Ben Best, Co-host
Welcome to *defragmenting*, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity.

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In this episode of *defragmenting*, Emily Harrison, author of the Substack newsletter *Dear Christian Parent*, sits down with Dr. Keith Plummer to explore the impact of technology on children and teens. They discuss a four-part series she wrote on what parents need to know about artificial intelligence that covers its pervasive presence in daily life, its implications for education, the dangers of AI-created deepfakes, and its impact on artistic creativity. They also discuss the importance of fostering real-world skills and the need for collective action within the church to help families navigate the challenges of the digital age. Let's join their conversation now.

Dr. Keith Plummer
When we at Defragmenting say we promote biblical integrity, we mean that in two senses. First, we want to have conversations that help people appreciate the integrity, that is, the wholeness or unity of the Bible. We also want to encourage and aid believers to live in light of that unified biblical story, resulting in increasing conformity to the likeness of Christ. Thoughtful Christianity, likewise, has at least two senses. We strive to host conversations that demonstrate thoughtfulness with respect to clarity of mind, and we also mean thoughtful in the sense of kindness and consideration as opposed to rancor and hostility. Something that exacerbates the fragmenting of contemporary life and poses a threat to both biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity is the frenetic pace of our highly connected digital environment, which is why the subject of living wisely with respect to technology is one to which we frequently return. We're convinced that this is a critical matter of discipleship the church can't afford to ignore. So when we learn of Christians who are giving serious thought to the matter and producing helpful material to assist other believers and thinking more deeply about it, we take note and want to make others aware of their work as well.

Dr. Keith Plummer
That's the case with my guest, Mrs. Emily Harrison. She's a wife and a mom of two, a Colson Center for Christian Worldview fellow, and the author of a Substack newsletter called *Dear Christian Parent*, whose aim she describes as "to address the disconnect between research on digital media and youth and what the church is saying publicly." Emily, welcome to *defragmenting*, and thank you for your time.

Emily Harrison
Thank you so much, Keith. I'm honored to be here with you today.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Well, just to give folks an idea of how it is that we were connected, you and I both independently had reviewed Jonathan Haidt's book, *The Anxious Generation*, and became aware of each other's work through that. And I became aware of your newsletter, *Dear Christian Parent*. Started doing some reading, really appreciated the content that you were providing there. And I asked you today to speak about some things that you wrote regarding artificial intelligence for parents. But before we get into that, could you tell us a bit about how you became interested in the subject of technology and young people, and what motivated you to start writing about it at *Dear Christian Parent*?

Emily Harrison
Sure. So that story is really, like most stories that get people into things, a personal one. I had realized as a parent, when my kids were younger, they're fifth and seventh grade now. So I'm right in the thick of it, of all of this. But when they were younger, I just was seeing a lot of negative behaviors out of our kids when it would come time to turn off the TV or put down the iPad that they were playing "educational"—and I say "educational" in air quotes—"educational" games. And it was just different from maybe when I asked them to clean their room or put their snack away. There's a different level of disobedience and irritability. I remember one day standing, and I think this is probably just God's prompting on my heart, but standing in my living room and thinking, if I don't get a handle on this now, it's only going to get worse. I'm raising two boys. My kids are going... They've got a lot of energy,

which is great, but I need to figure this out. We had tried all sorts of behavior modification—popsicle sticks and sticker charts and all the things that you do with young kids.

Emily Harrison
So I took a deep dive into learning more about technology in kids and brains, and I started reading a lot, got connected with a handful of different organizations who are doing work on the national and, in fact, international stage. But I kept coming back to—a lot of what I was learning was also being informed by just the biblical worldview that I held, even though I was involved with kind of non-Christian and secular organizations. So I sat in that for a long time and kind of waited for somebody else to step up to the plate. And after a lot of encouragement from my husband and friends, I went through the Colson Fellows program, which really gave me that confidence and clarity that I needed to start speaking more publicly. I've been doing speaking at churches and local community groups. So launching the Substack was really an obedience to God, to kind of step out into that and take everything that I've been doing on the advocacy side and speak more to the church.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Great. And when you first started talking about some of these things with other parents and people in the church and so forth, what kind of reactions were you getting?

Emily Harrison
When I first started, which would have been around 2017, most people looked at me like I had three eyes, or something, or 12 heads. I don't know. I just think the narrative of, "We have to teach our kids how to use technology so that they'll be prepared for the workforce" was so prevalent that most people just thought I was maybe a little off my rocker. Though my friends were also saying they were having similar parenting struggles that I was having, so I knew it wasn't just my kids. I knew from the research, this was the technology and a lot of the applications and the software side of stuff that was really hurting my kids. So that was where I started, I would say there's been a really big shift, probably in the last six to nine months. I credit Haidt's book, *The Anxious Generation*, with propelling everything to the national stage. Clearly, he is a very good communicator. He wrote an excellent book, but a lot of what's in that book was pretty well-known within this community ahead of time. But I think he's brought it to the forefront. So now I'm getting more parents who say, Well, we know this stuff is bad for kids, but versus before, there wasn't really that awareness.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. And when you, around 2017, around that time, when you started doing this deep dive, what were some of the things that you found helpful?

Emily Harrison
A lot. One of the first books that I read was called *Reset your Child's Brain* by Victoria Dunckley. She's actually working on a 10-year anniversary edition. So this has been out there for a while, but it looked at brain development and what is—it talked about these dopamine surges. What is going on when a kid is on this media? It happens to adults, but it happens more to kids because their brains are still developing, so they're just a little bit more susceptible. They don't have that fully formed prefrontal cortex, which helps with reasoning, decision-making, impulse control. That doesn't form until the later teen, early 20 years. I was learning a lot on that and just seeing that this stuff is really incompatible with childhood.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. Well, towards the end of 2024, you wrote an article for the Institute for Family Studies, called "AI: What Parents Need to Know," which you then expanded, for your Substack, into a four-part series. And it's a really helpful primer for parents with respect to just some of the basics about what their young people are probably interacting with, one way or the other, whether or not they know it. I wanted to just maybe walk through those segments. Number one, when we talk about AI, artificial intelligence, in what ways are young people already—and us as adults—already dealing with it?

Emily Harrison
Yeah. So AI is pretty much in everything. Most of us don't know. I kind of saw this was the next thing.

So I figured, well, if I'm going to be writing on technology, I better start to understand it. AI is so big and so broad that if you open up your weather app to see if it's going to rain later this afternoon, that's using AI. If you are typing out an email and there's predictive text telling you the next word you might need to use, or want to use, or should use, or however you want to put it, that's AI. If you are using ChatGPT, people know that, obviously, that one's AI, it's a little bit more in your face. But what we're seeing now is so many of these platforms. There's also the algorithm side of things that's AI. So the more you watch something, the more you look at something, the more it feeds you information that's similar to that. And all of this is being sold to advertisers, too. So that's kind of the broad scope of what's happening online with AI. We're just in it, and it's so common, and it's so known that most people don't even see it. It just feels like what the internet is.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yes. We're kind of swimming in it, and to think about it doesn't come to mind because it's just a given. In your essay about it, you discuss two different kinds of artificial intelligence. You make a distinction between narrow AI and then artificial general intelligence. Could you say a bit about what the distinction there is?

Emily Harrison
Yeah, sure. So narrow AI, like the name says, does a narrow task. So it's going to take algorithms, it's going to take all this information, and it's going to do what it's performing to do. So in that sense, I like to say your weather app is not going to tell you what show you should watch on Netflix later. It doesn't have that data set in it. Netflix isn't going to tell you if you need to wear a sweater because it's going to be cold this afternoon. They are narrow forms of AI. They do a specific task for a specific purpose. It doesn't mean just one, but a small subset of things. That really is the AI that we're swimming in right now. Within all that, there's generative AI, large language models, word vectors, hallucinations. We can go on and on with some of those. But the general AI is really the AI—some people call it super AI, I see those terms used interchangeably. Sometimes they're set as three categories, sometimes it's just the two. But this is the human intelligence, like artificial intelligence of the Jetsons—the cartoon that I grew up watching of robots who can act, think, and behave like humans. And that's theoretical. We're not there yet.

Dr. Keith Plummer
We're not there yet. But that's the idea of machine quasi-intelligence that is capable of doing all that human cognitive powers are able to do. So it's not just streamlined in terms of these particular tasks that the narrow is. And with respect to what parents should know regarding what kind of AI their kids are probably interacting with, in some form or another, it is the narrow AI.

Emily Harrison
Yes.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yes. Okay. And you mentioned ChatGPT. Many people are probably aware of that. I want to talk about that as we talk about what you have to say about education. But when we talk about this generative AI, what we're dealing with is the appearance of almost composition on the part of the computer, when in actuality, what it is doing is based upon what it has searched from the internet—it is making calculations as to what next word would most fit.

Emily Harrison
Right. It's highly, highly complex math. So we see it as words, so we think about it as language. But really what these word vectors are, in my mind, I kind of think about it as the biggest Venn diagram you've ever seen. So we know there's an association between the word "dog" and "cat." There's also an association between "dog" and "puppy," and "cat" and "kitten," and "dog" and "kitten." All of these things, when generative AI models have been trained—so they've had information uploaded to them by the creator—they have taken all of this information, coded all these words into mathematical numbers, and then they are just looking to try to find the next thing that makes sense. And they're doing that based upon pattern recognition, not based upon critical thinking skills. So it feels human, but it's just really complex math, which is what will sometimes lead to just silly things that don't make

any sense. We call that hallucinations, right?

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. Because that's what's going on, it's really just really complex math, that really says something about why it is that we need to be very leery about depending upon it for things like personal advice or things of that nature.

Emily Harrison
What we're seeing, really, is generative AI is good for experts, it's not good for amateurs. So I have a friend who is a scientist. She has one of those jobs where it makes my brain swim. I don't understand everything she does. She's very, very skilled in her job, and she can utilize generative AI because of the sheer amount of information it holds. But as an expert in her field, she recognizes when something's wrong.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yes.

Emily Harrison
So if you aren't an expert, you're not going to recognize improper information. And children are experts at not—they haven't developed an expertise yet. So that's where it gets really challenging for kids and students.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. In your second installment, where you do talk about AI and students, you mentioned a number of things, and I want to say that you also mentioned in this piece, yours is not—and I think with what you just said, it's evidence as well, but I just want to emphasize it—you are not saying that AI in all forms is something to be avoided, but you're really saying that when it comes to young people, kids and teens, relying upon it for particular things, that is where it is problematic.

Emily Harrison
Yeah, that's where they can't become experts if they're never working to learn. And I think that's where this narrative that's been around for a dozen or so years—that we have to teach kids how to use technology so that they'll be prepared for the workforce—what we're seeing is really the opposite. I mean, there's some surveys—I haven't seen actually scientific research on this—but there's some surveys that just are saying young adults aren't prepared for the workforce because they lack technological skills. So they're not comfortable with entertaining a new software. My husband has worked at three different companies over the course of his career and done the same job at each one. And in each place, he's had different software he's had to interact with. So there's the similar functions, but there's things that are different within each of those. Kids aren't coming out of high school and college, ready and confident to take on some of those challenges. So we're starting to see a lot of that in survey data from employers. But again, my friend who uses generative AI at work, she's using it because she's an expert in that field and is able to. It's just not the way to train children for the workforce, or I think for life.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. In fact, you say something that is seemingly counterintuitive, but you say in your essay on education, "Preparing our students for the digital age requires they use less technology." And then you go on to say, "Students must spend more time thinking and learning about what it means to be a fully-embodied human." I can only imagine that some people hear that, and that would just really cause them to say, What is she talking about? Less technology for greater preparation for the digital age. I think you're right. I do agree with you, but when people hear that, there is this recoiling as to, "How could that be?"

Emily Harrison
Right. Well, and so with that, I would say, what does it mean to be human, right? I mean, with that, we need to have a theology of work. Work is good. And a lot of generative AI is trying to decrease the amount of work we're doing. But to what end? Work is pre-Fall. I think we forget that a lot. We think of

"the ground will be hard, and your toil will be great." But work was good. God did a lot of work in those six days, and he made Adam and Eve to do that work. And when we're not thinking about the confidence, the self-reliance, the willpower, the joy that comes from doing hard work—I mean, my son and I right now, my youngest, have a little raised bed garden that we're working on. And so it's taking the time to plant the seeds, literally plant the seeds, as I'm trying to plant more seeds in him, spiritually, to literally plant seeds in the soil and see that watering, sunlight all of these things aid in the growing and developing, and it takes time and effort, and there's no quick fix to it. Sure, we can go to the grocery store and buy the sugar snap peas instead of growing them. But that process still had to happen somewhere else, if not in our home.

Emily Harrison
So I think when kids are—when we're kind of arresting that stage of development, where they're learning to struggle and struggle well, we see this a lot with writing, that kids are not taking the time. Writing things out by hand helps you learn them better, especially if you're note-taking in class. You're having to think about what the professor or teacher is saying and synthesize that quickly to: what's the important information here? You don't need to write down every single word. That's impossible. But you have to process that information. You're writing it by hand, which is helping you recall it later. You're doing the work then of taking it and maybe writing an essay about what you've learned. So you're having to determine what's a value, what's not, what's helpful, what isn't. And that whole process is really laborious. It's difficult. It's hard to learn. That's why we have schools. It's because we need to formalize this. I think a lot more could be said about that. But with this, you also see some creativity, and which words do you prefer, and what's your voice? In writing these articles, I was playing around with generative AI quite a bit because I wanted to understand them before I wrote about them.

Emily Harrison
And I quickly found after I was done, there was just a little bit of a pull to maybe use it again for my own work, and I had to shut that down really fast. And I think a lot of what's helped in my writing is, I've kind of developed my own voice, and AI is not going to do that for me. It's not me. I'm not thinking, does my view of God, does my view of the world, is that being bolstered by what I'm saying? Is it all coming together? And so kids have to learn to think.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yes. And there are so many, at least at the level of higher education, one of the things that I find so frustrating is that the producers of this writing assistance software are marketing it as assisting students to write. But in actuality, a lot of it is doing the writing. And you, in your essay, talk about how it is, and this is something that you mentioned in a lot of your work, that there is this great move on the level of elementary school education to implement screens and laptops and tablets in the classroom education. You say poster board presentations are now on PowerPoint, short speeches are prerecorded on YouTube videos. And there are a number of factors that have been brought to the surface in terms of what this has to do with attention and comprehension and so forth. But one of the things that you dealt with is the temptation that this poses, K−12, with respect to cheating.

Emily Harrison
Right. Yeah. I mean, I think a lot of that goes back to—what does it mean to be human? It also means we're fallen, right? So cheating is not new in the classroom. It's not new in the world. So that's kind of always existed. But now it's so easy. This is not a keep-your-eyes-on-your-own-paper. This is a don't-ask-the-computer, which is all you've ever known if you've grown up in school where they've been handing out tablets. This is what you do when you haven't developed the confidence to fight against it. The Nation's Report Card came out not that long ago, and the latest data says that 37% of 12th graders are proficient in reading. So it's no surprise then that our students are going to be tempted to use this for cheating. I mean, they haven't developed proficiency in reading, much less than these critical thinking skills. So I think we have to be really, really aware of that. And again, the poster board PowerPoint presentation—when I see data on this, it's putting something on a poster board, you're having to think so hard about what's a value, what's good.

Emily Harrison

When you put it on PowerPoint, you can try everything you want, and you can play around with the fonts and the colors and all of this, and it just kind of becomes a toy more than something where you're actually having to start thinking. There's a lot happening on the K−12 level right now as far as trying to get screen time minimized in the classroom, which is something I've been working on for a really long time, and I'm fortunate to know a lot of people who are leading the charge in this field. But I think that that's something—especially Christian parents need to be really aware of—is we're taking away from our kids the ability to do the hard work of learning when we put everything online. And it's no wonder that kids are cheating by using AI because they've just been told everything's on the computer. I mean, it just seems like the next layer. I was even talking to a teenager not that long ago, and he's like, "But if *you* ask AI to write something, then *you* are the one who's done the work." And so I get that. I mean, if you're a middle school boy, that makes sense, right?

Emily Harrison
But I'm like, Well, that doesn't... It's a little bit of bad logic. We can work through that, let's keep having this conversation. But kids aren't seeing those things as separate because they're used to sitting there. I've got a colleague in the Northeast, and she told me this story one day about this little boy who's in elementary school, and she was helping him with his math assignment, and he was really struggling. She had seen that his method was correct, but his answer was wrong. Simple math error, right? And so she said, "Well, let's get out pencil and paper and let's try to work this out again." She knew she could get him to the right if he could just see where he had made the mistake. And he kind of just threw up his hands and goes, "But the computer said I was wrong, so I'm wrong." And I think that's what our students are learning right now is if the computer says it, it's true and trustworthy, I must be the one who's made the mistake. I must be not good enough. I must be wrong. And you don't have that ability to kind of sit and look and learn from something and see—if you write a paper and you're getting handwritten responses from a professor, that's a much different experience than what kids are doing now with everything's typed, everything's formatted and perfect. You don't have to worry about not crossing your "t" with your cursive handwriting. I mean, your spelling is being corrected as you type, and your grammar is all embedded in these programs, so you're not having to work on those tiny little details along the way.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. You also address the fact that not only are students using AI to compose things, but teachers are using AI to try to detect it. I confess that I do.

Emily Harrison
Sure. Why would you not?

Dr. Keith Plummer
But you say something—the best way to determine if a student is using AI to cheat is simply to be a human and care. And as I read that, I thought, well, yes, this is true, and especially if you are able to know the writing style of your individual students and so forth. But I can imagine someone in K−12, and certainly when you start moving into college, who are saying, I just have all of this work to do, and I can't fully know all of the characteristics of each of my students. And so what would you say to them when they say, I agree with you that this is the best way, but I don't know if I can do this totally with the number of students that I have.

Emily Harrison
Sure. I mean I think this is where handwriting papers—I think we actually need to go back to the handwriting papers and not have typed papers in school. And I think with that, the act of handwriting, one, it's going to force kids into having to spend more time, even if they go to ChatGPT and then they just sit there and write it along, they're still having to do more thinking. And I think on those instances, teachers are probably going to be able to figure those out pretty fast. But when you have kids who are sitting there writing things out by hand and you are grading these things by hand, I think it becomes a little easier because you see writing styles develop a little clearer. This also means kids need to learn how to print their letters well and write in cursive. So this is a really much larger conversation. I think that's the way to go. I was just talking to a friend the other day whose son is a freshman in college, and in most of his classes, he's not allowed to have any screen. He's not even allowed to bring a

phone into the college classroom.

Emily Harrison
So they are making them write by hand. So the more and more we're getting kids to do the hard, physical—that embodied experience—I think the easier it becomes for everybody. And I have to look at it and go, for decades, teachers were reading handwritten papers, and they did okay. And when you're constantly trying to catch cheaters, and cheaters are trying to evade cheaters, and there's all these YouTube videos where you can teach it. In three minutes, you can...

Dr. Keith Plummer
Learn how to beat the detection software.

Emily Harrison
You can learn how to beat the software, right. So it's just a big game of cat and mouse. And at the end of the day, if the goal is to train our kids how to learn and to teach them how to engage with new material, I think we can go back to handwriting to everyone's benefit. Is it easy to take five papers with you home that night to check versus having to input everything into ChatGPT and check to see all these other sites and see if they're AI generated or not? I'm not a teacher, so I don't want to speak too much to this, but I think it's been done for decades and it can be done again.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. In fact, in that second essay, you offer some solutions, some of which you've just mentioned. Among them, you say, "No computer or internet-based individual schoolwork or homework K−8. Teachers may utilize these technologies in very limited ways." You've talked about to "teach handwriting, including cursive." I'm all for that. "Students should learn how to use computers as a *tool* for limited, specific tasks. We need to teach computer basics (what are its parts, how does it function) and computer skills.... Mastery must occur with non-internet connected devices first and foremost." And then you say, "Students should not use the internet for research until late high school. Research should be done with physical sources up to this point," and "All school work should be submitted in writing. Third, fourth, and final drafts of multi-page papers may be done with a typewriter or word processor." To the person who hears this, and I wish they could see us because I'm considerably older than you are, but who hears this and says, This is just nostalgia. This just is a wanting to go back to the way things were. What would you say in refutation of that? What is behind this? It's not just nostalgia.

Emily Harrison
So in part, those are proven methods. I mean, even to your point about cursive, when you write something by hand, you just remember it better, and especially cursive. And there's a lot of MRI studies and things showing that, and why some of these things are true is a little unknown, but we have enough data to say that it is true. So I think this isn't nostalgia as much as skill-building. We have successfully trained generations of people on how to process through these informations. So my dad, who's older than you, you're too kind to me, but he grew up before a typewriter. I mean, before a typewriter would have been commonly used in school. He's not that old. Sorry, dad. But he wasn't using it in college, yet he works in the IT field. So we have this kind of thought that if we don't give the kids what is commonly used now, they won't be prepared. But what's coming with AI, none of us can really predict. So if we go back to basics, and I'm looking at this, again, this data from the Nation's Report Card, 37% high schoolers are proficient in reading?

Emily Harrison
It's 24% in math. I mean, AI is mostly math, and only 24% of high school graduates are proficient in math? That data is actually from 2019, but that's the latest we have. From 2024, eighth graders—it's about the same—30% in reading, 28% in math. I mean, what we're currently doing isn't working, and Haidt shows a lot of that in his book on the mental health side of things. But the same thing is true educationally as well. Once we started putting tablets into the hands of kids and computers into the hands of kids, all this learning loss started happening. We kind of look at COVID and say, Oh, that's when it happened. But all of this tracks back to 2012. We have to build these skills so that they are prepared for what's coming next.

Dr. Keith Plummer
It sounds to me as though what we have done is we have prioritized speed, efficiency, ease, at the expense of what you're talking about, the building of skill and the cultivation of certain character aspects like patience and perseverance. Well, let's take a time out here for a few messages. And then on the other side, I want to pick up with where you picked up with respect to the next installment in your four-part series.

Dr. Keith Plummer
I am speaking with Emily Harrison, who is the writer at *Dear Christian Parent*, a Substack newsletter in which she deals with issues related to what the data is showing concerning the impact of screens on young people and what the church needs to know in terms of dealing with it. And we've been talking through a four-part series at her Substack site on AI and what parents need to know. And the third segment of that four-part series, Emily, is very distressing. And it has to do with how it is that by means of artificial intelligence, there is the capacity to relatively easily imitate voices and images to promote so-called deepfakes. And you called this essay "Deep Fakes: Or How to Ruin the Life of a Teenager." In what ways are teen lives being ruined by this technology?

Emily Harrison
Yeah. So this one's awful, and I hate it, and I wish it didn't exist. We could scrub the internet of it. But the facts are these deepfakes, so this taking an image of someone, and this is primarily being done to women by men. And a large portion of this is being done to girls, to women under the age of 18, and also being done by boys who are minors. So it is taking their image and turning it into a pornographic image. Now, with really just one picture of a person, you can create an image that looks as though they are completely naked. And all it takes is one picture at this point. And these things are so highly convincing and so good. I mean, the technology, if you've got a smartphone, you can do this. Please don't. Nobody who's listening, but it's so easy and it's so convincing. And quite frankly, if you're a 13-year-old girl and somebody has taken a picture of you and turned it into pornography, yes, it's better that it's fake than real. But if this is what's being shared throughout your friend group, if this is being sent to your teachers, parents, pastors, your siblings, if all these people are seeing this, does it really matter that it's fake?

Emily Harrison
I mean, I know, personally, I've talked to, personally, a handful of people who know of cases where this has happened, and it's middle school-age boys who are doing it. As a mom of middle school-age boy, he doesn't have a smartphone, so I'm not worried about him having gotten into this. But I can tell you, middle school-age boys are really great. I love them. I love my son and his friends, but they are really dumb. And I mean that in the sweetest, kindest mom way that I can. They just do stuff without thinking because they think it's funny, and they're trying to get a rise out of their friends, and they don't understand the long-term consequences of things. But we have put all of this technology in their hands. And then, we're going back to algorithms, the platforms that they're using are all being... You're getting ads for a ton of these different applications. There was a kissing app that became popular not that long ago where you could take... The idea was you take yourself and your celebrity crush or whatnot, and you make a fake picture of you kissing, and nobody thinks you've kissed whoever the latest movie star is, but it's just silly and fun to a point, except now you can also do that with any two people if you have access to this app and images of these people. So this can get really dark and really insidious pretty quickly.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. I have seen some stories of young women who were the victims of this, and it was sorrowful to see how their lives were really, really damaged by this being done and circulated. And then there is the whole question of the legalities and to what extent there can be action taken. I don't know if you have delved into this much, and I would imagine this might vary from state to state maybe, but what kinds of things are going on legislatively with respect to trying to address this?

Emily Harrison
Yeah. So the sad thing, and I can't speak to every single state, and there are some states that have better protections than others. But on the federal level, and the federal level matters a lot because if you're putting something on, say you've taken a picture, you've nudified, as I call it, turned somebody into a deepfake, and you've stuck it on Instagram. Now, that can easily cross state lines, so you need federal legislation. I reached out, when I was writing this article, to the National Center on Sexual Exploitation, and from their legal counsel said, There is no legal framework to prosecute on this stuff right now. And I know probably every dad of a daughter listening is going, That can't be right. I want justice. I'll wring the kid's neck. I want to penalize this person who's done this to my daughter. But it just doesn't exist. The technology has advanced faster than the legal framework. So there is a bill in Congress right now. It's called the "Take It Down Act." And that would allow, if you know you've been the victim of a deepfake, within 48 hours of requesting the images be removed, the platform would have to remove the images.

Emily Harrison
Again, how many platforms are on there? You've got to know where they are. You've got to know who's done it. You've got to submit this request. And I think what I've seen personally is a lot of times these are kids all around who are involved in these things. So it's not just young girls who are the victim, but it's young boys who are the perpetrators. And we've gone and said, Everybody's kind of the victim here. These are children who don't understand. They thought it was going to be funny or silly, or maybe they were trying to be malicious. But I know of one case where the FBI got involved because this is also child sexual abuse material. So when you're dealing with somebody who's under the age of 18, there's that side of things that you could prosecute. But who really wants to prosecute a 12-year-old boy for sexual abuse material when he himself is the victim of this and that he doesn't even understand the long-term ramifications? So it's just really... The whole thing just breaks my heart all the way around, and I don't think that parents understand how prevalent this is. I don't think they understand how frequently it's occurring.

Emily Harrison
And I think the line that we keep giving parents is that you need to talk to your kids, and if they ever see anything, they need to report it to you, and tell your kids and have open dialogue. But the data says only 1 in 10 kids tell their parents. So we know that these things are happening and that kids aren't reporting it. And then what are you going to do if you find out that your kid has seen this type of material? The initial thing is, give me that phone. The phone is being taken away for two weeks. Well, if this child... Why is your phone gone? I told my mom that you had posted a naked picture of someone. I mean, that's where I would say we have to just stop all the way around with the amount of access we're giving our kids because it's just too much to keep up with.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yes. And for people listening, the applications that you're talking about are so easily acquired.

Emily Harrison
Yes.

Dr. Keith Plummer
I mean, we're not talking about something you have to go on the black market and find and so forth. You just can go to the app store and find it. So we're not talking about something that if parents are thinking, well, they'll have to do a whole lot of work to get it. It takes nothing. In fact, you give a warning in your essay. You say, "Parents, stop believing the lie that filters and parental controls work.

Supreme Court Justices don't believe it. It's been said by many that the best age to give your child a smartphone or tablet is when you are ready for them to see pornography. Now, thanks to deepfakes, we have to hope and pray our own children won't *become* the pornography."

Emily Harrison
Yeah. I mean, there's thousands, literal thousands of these apps, and they're being advertised on YouTube, on X, on social media, online games. I mean, it doesn't take—they're on sites like Reddit and Discord and all these places that our kids should not be hanging out. And it's so easy. And we've just said to our kids, "Don't look, don't look. If you look, if you see something, tell us." But now we don't even... Your child could not look and become a victim of this, and it really only takes one image. And this is where people really bristle, but I think we have to stop putting pictures of our kids on the internet.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah, you wrote a piece on that, didn't you?

Emily Harrison
Yeah, I mean, right now, we don't have a legal framework that penalizes this type of behavior. I've even heard it said, If you're a woman, you just ought to assume that this is going to happen to you at some point. I don't know if that data quite bears that out, but it's just one of those things that I've heard repeated a few times. And so what happens when we've put our kids on the internet and now they're 20 years old and going up for a tough internship against a fellow student, and somebody wants to go take all these pictures that have sat on the internet of them for 20 years and create some bad stuff? I mean, we've seen types where an image of somebody from their college or high school years comes back to haunt them later for something they actually did.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Oh, yes.

Emily Harrison
But now it could be coming back to haunt you for something that you never were involved in.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yes. Well, another potential danger with AI and youth that you didn't get involved with in great depth, but we could also talk about it. I just want to briefly touch on the topic is—the encouraging of young people, and it's not just young people, it's adults as well, but AI companions.

Emily Harrison
Yeah.

Dr. Keith Plummer
And the encouragement to engage in either a romantic, sexual, or if not, even a platonic relationship with a bot that is quite troublesome and that certainly is contrary to what you were talking about before, what it means to be embodied and what we were created for and what relationships really are. I don't know if you want to say anything about that, but if so, feel free.

Emily Harrison
Yeah. So I was reading some research the other day, and it was looking at what's happening on these LLMs on these generative AI platforms. And it's like the most common application of them is to just write creative forms of a paragraph for school, or an email, or plan your family vacation to Disney—whatever. The second most prevalent use was online relationships and students using—not just students, but children and young adults—using platforms for mental health answers. It just goes on and on and on. The Institute for Family Studies actually has a lot of great articles on this topic as far as chat bots and relationships. But there are a lot of these sites out there, like Replika is probably one of the biggest ones out there, where they're saying, This is your new best friend, and you can go and spend hours talking to this person. I think when we look, especially as a mom of boys, I think about this a lot, we have this crisis of meaning and boys not growing up and feeling like they have

value and worth, and they've spent so much time online, it's pretty easy for them to slip into these online relationships that, as you say, can also become highly sexualized and really dark, really, really fast.

Emily Harrison
But when we're looking to a computer that's math—it's math—to answer questions about meaning and purpose and to provide companionship and fulfillment, I mean, we are really missing out on the fullness of who God has created us to be. We look at the Trinity, we know our God is a God of community, and we can't replace that and expect that things are going to go well, but it is just growing in popularity.

Dr. Keith Plummer
I teach a class called Technology & Christian Discipleship, and we did a section on relating to machines, and I showed them a brief video that the *New York Times* did several years back called "My A.I. Lover," which had to do with several women who were in these emotionally attached relations with their replica creations. And it was—when the video stopped, it never fails. The look on the student's faces. There's sadness, there's a stunned look because it is a sad thing to see people who were created for people, settling for, and in some cases, preferring a relationship with something that is just doing math but mimicking the communicating of a human.

Emily Harrison
Yeah. And there was a case—I'm sure you saw it—I think the family was in Florida, a young boy who—

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yes, the 14-year-old.

Emily Harrison
The 14-year-old committed suicide because he wanted to be with his AI girlfriend. Again, that's where we have to come back to all these filters and parental controls and all this stuff doesn't work. He was using this kind of coded language of, I want to be with you. And of course, you can't be with something that's not embodied. Yeah, and ended up taking his own life. And really, the only reason we know about this case is because his mother is suing the platform he had been using for this, which is super popular with kids. If you get on the name of it, it's not coming to me right now, but if you get on to that—

Dr. Keith Plummer
It's escaping me, too.

Emily Harrison
It'll pop into one of our brains in a minute. But you can talk to your favorite cartoon character. I mean, *Bluey*, the little cartoon that all the little kids love. You can talk to a *Bluey* character, I suppose. I don't know. Maybe I shouldn't say that about *Bluey*. But it's such a friendly, kind of fun little thing. It's like you can talk to Santa Claus or the Tooth Fairy or whatever, and it seems really cute and fun, but it can very easily become very manipulative, and very scary, and very detached from reality.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yes. And there is the incentive on the part of the people who are creating these things to keep people engaged.

Emily Harrison
Absolutely.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Yeah. The fourth in your series was a really interesting piece, and that having to do with art. It's called "Tabernacles, Poisoning, & AI 'Art.'" Some of this you have slightly touched upon, but here you're looking at what is lost when we encourage young people, rather than to be creatively artistic themselves, to rely immediately on the capabilities of AI. Why should parents be concerned about that

at all?

Emily Harrison
Yeah. So I've I heard from a handful of parents who are going, Oh, this is so cool. My child typed in some words and out popped this funny image. Or they took their favorite... It's March Madness season around here, their favorite basketball team, and put them and their buddies in this image together. And look at that, they just typed in some words, how smart are they? On the base level, I guess I can understand that, but where all of this so-called art is coming from is art that already exists on the internet. And it is really just plagiarism. It is just stealing parts of images and recreating it. And again, this is one of those things like cheating in the classroom. Plagiarism and forgery have existed in art as long as art's been around. But we're lacking kids who are thinking and creating and doing the work. I mean, we are created by a creative God who made not just one tree, but thousands of different types of trees and looked at all of them and said, "It is good." I can hear the birds outside my window right now. He made all these different birds who sing in all these different tones so that they call and respond to one another, and they're all different, and it is good.

Emily Harrison
And you see a sunrise, and it is good. I mean, these are the beautiful parts of art that no matter how many times if you ever try to take a picture of a sunrise with your phone, you never get it. It's always better in real life. So I think we need to be really careful as parents and as teachers about allowing our kids to use AI to create art because they're just stealing things that are out there that are being rebranded. And they're not learning that really, really personal part about having a relationship with God and being creative and developing things on their own. And not everybody's I grew up to be an artist, and that's fine. I've got a couple of friends who are fantastic artists who I love and whose art is up in my home, and I would be hard-pressed to draw a stick figure. But my creativity comes out when I cook dinner for my family or when I write. And those are all those building blocks that kids need to be doing to help get them ready for the life of creativity that God's called them to.

Dr. Keith Plummer
I'm curious, with your own two sons, when you went through this transition of saying, Okay, we're going to make some changes. You and your husband talked about this and so forth. What was their initial reaction? And how, since then, are they coping or adopting some of the things that your family has implemented?

Emily Harrison
Yeah, that's a good question, Keith. I appreciate that one. When we initially kind of got into this, again, this is back in 2017, my kids are still those middle school age years right now. So a lot of it was, We're mom and dad, and these are the rules, and so goes it. As my kids have gotten older, it's gotten more challenging. So personally in our house, my kids, they don't have tablets, they don't have smartphones. If they ever need to use a computer for an actual task, I'm sitting with them or my husband's sitting with them and doing it. And those tasks are, we're going to do a task and then we're going to be done. We have a landline phone.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Wow.

Emily Harrison
Yeah, I know. They're coming back, Keith. They're coming back. A lot of our friends are starting to get them, too, because what we've given our kids is independence to call their friends and make plans and be home alone for periods of time without me being worried about them. So a lot of times my kids will say, "So-and-so has...and so-and-so," and that is true for all parents, for all humanity. But what I remind my kids is I'm actually giving you a lot more than what some of your peers are getting. I'm giving you the independence to call and make plans on your own, not to have to be 14 years old and still have your mom text a friend. I am looking at some of the things that are online, and I had to explain what sextortion is to one of my kids the other day. So it's not that we aren't having these conversations. It's not that we're not talking about the dangers of these things. But I've said to my kids, I will never buy you a smartphone. What I tell parents is I will never buy my children a

smartphone, and I will also never put a *Playboy* magazine underneath their mattress and ask them to not look at it.

Emily Harrison
I don't say that to my kids. Maybe one day when they're older, I will. But I think I just am being really realistic. And the more data I look at, the more I dig into all of this, the more I see how quickly things are changing and how ill-equipped parental apps and filters are to block these things. When we're looking at deepfakes and we're saying there is no way to prosecute for these types of things. I think we're just putting the pause on it. We're just saying you can have a smartphone, you can have social media, you can have all of those things one day. You're just going to be an adult when you do. And I am protecting you from some of the dangers of these things. But I want you to learn how to type. I want you to learn how to use a word processor. I want you to learn how to use Excel, how to use spreadsheets. I want you, when you're an older student in high school, to learn how to do internet research, how to tell what's real and what's fake news. And I've played around with some of the games that they use in schools to kind of help you figure out, is this real or is this fake?

Emily Harrison
And they did not help me figure anything out at all. They're just really, really confusing. So we're very fortunate that we have our kids in a classical school where screen time is really minimized. They don't have individual computers or tablets or anything. So that's been super helpful for our family. But the more we talk about these things, even my kids will say, I know these things are bad for me, but my friends have them, and that makes it hard. And I'm like, Yeah, buddy, you're right. That does. But what's easier is I can list about five or six families that we're close with who've made similar choices to us.

Dr. Keith Plummer
That was going to be my next question, because one of the things that Jonathan Haidt focuses on is the necessity for what he calls "collective action." That it's not simply a matter of the individual or even the individual family, but because of the ubiquitous social pressures, there's really a need for networks of individuals and families. So I would imagine both in the school that your kids are at as well as maybe in your church, there are relations where families are trying to help one another through this.

Emily Harrison
Yeah. And I think that's where I kind of start my Substack as Dear Christian Parent is I want—I think the church needs to take a larger role in speaking about these things. When we are looking at this data, this stuff is just not for kids. It's just not. And to try to say, Well, we want to give them access so they can make good decisions later. Well, we don't use temptation as a form of training.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Good point.

Emily Harrison
And I think if the church would be more bold—I've seen so many secular organizations fighting. There's a huge growing group in the UK right now that's trying to delay smartphones for childhood. They are just growing like gangbusters. I mean, it is—there's a lot of groups who are fighting technology in schools. There's all these groups. And I think the church has the answer more than these secular organizations because we understand what it is to be created in the image of our Savior, right? Like we get how important these formations are of virtue, creativity, hard work, joy. We understand all of this, and I really am encouraging pastors and youth leaders and parents to really think deeply about this stuff. And I think the reason the church... You didn't ask me this, but I think the reason the church struggles to do so is because we want to be kind, and we don't want to say to a parent who may make a different choice—we don't want to come across harsh or judgmental. And I think we need to be having these debates within the church and being realistic about the data because I think it's a kindness to correct our brothers and sisters when they're walking in something that's not okay. So that's the long and the short answer, I guess.

Dr. Keith Plummer
That's very helpful. And for those who have heard you, and we've been talking about your Substack newsletter, if they want to check it out, how can they do that?

Emily Harrison
Yeah, they can Google "Emily Harrison" and *Dear Christian Parent*, and I should pop up in that. I'm not on any other social media. Which is more about my own personal level of just keeping myself in check. So that's the best place to find me. And they can just subscribe there. I send out an email about once a week, no more than that.

Dr. Keith Plummer
Great. Well, I follow you on Substack, and I can attest to the fact that you don't deluge the inbox. I'm really grateful for your work. Thank you for the work that you're doing. It is important. I want to encourage you in it. I want to encourage those who are listening to check out *Dear Christian Parent*. Emily, thank you again for your time.

Emily Harrison
Thank you so much, Keith. This has just been an honor and a pleasure to chat with you today.

Ben Best, Co-host
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