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7 Perth teens give up social media for a week

AUGUST 12, 2015 11:33AM



Mikela Marissen (14), Sarah Beresford (15), Tyde Levi (15), Caiden Eaton (14), Taylor Wilkie (12), Ash Kemp (14) and Georgia Walford (13) all took up the challenge of quitting social media.

ANNABEL HENNESSY PerthNow

TAYLOR Wilkie doesn't like social media. She needs it.

After joining Facebook when she was in Year 4, the 12-year-old can't imagine a world where she isn't "connected" 24/7.

At nine, when kids of generations past were riding bikes and playing make-believe, Taylor remembers feeling like she would be the weird one if she didn't sign up for the latest app.

Now in Year 7 at Comet Bay College in Secret Harbour, social pressure is all about getting a boyfriend.

However, it's not so they can share a first kiss or hold hands. It's so they can post photos of each other on Snapchat — the social media app that lets users share messages that then “disappear”.

Taylor has never sent a letter in the post, doesn't know what a landline would be used for and spends about two hours everyday on sites such as Facebook, YouTube, Instagram and Kik. Every day she sends up to 50 texts and 10 photos on Snapchat.

But for one week she stopped.

As part of a special investigation by PerthNow, seven Perth teenagers tried to give up social media and their smartphones for seven days. The teens kept a diary during the experiment.

Six of the seven survived the week without giving in to techno temptation. But of those six, four said it would be “impossible” to live as a teenager without social media permanently.

Five reported spending more time outdoors. They also slept better and had “fewer fights” with parents.

Taylor said the challenge laid her social media addiction bare.



Taylor Wilkie, 13, from Secret Harbour. Normal tech time: Two hours a day on Facebook, Instagram, YouTube and Kik. Up to 50 texts and messages and 10 Snapchats per day. “I HATE THIS CHALLENGE. Feeling: annoyed.” – Day 3. Source: News Limited



Sarah Beresford, 15. Normal tech time: Two hours a day on Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook and Pinterest. Up to 50 texts a day. "Have suffered no adverse effects to my week of solitude. All in all, it was a relatively enjoyable experience." – Day7.Source:News Limited

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Taylor said the challenge laid her social media addiction bare.

"It really felt that way," she said.

"There were times when I was chanting, 'phone, phone, phone', in my head and when my mum first turned off the Wi-Fi I thought I was going to die I was so mad."

Sarah Beresford said she used her new-found free time to build a backyard chicken coop and read books. Normally Sarah would whittle away her time spending about 30-50 texts a day.

The 15-year-old now wished she was growing up in a pre-Facebook era.

"The art of communication has lost itself (even) our deep thoughts now consist of small talk," the Dianella teenager said.

"People put so much on social media that you just couldn't get in real life, so much of it is inappropriate and it's so easy to find about something you're not ready for accidentally, your innocence is gone from the time you're 12."



Mikaela Marissen, 14. Normal tech time: 30 minutes a day on Facebook and Snapchat. About 20 texts a day. “Completing the challenge made me realise I don’t need social media in my life, having face-to-face conversations and being in the moment is better.” – Day 7. Source: News Limited



Ash Kemp, 14. Normal tech time: Up to two hours a day on Snapchat, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. Up to 100 Snapchats a day. “Not being able to keep up with the world or things that have been happening is like I’ve been ‘excluded’ ... so many people around me are on their phones and socialising with the world and it’s tempting to use Snapchat and Instagram!!!” – Day 4. Source: News Corp Australia

Coolbinia teenager Mikaela Marissen, 14, said the week had made her reconsider the role social media was playing in her life. She hasn’t yet signed back into Facebook or Instagram.

“It made me question why I even had all these accounts and was spending all this time on them,” she said.

“I was more present when I was doing things and had more meaningful conversations.

“Ever since we got laptops in Year 7 everyone at school became so focused on communicating through technology, but I’ve found that I don’t actually enjoy that and prefer spending time with people in real-life.”

Mikaela said there was something “peaceful” about being tech-free.

She said confrontations that previously took place on the playground were now occurring over chat messenger websites late at night.

“People who are shy in person will act really confident online, and they’ll use social media if they need to confront someone,” she said.

Former Youth-Crisis Intervention Worker Kim Smith recently founded a program in West Perth called [Standing Strong](#) that caters towards teen girls facing confidence and self-esteem issues.

Ms Smith said the usual growing pains of coming of age were being intensified by social media.

“It can set girls up to start comparing themselves. If they’re feeling depressed or anxious and then go on social media and see pictures of their peers appearing to have the times of their life it can create massive insecurity,” she said.

Ms Smith said with some girls in her group being hassled for sexual photos by their male peers as young as 14, the digital world meant many kids were growing up faster.

“The thing I say to parents is that social media is a reality they need to accept it, instead of banning it, they can get on it with them to understand it more,” she said.

“Parents also need to understand it’s not all bad and generally your kid’s behaviour in real-life is going to be reflective of their behaviour online.”

Leeming teenager Ash Kemp, 14, spent most of the week riding her bike.

Known as the one among her friends who is always up-to-date with the latest online gossip, Ash normally spends at least two hours every day sending and sharing text messages.

“I realised I spend most of the day on social media,” she said.

“I had so much more free time and actually did more real-life social things.”

Ash said the challenge made life “less complicated”.

“It wasn’t as stressful not having to keep up with 24/7 cycle of connection,” she said.

“It was good to actually have a break and think. I do think social media can make things more intense ... everyone I know puts whether they’re single or taken in their bios on social media and it creates this focus on relationships.”

Even though she admits she counted down the final minutes of the challenge, Ash said the seven days made her think about what else she could do.



Georgia Walford, 13. Normal tech time: Three hours on Facebook, Tumblr, Vine, Snapchat and Youtube. 200 texts, three Facebook shares and one photo a day. "I've got two days to go and I'm sooo bored."– Day 5. Source: News Limited



Caiden Eaton, 14. Normal tech time: 25 texts a day, 30 minutes of games, 30 minutes of computer time. Just joined Facebook. "It's harder to be in touch with friends. Lots of them don't have landlines. It's hard to know what people are doing." – Day 2. Source: News Limited

For 13-year-old Georgia Walford, there were times she "just couldn't handle it".

"It was just not fun to be so disconnected," Georgia said.

"It was a bad week. The only good thing I can think of was that my mum was happier with me because I wasn't stressed out about stuff that was happening on social media."

Earlier this year, Georgia was the victim of cyber-bullying by former friends. Even during that she found it impossible to stay offline.

"When people say if you're being cyberbullied just not to look at it or to switch off your phone, I think they are so stupid. It's not that easy," she said.

Georgia said when she first started getting mean messages it took her a long time to tell anyone because she perceived cyber-bullying to be "normal".

She said social media created a pressure “to be perfect”. For example, if she posts a photo and it doesn’t get enough “likes” then she feels she has to delete it.

A former schoolteacher with 20 years’ experience, Claire Eaton regularly visits school with her workshop on “resilience, optimism and confidence”.

Ms Eaton said studies were showing kids of 2015 were maturing three years faster than previous generations.

“When I give speeches to rooms full of parents I ask, ‘Who here would like to be a teenager in 2015?’ Not a single hand will raise up. It’s never been harder to be a teenager,” she said.

“Thirty years ago, when a kid made a mistake they did it at the park — now they do it on social media where it’s public and there are long-term ramifications.”

Ms Eaton’s son Caiden, 14, took part in the challenge.

He said it was “much harder” than he expected.

An avid football and cricket player, Caiden had the smallest social media use of the group at about 25 texts a day.

Yet he still felt isolated from his peers during the week.

“I didn’t think it would bother me, but it had a much bigger effect. I felt out-of-the-loop at school when I’d be hearing things and not know what people were talking about,” Caiden said. “It was frustrating. A lot of my friends didn’t have landlines and I couldn’t catch up with them.”

Having just recently signed up to Facebook, Caiden said the challenge made him conscious that he never wanted social media “to control him”.



Tyde Mellet, 15. Normal tech time: Three hours on YouTube per day, up to an hour and a half on Facebook, uploads six Snapchats, 10 tweets, one Instagram and can send more than 100 texts a day. “My fans expect me to be constantly sharing and keeping them up to date.” – Pre-challenge Source:News Limited

Not everyone could go through the week without social media. Dianella teen Tyde Mellet, 15, has nearly 400,000 subscribers for his video posts on YouTube. Under the username Tyde Levi, he spends about three hours everyday on YouTube.

He dropped out on day one because he was “too scared to lose followers”.

Tyde also recently dropped out of high school to focus on his YouTube channel, which boasts videos titled “Sex?!”, “Apple Watch Sucks” and “Am I a Poo?”.

“It’s not just me talking to my friends, it’s my business,” he said.

“I’ve been able to travel to America for YouTube conventions and meet people all across the world. At school teachers were getting annoyed that I was falling behind in my work and they didn’t take it seriously, but for me it’s a career.”

Tyde’s mum, Laurelle Mellet, said while some parents might not understand her decision to let Tyde leave school, she wanted him to “follow his dreams”.

“So many parents are scared of social media, but I’ve made sure I’ve educated myself,” she said. “I’m not the best person to ask about social media addiction, because I’m addicted. First thing every morning I need to check my Facebook, Instagram and Twitter ... whether it’s a good thing or a bad thing I don’t know, only the future will tell.”