Research finds that, on average, children engage heavily with technology by age eleven and that adolescents use technology for non-academic purposes for nearly three and a half hours each day. Girls are more likely to use technology for social networking and communication, while boys are more likely to use technology for gaming or entertainment.¹

Interestingly, young men are more likely than young women to become problematic Internet users and young women are more likely than young men to recognize and control their problematic use.² Overall, research does not support “generalized 'bad versus good’ effects of Internet use on youth” but suggests that “the context in which Internet use occurs needs to be taken into account.”³
INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Intense use of digital technology can interfere with young girls’ social skills and ability to manage healthy, face-to-face relationships. Research on girls between the ages of eight and twelve found that—compared to girls who limited their use of digital technology—heavy users spent less time in face-to-face interactions, reported feeling less accepted by their peers, and spent more time engaged with peers their parents considered to be a bad influence. In contrast, the same study found that frequent face-to-face communication was closely associated with positive social and emotional development.4

During adolescence, girls carry out two critical developmental tasks: building peer relationships and developing a sense of identity.5

• Digital technology enhances girls’ opportunities for self-presentation and self-disclosure, which can be a double-edged sword with respect to girls’ peer relationships. Online environments make it easy for girls to connect with friends and can enhance friendship quality, but they also make it easy for girls to engage in cyberbullying and virtual harassment.6 Similarly, teenagers can access valuable social support online, but they can also interact with dangerous strangers.6

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

INTERPERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

• Parents should encourage their daughters to have “face to face” time with their friends so they can practice the complex and subtle social skills that are best learned through real—not virtual—interpersonal interactions. Digital media should be used to strengthen girls’ relationships and should not take the place of spending time with friends in person.11

• Research indicates that the “psychosocial problems that originate through online communication often resemble those found in the offline lives.”14 In other words, girls who contend with conflict, exclusion, or rumor-spreading online often face similar challenges in their offline relationships. Adults can help girls build their social, assertion, and conflict mediation skills to improve both their online and offline relationships.

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

• Time spent online can contribute to depression and anxiety in girls who have few offline friendships or unsupportive online relationships. Parents should pay attention to the quality of girls’ offline and online relationships and, if necessary, limit access to digital media while supporting in-person friendships.

• Parents should help girls moderate their overall use of digital media because excessive use can compromise physical health and interfere with sleep, even as it supports positive peer relationships. Cell phones and computers should be turned off at least a half-hour before bedtime and cell phones, in particular, should not be allowed to interrupt sleep.

SCHOOL WORK

• Adults should help girls suspend their Internet access or block access to alluring websites during periods of concentrated work. Further, parents can work with their cell phone plan carriers to suspend data access during particular days or times of each week.

• Many girls find that they are highly productive when they follow a twenty-five minute period of concentrated work with the reward of five online minutes. Girls who are easily distracted by technology may need help from parents who are willing to regulate online access for them. For example, some parents offer to hold their daughter’s phone while she studies and to return it for short study breaks.
Research on the impact of digital technology on identity formation also yields mixed results. Going online to communicate with friends appears to contribute to a clear sense of personal identity; however, girls without strong friendships may go online to experiment with different identities and may, as a result, feel less sure about who they are or how they want to present themselves. 

MENTAL AND PHYSICAL HEALTH

Research on college students finds that media multitasking – the act of moving back and forth between doing focused work and texting, emailing, and posting online – contributes to depression and social anxiety. This is true even when controlling for overall levels of media use. Similarly, research on the connection between engagement with social media and life satisfaction finds that it’s the quality, not the quantity, of the interactions that counts. College students with supportive online interactions reported high levels of life satisfaction, regardless of how much time they spent online. Time spent surfing online can contribute to depression and anxiety, but only in the context of having few or poor friendships.

Compared to heavy users of screen-based media, teens who limit their use report better physical health, higher quality of life, and more positive family relationships; however, heavy screen-based media users report more positive peer relationships than teens who limit their use. Exposure to electronic media disrupts sleep by contributing to later bedtimes and greater overall fatigue. Nighttime cell phone use, in particular, was strongly associated with daytime sleepiness.

SCHOOL WORK

Media multitasking – attempting to learn while simultaneously engaged with media – interferes with work efficiency, quality, and value. Students who media multitask make more mistakes, remember less of what they learn, are less able to transfer what they do learn to new contexts, and have lower grade point averages than students who don’t media multitask. In addition to compromising mental power, the interruptions associated with multitasking waste time. The constant switching from one task to another costs students the extra time and effort of trying to pick up where they left off when they return to their studies. Indeed, one study found that students were on task for an average of only five and a half minutes before being distracted by digital media.

GIRLS AND DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY [ENDNOTES]

RESOURCES FOR PARENTS AND EDUCATORS

@ WEBSITE

COMMONSENSEMEDIA.ORG
This first-rate website provides:
• reviews and age-specific ratings of digital media,
• advice for parents, and
• resources for educators.

BOOKS

NET CETERA: CHATTING WITH KIDS ABOUT BEING ONLINE
This accessible guide, created by the Federal Trade Commission and available online at onguardonline.gov/netcetera, provides a basic introduction to talking with children and teenagers about online behavior and safety.

TALKING BACK TO FACEBOOK: A COMMON SENSE GUIDE TO RAISING KIDS IN THE DIGITAL AGE
James Steyer, the founder of Common Sense Media, addresses how digital technology influences kids’ relationships, attention, and privacy and provides age-specific “common sense tips” for parents.

BOOK

A SMART GIRL’S GUIDE TO THE INTERNET
The American Girl Library comes through again with this thoughtful handbook for new users of digital technology. Appropriate for children and tweens.