

Welcome to *defragmenting*, a podcast of Cairn University, promoting biblical integrity and thoughtful Christianity.

The adverse effects of a screen-immersed life on children and teens becomes harder to ignore on what seems to be a daily basis. What are parents to do? In her book, *The Tech Exit: a Tactical Guide for Freeing Kids and Teens From Smartphones*, Claire Morrell offers well-researched and hope-giving answers. She joined Dr. Keith Plummer to talk about the dangers of screen emersion, the inadequacy of screen limiting and parental control software, how to prepare for a family digital detox, and how and why to fill the time previously consumed by fixation on devices. This informative and encouraging exchange is not foremost about saying no to digital tech, but rather about acknowledging and embracing what God has made us for. Let's join their conversation now.

Clare Morrell is a fellow at the Ethics and Public Policy Center and director of its Technology and Human Flourishing Project. Her work has been featured in *The New York Times*, *The Wall Street Journal*, *Fox News*, *The New York Post*, *Newsweek*, *National Review*, *The Hill*, *The Dispatch*, *National Affairs*, *Public Discourse*, *Bloomberg News*, *First Things* in *World* magazine, among others. That is not an exhaustive list by any means. She's the author of a new book published by Penguin Random House titled *The Tech Exit: A Practical Guide to Freeing Kids and Teens from Smartphones*. It's a book that Brad East in his review for *Christianity Today* calls "a tech book that doesn't pull punches." And it has received high praise from notable figures such as Cal Newport, Abigail Schreier, and Jean Twenge. Claire, I have looked forward to talking with you about the book. Welcome to *defragmenting*, and thank you so much for accepting our invitation.

Oh, no, it's a pleasure to be here. Excited for this conversation.

Before we get into the book, from the things that you have written, the presentations that you've given leading up to the book, it's evident that you have given a lot of thought to the impact of technology on us as individuals, on society, and in the book, particularly on teens and children. But I was curious, what were some of the factors that led to this becoming an interest of yours in terms of technology and its effects on us?

Yeah. No, the longer backstory as I spent the first part of my career working in the area of the justice system, particularly around the crimes of human trafficking and child sexual exploitation, and just continue to see the intersection of technology and its role, particularly social media platforms, in their role in facilitating a lot of these crimes, and that there was no legal accountability for these platforms for their role in distributing child sexual abuse material or in facilitating trafficking. And so that was my first exposure to this technology is actually harming children and is being used in criminal ways, but there's no accountability for it. And then I became a mom, and I came to the think tank I'm at now, the Ethics and Public Policy Center. And there was just increasing research and data coming out about the harms of social media to kids, and particularly the harms of also online pornography and smartphones. And so they brought me on board to start up a project dedicated to trying to help put forward policy solutions to protect our kids online and help families in protecting their children. And it was a perfect fit, given my recent background from the Justice Department and some of the work I had been doing there, looking into the challenges we were facing with social media platforms.

And so that was how it came together. So I both had this interest longer term for my role in trying to help get justice for victims, especially vulnerable children and women. But then also as a mom, it became a very personal project for me of wanting to help other parents like myself better know how to protect our kids and to have policy solutions that would actually help back parents up in their work of protecting their kids.

When a lot of people think about the dangers that are posed to children and teens online, the content in terms of the sexually explicit content, the potential towards trafficking and so forth, come to mind in terms of the content, and that's clearly a justice issue. But you say in the book that it goes beyond that as a justice issue, that kids and screens is a justice issue, even in a broader sense. Could you explain what you mean by that?

Yeah. No. So I talk about it because, unfortunately, we actually see a socioeconomic screentime disparity that now children from lower-income families are on screens on an average four or more hours a day. And so I am trying to frame it in the book as this is one of the reasons that we do need policy solutions in some of these areas. That if we put it entirely on parents, some of the most vulnerable kids will be the most harmed by these technologies because as more high income families, they become more educated on the harms, they take more steps to individually restrict kids' access to screens and technology. Families with really busy working parents outside the homes or a single mom trying to raise a child, they end up then falling into the use of screens much more. Now that we see all the both physical health effects, the changes in the brain from these addictive technologies, the mental health harms, we're aware that these things are harmful to kids in their development. And so that is when there is a role sometimes then for the government to step in. If we recognize that a product or a substance is inherently harmful to kids or inherently addictive, then we put age restrictions on it.

And so I advocate for some of those types of solution in my book, Ask a Justice Issue, to say that all children deserve to be protected regardless of how involved or not their parents are or are able to be in restricting their own individual use of these technologies, particularly social media platforms and online pornography websites being some of the most harmful technologies kids can be using today.

You say in the book that even if it's not a matter of a child being on, say, social media or having a smartphone, him or herself, that doesn't mean that he or she goes unaffected. How is that?

Yes. No. And so this is another one of the reasons that has compelled me to do the policy work that I'm doing is that there are collective aspects to the harms from these technologies. I try to explain in the book that the effects are not only individual, that the effects of a smartphone or social media don't only impact the individual child using them, but they actually change the entire social dynamic, the social environment, or the entire peer group. Even if only one or two teams are using these technologies, it changes it for everyone. What that means is that a child could actually still experience some of the mental health effects of these technologies even without using them. The anxiety or depression, feeling left out, loneliness from feeling isolated from the fact that now all the social interaction is happening through the phones and social media. And so when there are these kinds of collective harms from a technology, that is when it becomes necessary to have coordination. And the law and policy is that tool where we can actually provide solutions to these collective action problems. Because Each individual parent then feels really like a powerless or it's very difficult to opt out if all the other kids are on these devices.

And so wanting to have policy solutions to back parents up to help mitigate, especially against these group level harms is very helpful to have that coordination role from the law and from public policy. And I also talk about how schools can also play a really big role in helping parents with those collective solutions that even just banning phones and social media from the school day protects a child's main social environment, not just the learning environment, but also the social environment. Then when all the kids at school are not on the phones or social media, it protects that in-person socialization and helps to mitigate those group level negative dynamics that the technologies can create.

When I think about some of the social dynamics that the presence of smartphones create, especially in a school setting, I think about the violence that often is incentivized in terms of, and here, thinking about there are whole accounts that are devoted to school fights. And so there's incentive for the person involved in the altercation to get cred that way, and the person who posts it to get cred in terms of the likes, the retweets, and so forth. And so it just seems like that's just one other area where someone, even if they weren't part of the social media climate, could be easily affected by it.

Yes, exactly. And in a lot of these schools that I actually interviewed and spoke to, they said the impetus for their policy change of banning the phones actually was first and foremost because of student discipline issues they were seeing. Just like you were mentioning, they were having issues with kids using the phones for violence, for bullying, for coordinating activities, meeting up and skipping out of class and meeting up in the restrooms. And so they said, We have to get rid of the

phones, not just because they are distracting to actual learning, but primarily these schools were just facing a lot of discipline issues amongst the students that were facilitated by the phones.

The first part of your book, you spend a considerable amount of time addressing what might be or what you say is a false sense of security, where parents may think that by means of such things as screen time limits and parental controls, they are taking adequate measures to protect their kids. You say that that is a false hope, and it's not really grounded in anything that is substantial. You refer to what you call a screen time trap. Why is it that you say that those measures are not enough?

Yeah, I realized it's provocative to start there to say that the strategies that most parents are adopting or have fallen into are really not sufficient. And so I try to explain why screen time limits are no match for the technology's addictive design. And it really comes down to the brain science that these technologies, smartphones, social media, in particular, whereby the dopamine response they release in the brain is more like a highly addictive drug. That even brain imaging studies show that heavy users of social media, their brains look the same as users of highly addictive drugs, that the structural changes in the brain are the same. And that's because what happens is this artificially high level of dopamine that is released in the brain as a result of getting a new like or a follow or on social media or a new notification on your phone. What that does is then immediately afterwards, your brain dips into a dopamine deficit state. It actually doesn't return to baseline. It goes into a deficit. And the point is to incentivize you to do that behavior again. And so what the result of that is, is constant craving. It really creates a compulsive use.

And so The time limit will never be enough. Even a short amount of time produces this deficit state where they want, they literally crave going back on again. And so the time limit, it doesn't map onto a child's mental or emotional time because because of that craving, it dominates their thought life. They spend the rest of the day thinking about when they can get back on the app. And so even a short amount of time because of how highly addictive it is and those impacts on the brain, it really changes a child's behavior and just the orientation of their life to revolve more than around this phone or their social media account. And so I try to just explain the idea that this is something that can be controlled with a time limit. We have to get the metaphor right. Screens are not like sugar. They're more like digital sentinel, where I think no parent would say, Oh, that can be enjoyed in a small or safe amount. It's because it is so highly addictive. The amount of dopamine and how quickly it's released, creates this constant craving for more. And so the more I've dug into the neuroscience research, and I mentioned a study from the University of North Carolina that found that actually other time, kids who were frequent checkers of social media--so not even saying they're spending a lot of time on it for a day, but the habit of checking social media, which again, that craving induces other time led to divergent brain development--that their brains actually became sensitized, which is a term used in addiction science, to the particular stimulus of social media, of social rewards. And addiction scientists will tell you this, that things that are addictive, it does cause the brain to actually change and become sensitized to something which is that it leads to just a constant baseline craving in the brain for that stimulus and leads to compulsive behaviors and uses.

And so I think the more research that comes out, we can just really clearly see, Okay, this is not safe in any amount of time. It's really powerful on developing brains in particular. And then on the parental controls front, and again, I feel for parents because I think they've been sold this myth by the tech companies, like your kids can use our products and be safe If you just enable our settings, our time limits and parental controls. But all my research has shown me just how those controls really fall short of protecting kids, that they don't actually give parents real control or insight into what's happening in an app. I try to out to parents that the company's algorithms control your child's experience on the social media platforms. They don't give that control over to parents. I mean, the best that it lets you do is maybe set a time limit and some privacy restrictions, but you're not controlling what they're seeing, what they're doing, what messages they're exchanging, and you're not even able to see into that, that most of these social media companies don't even give access to third-party parental control software that you might install on a device. So you recognize that the built-in settings are not sufficient, you install an external software, and even that is blocked from accessing what's happening inside the apps like TikTok or Discord or Snapchat. And so parents are really flying blind when it comes to social media, and it's just too easy for kids to stumble across really dangerous

content, and then those algorithms go to work and suck kids down really dangerous rabbit holes. It's too easy for predators to access children, to be anonymous online and pretend to be a peer their age, and message and reach out to kids through these platforms and apps. And so it's just a smartphone introduces thousands of portals to the Internet, and it is impossible for parents to effectively lock down all of those portals with parental controls.

And so I try to warn parents, too. It's not even just the social media apps, even things that look like an educational game. All these apps today have these social media components where you just have to be really careful because even something that looks like an educational game, strangers could be reaching out to them on it. There is often still an in-app browser where they could still access pornography websites or other dangerous things. And so the app-based smart devices are just really too difficult for parents to oversee. And that's why I argue, as I do, for *The Tech Exit* of just saying no completely to smartphones and opting for alternative phones for staying in touch with your child, especially as they get older instead.

I was very shocked by a number of things, as you were describing some of those things, not only the ways that teams can get around some of the parental controls, but then, as you were just noting how it is that people can make use of apparently innocuous apps. You used an example of Ubible, the Bible app, how people were infiltrating the community feature there and using it to reach kids. Yes.

No, it's really terrifying. I do use those examples because I want to shock parents into awareness. But I realized that that's really hard to hear as a parent. You're like, I had no idea. I thought my child was using the Bible app. It speaks to the challenge and difficulty for a parent to have to do all this research and work to look into every single possible app in the app store, which there are just thousands, hundreds of thousands, and they're not often rated correctly. A mom the other day was telling me she was going through the app store to try to just see what AI apps were rated as appropriate for children. And she said she found over a dozen Nudify apps, which is an AI technology that takes a picture and strips it of the clothing to make a nude image, that they were all rated as four plus, like appropriate for a four-year-old and up. It's on the company, it's on the apps themselves to rate themselves. And Apple and Google do not do a very good job of ensuring those are accurate. And so parents don't even have accurate information to navigate the app stores to know how to protect their kids.

And so for all these reasons, I really just encourage parents to stay away from the app-based devices of tablets for younger kids and then smartphones for teens. And if you want to help them learn how to use a computer or the Internet as a tool, it's much easier to do that on a family home computer that, again, isn't app-based. You can publicly see the websites they're accessing. You can install a filter on the web browser. It's much easier to control. You can control your WiFi router. But the app-based devices, smartphones and tablets, are just very, very difficult for a parent to keep up with, honestly. The parents I spoke to who fell into this screen time trap, as I call it, they are exhausted. They were told they could have both worlds. They could have. They both let their kids use these technologies and have some safety. Then they quickly realize they're in a lose-lose situation that their kids are not being effectively protected, and that giving in to the device that they thought would solve this tension in the parent-child relationship of the kid constantly begging for the smartphone actually just resulted in 40 new battles a day because the time limit's never enough.

And now there's just constant friction between parent and child over the use of this device. I try to say it's actually lose-lose scenario, and there is a better way. And the message my book really tries to hold out is hope for parents, that it's actually possible to do a smartphone free childhood. And that's what the majority of the book focuses on. And so I do just want to leave parents with that hope and encouragement that you don't need to be scared or terrified about all these terrible apps that are out there. You can just opt out, and that really is the best for your kids.

Yes. And that is something that I was planning to get to in terms of the book is is actually very hopeful. Even in the case of those parents who may have given a smartphone to a child. They've had it for some time. You say it's never too late to do what you believe is in the best interest of your child. And you say that you have spoken with families who did do an about face. You're honest about some of the challenges that come with that, but you're also hopeful about how it is that that can be done.

Could you say a word about those situations?

Yeah. I want parents to know it's never too late to reverse course. I talk to a lot of parents and they say, Oh, I really wish I had your book two years ago before we gave smartphone to our kid. And I say, No, no. That's exactly why you need to read my book, because I actually explain it's never too late to reverse course, and that many families have done this. And it starts with doing a digital detox. And there's a whole science to this, actually, that going off these devices, taking the phone away, and I try to explain to parents, maybe it seems daunting to do a smartphone-free childhood or reverse course on this. Just start with 30 days. Anyone can commit to doing something for 30 days. And just detoxing from smartphone, social media, interactive screens for 30 days actually allows the child's brain to recalibrate, to get back to normal levels of dopamine. And so what that does is that it eliminates that craving and compulsion, that their brains actually are able to return to a normal state. And it calms their nervous system because one of the other effects of all these interactive screens is it puts kids nervous system into a fight or flight mode.

They release all this cortisol and adrenaline from the interactive screens, and then there's no outlet for it because they're sitting on a screen. They're not actually running away from a bear, that adrenaline response. And so what happens other time is it really dysregulates kids behavior, their sleep, their mood, tantrums, poor focus, all these It's a result from that. And so detoxing for 30 days actually allows a child's nervous system to calm down, their brain to rebalance, and it really removes that addiction. And kids are actually able to experience pleasure from the real world again, because that's another effect of the screens is that they start to become desensitized to pleasures in the real world because, again, their brain becomes used to this artificially high level of dopamine. And then realize things just seem boring and mundane. They don't actually give them pleasure or satisfaction Just taking the screens away for 30 days, I can't tell you how many parents after parents said they just couldn't believe their results in their kids, and they just wish they had done this sooner, that they just didn't know. Because for a lot of parents, it actually feels impossible to imagine dealing, particularly with a difficult child who may be addicted to a screen without it, because there is this calming effect when you hand a child a screen, but cumulatively, handing them that screen really does dysregulate their brain and then they're developing bodies and their nervous system.

And so that actually taking it away, there is some short-term pain points you have to push through. It's like, yeah, they will almost go through a withdrawal. And most families said the first two weeks were really hard, but they kept going, and then they got to 30 days, and their kids actually stopped asking for the screens. And this is possible even with teenagers. I will say with teens, something that was emphasized to me was because the smartphone today feels like such a privilege and a marker of adulthood, then taking that away, they really tried to replace it with more freedoms in the real world, like the ability to drive the car to a friend's house or just different real-world privileges allowing them some more independence, especially in their social lives in the real world, when they took that smartphone away. And even these teens were able to see for themselves after they detoxed like, wow, I didn't realize how addicted I was to my phone. And I actually I feel better not being on it. And I feel happier and not as anxious and stressed and I'm able to focus more. And so the kids can actually see the effects for themselves, too.

And that's really powerful for parents to be able to engage their kids to, as they go through a detox, talk to them about how they're feeling about it, why they're feeling that way, and what they notice in themselves once they are going off these screens. Just start with 30 days, make a plan. Put it on your calendar, talk to your kids about it, explain why you're doing this, and then get them excited about all the non-screen activities that you're going to do as a family, all the fun experiences and relationships that you're going to pursue together. Because just providing them the real-world goods, of which the smartphones and social media are really cheap substitutes, is a very powerful antidote to taking the screens away. My message is that it's very possible to reverse course detoxes work, and it's really never too late to do one. A detox can benefit anyone at any age, at any time. It's even good for us to do as adults. And so I would say start there. And then the rest of my book also then describes then how do you sustain that lifestyle over the long term once you've done that detox.

Yes. And if anyone here is 30 days and they think, Oh, my goodness, how am I going to do that? You

do say in that chapter, Try just seven days if three weeks or a month sounds too long. So even if someone were to say, Okay, let's try this for a week, you're saying that's worth it?

It is worth it. And you may not see the full benefits because, again, there is some science to it taking somewhere around a month to 30 days for the brain to recalibrate. But you still will see, I think, just positive changes just from being off the screen, even for seven days, even for a week, or even for a day, just deciding we're going to do a phone free day as a family. Just because any time you're taking the phones away, you're really allowing for them to engage more with the real world, more with real-life relationships, and to notice in themselves the effects that the phone has. And that can almost be the most powerful thing is by not having it, they actually realize, oh, my goodness, I'm reaching for my phone. That's how much I check it. It feels very weird to walk around without my phone on me. Just them having almost that cognitive dissonance of why am I feeling this way can be helpful as you're having those conversations of like, Hey, we want to reverse course on this or restore a healthier relationship for you with this technology. Just doing that even for a day, seven days, can still be really powerful for helping kids to notice those things in themselves.

When you talk about doing a digital detox, you make it clear that you're not just talking about the parents detoxing the child and the abstinence is only on the part of the child. But you say that the parents should be forewarned. The main thing you'll need to replace screens with at first is your time as a parent. And you talk about how it is that while there might be some differences in terms of what is expected of the child, but it's also beneficial for the family as a whole to do as much of a detox together as possible. And you also talk about finding other families with which to perhaps do the detox. Why is that key?

Yes. I explained that it's really important for kids to feel like the parents are team players in this. If you're telling me this thing is so addictive and bad for me, why are you on your phone all the time? And so while I explain this doesn't mean that parents have to completely give up their smartphones the same way we're asking the kids to, we should really significantly try to separate ourselves from our phones during the detox, especially when we're at home with our kids, and as much as try to do the detox with them. If you can get off all the social media apps for that month, or if you can honestly switch to a dumb phone for a month and just try it out. The detox is a good thing for everybody to do, and it can be beneficial for parents as well. While we don't have to adopt all the exact same practices as our kids, it really helps to show we're a team player. For even ourselves to experience the benefits, the more we can dumb our phones down, separate ourselves from our phones, and even potentially test out using a non-smartphone instead for that month can be really helpful.

Then in terms of finding other families, I explain both doing a detox, but then also sustaining this lifestyle over the longer term, it's a lot easier and you are more likely to be successful if you can find at least one other family to do this with you. Just talking to another family in your neighborhood or your church or your school to say, Hey, we're going to do this detox for 30 days. Would you like to do this with us? And it gives parents allies and also gives kids friends who are also going through the detox. And then sustaining this lifestyle over the longer term, it's really helpful to have a few parents ask your allies to say, We're all opting out of the smartphones and social media for our kids together, because it helps provide some of that collective solution we were talking about at the beginning. It can help create these counter pressures, pushing back against the smartphones and social media being such a part of childhood so that your kid isn't the only one not on the social media apps. They're not actually left out the social dynamics because there are several kids in their peer group who are not on these apps or don't have the phones.

The more people you can find to band with you in opting out, it just makes it easier on each individual family in making those decisions. It just gives you allies as a parent to help push you through those different points of resistance or to help troubleshoot challenges that you might be facing. I really encourage parents to talk to other parents. Even using my book, *The Tech Exit*, as a conversation starter, I would really meant the book to be read by parents, shared with parents. And so often parents ask, How do I start this conversation? And I think it can be as simple as saying, Hey, I just read this book. We're inspired to do this thing. Would you do this with us? You can read the book for yourself

and understand why screen time limits and parental controls aren't enough. And I even made a discussion guide to go with the book available at thetechexit.com, to just encourage parents, Read through as a group, get a book club together, and actually talking about these things, I think together as a group, will actually help families to find those solutions and to find each other to do this tech exit in community, that you don't have to do it by yourself.

Yeah, that was a very helpful piece, and it's something that a number of people, particularly like Jonathan Haidt, talking about the importance of collective action, have really emphasized. And I could see a lot of support and encouragement to persevere coming from that, as opposed to just trying to do it on our own. Before we take a brief break, in your book, you have a number of conversations with families who are in various stages of a no-tech or low-tech type lifestyle. And you, at one point, say that you'll note, you say to the reader, that most of these are moms. And you said something that I really took to heart. My kids are adults now. Honestly, I'm really glad that my kids are adults now, but then I worry about my grandchildren, so I'm not fully out of it. But you say dads might want to give serious thought to this. I just wanted to ask you, if you were to address fathers specifically on helping kids become more screen-free, what would you have to say to us?

Yeah, I would just say I think that dads can actually play a really pivotal role in being leaders of the family in this direction. But I think often, because moms may spend more of their time with the children, they see the screen effects much more firsthand, and it can be harder for dad. And then he thinks like, Oh, but it's fun. It's nice to just hand him the screen, or it's fun to play video games. And I think sometimes the dad can be a little bit more dismissive of the effects. And so I think just really, fathers, arm yourselves with this information and actually help lead family in the right direction. Support your wife who's more on the front lines on the day-to-day basis, having to implement a lot of these changes. I recognize that moms may bear more of the burden in doing the digital detox or even living out the tech exit lifestyle because they're really on the front lines in a lot of the day-to-day parenting. But dad's providing that leadership of the family, backing mom up, really taking your children under your wing and explaining what you're trying to protect them from I think dads have a really important role, really, as also the protector of the family to really explain what you're protecting your children from, why you're trying to prepare them for how to handle these technologies and digital temptations as an adult, and giving that cover as well to the mom.

Because I think sometimes the dads can just maybe they're not seeing all the effects firsthand. It can just be easier to be like, Oh, I don't see what the big deal is with giving him a smartphone. All his friends have one. It's fine. But instead, dads, take a more proactive stance. Really listen to your wife's concerns and read the research for yourself, read my book for yourself, and try to take a more proactive stance in trying to lead your family in a direction away from these technologies and taking a more proactive role in trying to particularly protect children from the digital harms that they can fall into. That would be my encouragement to dads.

That is helpful. Well, let's take a brief time out here. On the other side, I want to go into the next section of the book in which you talk about feasting.

New from the Cairn University School of Divinity, *God Rest Ye Merry* is a 26-day advent devotional to refresh and renew your joy in the gospel of Jesus Christ during the Christmas season. Get your free digital copy today at faithtruthmedia.com/advent. That's faithtruthmedia.com/advent.

I am back with Claire Morrell, who is the author of *The Tech Exit: A Practical Guide to Freeing Kids and Teens from Smartphones*. We just were talking about what you recommend in terms of digital detoxing, and you call that section Fasting, appropriately, but that's not an end in itself. Look at the next section is Feasting. But before we move on to that, I wanted to say something more about the Fasting section because you had something there that was very thought-provoking. You said "In leading up to the detox, in some instances, parents may even want to apologize to their children." What would that look like?

I think it's important as parents to own up to our own mistakes and even to model for our children what that looks like, to own our own mistakes or our own errors and how we then pursue remedying

them. And I think, again, in light of new information that you may not have had at the time when you gave your young child a smartphone and now you're reversing course on this, it's going to be important for your kids to understand that you're explaining to them, Listen, we made a mistake. We gave you something that was too powerful for your developing brain to handle before it's ready. And so we are going to help you, and we're going to solve this, and we're going to reverse course and detox from this. I'm not saying it's easy, but I am saying this is a necessary part of parenting is that when we recognize we've made a mistake, that we've done something that we didn't need for it to be harmful to our kids, but that damaging to their health or it's harmful to their health, we don't just continue down that path. We reverse course, and we explain that to our kids.

And so I think actually even apologizing can be really powerful, even for our parent-child relationship, for them to see that mom and dad are not perfect. We have not always had the answers to everything or had it all figured out. And we are growing in the process of parenting. And so, yeah, I share that example in the book that reversing course just may involve actually apologizing to our kids to say, We didn't know we didn't have this information at the time. Now knowing what we do in order to protect you, we're going to take the phone away, and we're sorry. Because I recognize it's a lot harder to undo something, to take something away, than just to not give it in the first place. I think, again, just apologizing being part of that at least helps the child. Maybe they don't agree with the decision, but at least helps them understand it.

Yes. And as you mentioned, there is an important part in terms of just exemplifying humility, particularly from a Christian standpoint, as we think about discipling our children. That is really, really important. So the next section, you have this acronym feast in contrast to the fasting. As I was reading this, I thought about a quotation that I use when I'm teaching predominantly when we're talking about a biblical sexual ethic. It's from a philosophy professor at Biola named David Horner. And this was a lecture that he gave on Christian ethics. But in it, he said this, "You will never rationally and for the long haul say no to things that are very attractive to you without saying yes to something better. Much of what we do with ethics as Christians is say no to something. Very often, we don't say what we're saying yes to." And you don't make that mistake because you are actually saying you're casting a vision of the good life and saying, For the sake of this, these measures are worth it, even if they are going to be marked with some pain and disappointment, hurt, and so forth. I really appreciated that, and the element, so we won't have the time to speak to each of them, but just to give an idea to people what this consists of.

The F in FEAST is finding other families. E is explain, educate, and exemplify, some of which we have just discussed. A, adopt alternatives, S, set up digital accountability and family screen rules, and T, trade screens for real-life responsibilities and pursuits. And one of the things that just... Though I am concerned about where we are societally, technologically, one of the things that I find exciting from a theological Christian perspective is this pushes us, or it should push us, into thinking seriously about and then asking ourselves, Do I really believe this? What it is that God has made us and what he has made us for. And you are in this FEAST aspect in terms of sustaining this way of life. I really detected she is depicting what it is that we were made for and how it is that we can best enjoy that.

I'm so glad. I'm so glad that you got that. That is really the vision that I'm trying to hold out. It's just asking the question, what is childhood for? And what childhood do I want my children to have? I think when we step back and really ask ourselves these questions as parents, and when we approach parenting with purpose, not just like, Oh, we're just trying to survive. Because if we're just in this mode of survival parenting, it's just too easy to give in to handing a child a smartphone or a tablet. But when we step back and ask ourselves the purpose of childhood and really the purpose of human life and what we want their childhood to be filled with, it becomes really clear that screens are not delivering those goals, those goods that we want our children to have. And so that is why I really wanted to this positive acronym of FEAST to say that the saying no to screens, the tech exit is not the end. The tech exit is the means. It's the means to pursuing the ends that we were made for. And so that is where I want readers to end.

I don't want them to think that this book is just about giving up smartphones. And that's the key to the perfect childhood. It's saying, no, the means of pursuing a childhood and a human life of flourishing is

saying no to technologies that are going to distract us, addict us away from what we were made for, which ultimately for Christians, we understand we know we were made for a relationship with God and relationship with others, and that the screens really get in the way of those two things, those two great commands that were given, and also just the message of Christianity that we on our own can't fulfill those commands. We need Jesus Christ. And so then our life becomes about trusting in and following Jesus. And that is the ultimate pinnacle of human flourishing is us finding our life in Christ and being united to him. Just wanting to point our children toward Jesus and towards these eternal matters, the screens really get in the way of that. Just even at a much deeper level, and I try to point to this at the end of our book, is we have to be asking those questions of what human life is for, and then it becomes clear that the screens are not delivering that.

That is why, again, I argue for the tech exit as a critical means to pursuing what human life is for and where true human flourishing is found, but it's not an end in itself. The far greater task ahead of us, I say, is pursuing those real-life goods. That's the end of the acronym of FEAST is trading the screens for these real life responsibilities and relationships and pursuits. And that was my favorite chapter to write because it was just so joy-filled and just a thinking of the ways that these families have oriented their lives really around relationships with each other and about training their children in real-world responsibilities. Not just hobbies, which hobbies are great, teaching kids how to play sports or arts and crafts, but just actually teaching them service, helping them learn to serve their families in the home through first chores and tasks around the house, and then learning to serve others in their community through their church, their school, their neighborhood, and just really the power that service, it's a powerful antidote, really, to anxiety, the anxiety we see crippling teens today who are on social media holding themselves out to the world for judgment in a very self-centered way, that the smartphone and social isn't currently self-centered.

It just teaches you that the world revolves around you, which we know isn't true, and just so sadly caves children in on themselves. And so instead, this path to flourishing is helping our children to lift their eyes up to God and then out to other people. And that's what these families are doing. They're helping their children to engage in real life. And so saying no to screens is a necessary part of that. But then the joyful task after we've said no to the screens is pursuing those real-life goods that are for our good and are flourishing as humans.

What are parents to do when for the purpose of school or maybe even youth group at church, there is an expectation, maybe even a demand, that students have access to particular apps or social media platforms. What advice would you give families with respect to this? Because I think we're going to see more and more at the level of Christian schools and churches attention between what is seen as an efficient and and fast way of disseminating information and families who are increasingly saying, We are desirous of making these kinds of changes.

Yeah, that is a tough one in the sense that I often feel like parents make a lot of decisions in their own family, and then where they feel like they're more powerless to resist some of these things is when the school is making certain decisions for them or even their church youth group is encouraging the other direction. What I would first just say is, parents, we can't underestimate the power of a single voice that I think often the schools may not even know that parents have an issue with these school-mandated iPads or laptops or tablets because if they don't hear from parents, they don't appreciate them or they don't want them, then they don't know. They don't know what they don't know. For every parent who speaks up and says, We don't actually want child to be learning on the tablet or completing their homework assignments through this screen, it makes it easier on other parents. Then the more parents they hear from them, they may actually make a change. I also will say some parents have had varying degrees of success in just securing an accommodation for their child to not use the iPad or tablet in school to explain, We would like our child to complete these assignments by paper, and schools have accommodated that, printing out the worksheets for kids when parents don't want them to be on the screens.

So obviously there are sometimes forces beyond the parents control, but that we're not completely powerless, that we can make our voices known to the school, to the school to the school administration about the changes that we want to see and that we can ask for accommodations in

the meantime. And I will also say for youth groups as well, I think their parents can have even more influence because we are the church, we're the members the church, and that if we express to the youth group, this is the culture we'd like to set in the youth group. We don't want all the kids on phones or being encouraged to be posting about youth group on social media. Social media is not good for our teens. We don't want them to be on these apps to begin with. Again, I had several parents share stories of success where them just expressing that to the youth group leaders, the leaders in leadership in the church, really made a big impact and a big difference because I think Sometimes there's just an awareness of all the harms, and it's too easy to drift into adopting what the culture has adopted.

I think just remembering as Christians that we live counterculturally and that technology is one of those areas. But I think increasingly, Christians need to become comfortable with living differently than the culture. That applies to just thinking through our youth groups and not encouraging all the teens and youth group to get on social media and smartphones, but actually the opposite. I think that if we think about even from a positive framing, like youth groups can be a very positive antidote to some of these social pressures towards screens. If the youth group is a place where people aren't on their smartphones and social media, if it's a phone-free in-person gathering, a youth group where all the kids leave their phones in a basket and they're just actually together in real life, a youth group. That's super powerful when then they go back into the culture or back to their schools to have even that buffer of a youth group where they're experiencing real life community in relationship with other peers and with their leaders. And so I think youth groups should think positively about how can we create that type of culture at our youth group by having better policies around how we treat smartphone use or social media use, particularly when kids are at the youth group meetings. Those would be my suggestions.

Thank you. That's helpful. In the fourth section of the book, you talk about collective solutions. One of the chapters is devoted to schools in particular. And you say in that chapter that it's not just smartphones. You say at one point it's time to get screens out of schools, not just the phones, but also the laptops. And there has been growing in consistence of incorporating, whether it be Chromebooks or laptops, into the regular curriculum of K through 12 students. Why is it that you make that statement, which I would imagine some would respond to and just say, Well, wait a minute. We've got to prepare our kids for the technological world that they're going into. And what is this?

Well, briefly, I'll just say, I try to explain. I'm not anti Kids learning how to use technology truly as a tool. In fact, I get lots of examples in the book of how kids can do that, actually learn to use a computer and the Internet for research as tools. But unfortunately, what's happened, instead of getting tech education, where they have a computer computer lab where they're learning these actual computer skills, education technology has just taken over every aspect of education. I like to say we should have tech-ed, not ed-tech, where now the mode of learning for every subject has become the tablet on the desk, which are inherently distracting to kids because it's impossible for teachers to completely keep kids off of game websites, unfortunately, even pornography websites. There's just distractions inherent to the fact that a child now has a screen on their desk, but that even then the mode of learning is not ideal for how the human brain learns. I document the studies in the book that we actually comprehend texts more deeply and develop fuller literacy when we're reading things on paper as opposed to screens, and that something about the screen just encourages the brain to skim more than to read every word and to really comprehend the meaning behind the words more deeply.

I think just the mode of the screen-based learning has not been ideal for just human literacy and just how we also learn how to write. Writing by hand is much better than typing. We remember things better writing it by hand. Just looking at all these different studies about how we learn, it's clear that learning on screens is not ideal in terms of how we learn. Then the results have not borne out. That one laptop per child has not all of a sudden drastically improved educational outcomes or reduce educational inequalities or the achievement gap. Instead, I think we really actually need to question the use of these educational screens because it shows that getting phones out of school does a lot more to improve student performance and actually helps the lowest performing students the most. And so similarly, I think getting screens out of school would actually help students to learn better and we'd probably see even the best results for the lowest performing students who may just be much

more distracted by the screens in the first place. And so that is my encouragement, is for screens to severely limit the use of the tablets or computers and to try to contain them to more of a computer lab or computer class-type setting, where they really do learn to use the screen as a tool, but not have the screen become the teacher or become the form of education for all the other subjects.

Yes. Well, to give you further encouragement, our Our Provost, Dr. Adam Porcella and I, we were asked to speak to a gathering or two different gatherings. It's a conference of the Mid-Atlantic Christian School Association, a number of educators about issues related to technology. And your book has been in our prep for both of us. Both of us have been, we have read it and benefited from it, and we're going to be sharing some things with them. The appendices, I'll I just wanted to say a word about this.

Yeah.

The appendices are a treasure trove in themselves.

Oh, thank you. I did put effort into that.

Everything from a self-evaluation for adults for us to check our own technological use, Screen Detox Plans, organizations, and communities that people can join with real-life alternative resources and policy resources. This is a real wealth of not only information, but as we've discussed, encouragement. And I would strongly encourage listeners, if you are a parent, if you're a one who works with youth in any capacity, this is a very, very valuable book. It is *The Tech Exit: A Practical Guide to Freeing Kids and Teens from Smartphones* by Claire Morrell. Thank you for the effort that you put into producing this, and I look forward to just how much more fruit it will yield in the lives of families and churches. So thank you, and thank you for the time with me today. This has been a pleasure.

No, thank you so much for having me. Really enjoyed it. And yeah, I pray it will be a blessing and a resource for parents and churches to help us in this way.

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