world does not crowd out experiences essential to becoming a healthy adult. In fact, it is the character and strengths that they develop in real life which will safeguard the next generation's decisions about how technology integrates further with our world.

Ultimately, prevention isn't just about reducing risk. It's about creating the conditions in which young people can thrive.

Tennessee has an opportunity to use these funds not simply to respond to harm, but to build something better in its place.

That is an investment in young people worth making.