Screens, Social Media, and Kids' Brains: Strategies for Mental and Digital Well-being

Dr. Katie Hurley

Interviewed by Dr. Laura Markham

Dr. Laura Markham (00:04):

This Summit is brought to you with love by Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids. Welcome.

Hi there. I'm Dr. Laura Markham, founder of Peaceful Parent, Happy Kids, an organizer of this online summit. Nurturing Hearts, Nurturing Minds: The Neuroscience of Peaceful Parenting. I'm delighted today to introduce you to teen mental health expert Dr. Katie Hurley, DSW, LCSW, AKA, Dr. Mom. She's the senior clinical advisor for The Jed Foundation, a nonprofit dedicated to teen and young adult mental health and suicide prevention. She's the author of five books at the intersection of youth parenting and mental health, including the award-winning No More Mean Girls. We're talking with Katie Hurley today about screens, social media and the teenage brain, strategies for mental and digital well-being. Katie, welcome to The Summit.

Dr. Katie Hurley (00:59):

Laura, thank you so much for having me.

Dr. Laura Markham (01:01):

Well, I'm delighted to talk with you and I want to extend, I know our title is The Teenage Brain, but many of our viewers have kids who are 9, 10, 11, 12, not even 13 yet, and that lays the foundation. So if we can expand our age a little bit, I know that you

have a lot of expertise in what happens by the teen years, but also what happens earlier.

Dr. Katie Hurley (01:25):

That's right. And actually 40% of 12 year olds are using Snapchat, so it's a good time to talk about that.

Dr. Laura Markham (01:31):

Great. So that is a perfect place to start. I think so many parents are worried and confused and don't know where to begin to have conversations. So maybe you could start us off with that. What kinds of ... Your kid comes to you, your 11-year-old and says, "I really want to use Snapchat," and what do you say?

Dr. Katie Hurley (01:53):

Yeah, so I always say to parents, "Kids are going to come to you and say every other kid has this. Every kid is using it." And it's true, 40% of 8 to 12 year olds are using it somewhat. But if we can work as communities to set some parameters around it and hold off as long as possible, it is really difficult to totally hold off forever. This is how kids communicate, it's how they plan things, it's how they find each other. We used to find each other by the bikes in the yard. Now they find each other on Snap Maps. It's kind of wild how much things have evolved.

(02:33):

But if we can work with other parents and have honest conversations with other parents so that we can say, "Well, what are you doing about Snapchat and what do you know? And here's what I know," that's step one. So when they come to you, it's okay to take a pause and say, "I have heard a lot about that, but I'm not sure I know enough about it yet. So I'm going to do a little research and talk to some other parents and see what everybody thinks and how it's being used. But how would you want to use it? Why are you interested in Snapchat? What would you want to use it for?" Is always a really good place to start.

Dr. Laura Markham (03:07):

Beautiful. So what would you want to use it for? Now I'm your kid and I'm going to say, "Well, because everyone's using it and that's how they stay in touch with each other. And I'm so left out." And no one wants their child to feel left out. So what does the parent need? What information do they need to gather to make this decision? Are there guidelines about age?

Dr. Katie Hurley (03:28):

Yeah, so the first response to that would be, "Oh, it is really hard to feel left out. If you feel like all your friends are on it and you're seeing them use it, I can understand that it's really hard to feel left out. So let me just gather some more information before we jump into this because I want to know what we're doing." So Snapchat and Instagram have both recently rolled out more family features. So you can have a family account on either of those platforms where a parent can sort of oversee what's happening. What's hard about Snapchat is that it is true that most things disappear. They do disappear automatically, but kids will take screenshots or take another device and take a video or a picture of things. If a screenshot is taken on Snapchat, the person who sent the snap is notified. Katie someone took a screenshot of this snap. They will say who did it, which is good because then you know, "Oh good, they liked my content." Or "Uh-oh, maybe I shouldn't have said that thing. I need to get in touch with that person."

(04:35):

But also kids sometimes just they find ways around it. And so they'll take another ... An iPad for instance, and they'll take a picture of something and then start sharing it a different way. So one thing that parents really need to know and understand and help their kids understand is that there is no privacy on any of these platforms. It doesn't matter the parental controls, it doesn't matter that it's a private account. There is no privacy. The minute you step into social media, you're one screenshot or one screen capture away from people you don't know knowing your business or knowing what you're saying. So that's really ... I always say that's the line you have to be willing to cross. That's step one. If you're willing to cross that with an 8, 9, 10-year-old, I personally wasn't as a parent. I also know it's getting more and more difficult because more and more kids are using these things. But if you're comfortable with that, then you really have to talk with your kids daily about what they share, how they share, and what they view.

(05:43):

Allegedly with the new parent features and family features, some of the content on Instagram and Snapchat in the for you pages, the reels ... Reels and TikToks end up everywhere in Snapchat, in every platform. So you can even just Google them to see them. So this idea that, "Oh, I kept my kid off TikTok, so they didn't see any of that stuff," is not ... That's not real. We have to recognize that everything is everywhere. It's on YouTube, it's everywhere. So really the best strategy is educating your kids, talking about what they might see. So if you are not willing to have a conversation with a 10-year-old about pornography and what that means and what it looks like and how it

might feel to encounter something like that, then you and they are not ready and that's kind of a good baseline for yourself.

Dr. Laura Markham (06:34):

Beautiful. And we will be talking in this summit about talking with kids about sex and porn, but just quickly, how would you phrase that to a 10-year-old?

Dr. Katie Hurley (06:47):

So I would say, "When you're on social media, sometimes you see things that you're not looking for. Sometimes you search for something and the algorithm, which is the computer part behind the social media platform that sort of sends out all the videos and all the content, sometimes it gets confused. And it sends you things or sometimes it's on purpose that it sends you things that you don't really want to see just to see if you'll like it. And so that may include videos of adults having sexual contact that you don't understand necessarily and you don't know what to do about. If you see anything like that or if you see anything that's violent or anything that scares you in any way, I would like you to come to me first so we can work through it together."

Dr. Laura Markham (07:38):

Great. Great. So I mean, obviously parents watching this are thinking, "Oh my goodness, I'm going to get my kid a cell phone and the first thing they're going to do is see porn."

Dr. Katie Hurley (07:48):

No.

Dr. Laura Markham (07:48):

So what do you suggest that parents do? Parents agonize about when to get that first cell phone, but then they give the kid the cell phone, nothing explodes in their house, they think things are okay, and they don't really know … When they're potty training, they understand what to look for. Is the kid peeing on the floor or do they have wet panties on? They know what to look for and they know what to monitor. Is the kid dancing around and not making it to the bathroom? We don't know that for phones. We give the kid a phone and we don't know how to monitor. And a lot of parents think, "Oh, well if I get some app, it'll map my kids everything." Is that the right thing to do? So talk to us about how parents can best monitor what their kids are doing. What's that look like?

Dr. Katie Hurley (08:38):

So every family's different and every family has different needs in terms of monitoring and what they think they need to see. A lot of families are using Bark to monitor for certain ... And Bark does a really good job of searching for different words that can pop up. You put in what you want them to search for, and it does do a reasonable job. Sometimes it overreacts, so sometimes it's constantly telling you things and kids, young people have their own vernacular. They speak differently than we do, and we did that as teenagers. We just don't remember, or as kids. We just don't necessarily remember it all but we did do that. That's part of growing up. That's part of exploring language and development. So that's all very normal, but sometimes the monitoring apps can kind of over-evaluate words that are put into things. So that's just something to keep in mind.

(09:29):

But what I always say is, what I like about Instagram, if I'm going to say there's a good feature to it, is that you can actually, and my teenage daughter actually taught me this, and she uses this and a lot of her friends do, is you can actually program words and hashtags that you don't want to see on Instagram. So if you're struggling with something, you can put those words in, or if you are thinking that your child is not eating as much as they normally would, or suddenly you're seeing different behaviors around food than you've ever noticed before, that's common when young people are first stepping their toes into social media because there's a lot of eating disorder content and there's a lot of toxic beauty content and that's not just for girls. Everybody worries about the girls. Young boys are seeing a lot of toxic health, muscle building content, and that includes how to eat and what to eat and when to eat and when not to eat. So watching for all those behaviors.

(10:32):

But on Instagram, you can actually program in bodybuilding, eating disorders, calorie restriction, all those words, you can program it in and then it will filter out so that you're not seeing that content, which is great. But I would say in terms of noticing, what we notice most of all is that young people tend to turn inward. Part of that, when I really work with kids one-to-one is that they feel guilty. So they're seeing things that they think their parents wouldn't want them to see, and they feel guilty about it and they feel bad like they've done something wrong. So one thing I always say to parents is have an amnesty policy. "Whatever you're seeing, you're not in trouble. I just want to understand and I just want to help you and I want to figure out ways for you to not have to see that stuff anymore."

(11:21):

So having that really open communication and removing the threat of punishment, because what we see often is that the knee-jerk reaction is, "Get rid of this. That's it. You can't handle this." And that may be true, and some kids do need a pause on devices at times and on social media at times. But that shouldn't be step one because if it is, they'll turn more inward and share even less when they're encountering things. But kids who are isolating, spending so much time in their room on their device, hiding their phone, or you hear them shuffle, throw something out of the way when you knock on the door or enter the door, those kinds of behaviors, changes in friendships. So the kids they normally talk a lot about, they're suddenly not talking about anymore, not wanting to connect with anymore. When you see them ... Changes in sleep habits, a lot of kids are really good at sneaking onto social media at night. This is not the fault of parents.

(12:23):

I want to be super clear. Blaming parents is useless. This is a totally new terrain for parents and we are not going to blame each other or ourselves. We are going to learn how to manage it together, and that's the best thing we can do as a whole, as parents. But kids are good at sneaking it because the appeal is strong and we will talk about it when we get to brain stuff, but all of these apps are designed to hack all of our brains and keep us coming back for more. And it is unreasonable to assume that young people can just manage that. It's not reasonable. Adults can't manage it so we have to think about that. But changes in eating habits, changes in sleep habits, those are all signs you can kind of look for to know that you know what? I think we need a little bit more oversight.

(13:13):

But I always say the best monitoring is engagement. So connecting with your kids, even just on the daily, like, "Hey, did you see anything cool on Snapchat today?" When your kids are sending you reels, my 17-year-old spams me like 10 reels in a day, but I watch them all when I have a minute because that's like a window into what she thinks is funny or what she thinks is interesting. So it helps me gather information and then when I send them back, it's actually a connection. It's a way that kids are trying to connect with their parents right now in sort of this safe way to them, like a psychologically safe way. So try and connect as much as you can, set aside 10 minutes and make it that your time that you do it. But also just asking them, "Well, what's happening on Snapchat today? Where's everybody meeting up? What's going on?" So just really asking a lot of questions every single day. These are not one and done conversations.

Dr. Laura Markham (14:09):

Beautiful. And let's talk about the mental health concerns that you've been referring to. So what does the research tell us about the vulnerable preteen and teen brain that's taking shape in response to every repeated experience is now experiencing in devices all the time? What do we know about what's happening for kids?

Dr. Katie Hurley (14:30):

So right now, we sit squarely in the place of we have correlation and we don't have causation. And that's a frustrating place to be for you and I and for researchers and people who read all of the research coming through. Because I always say, "If we wait for causation, we've waited too long." As you know but people who don't know about psychological research and sociological research, it's expensive, it's time-consuming, and long-term longitudinal studies are very long. So it's not possible to gather the data in real time fast enough to say, "Oh, we have causation."

(15:12):

All that said, we know that kids are spending more time connected online than they are in person. We know that rates of depression and anxiety have been rising since 2019. So there are some books and blogs and people who are going to say it's all because of the phones. It's one factor. Mental health is always multifactorial. And so we want to remember that because we want to remember that your kid may be diving into their phone more because they're experiencing depression, because they're experiencing social isolation, and they're searching for some kind of connection and they're finding it online. So we can't say for sure which came first, the chicken or the egg on this one.

(15:56):

What we can say is that we need to look at the whole arc of it because we are seeing elevated rates of anxiety. We are seeing elevated rates of depression. We're seeing elevated rates of suicidal ideation in some groups so we need to pay attention to those things. Those are all important, whether it's because of the phones or because of all the different things, which is what we always say in mental health. It's we have to look at all the factors. What is their day-to-day like? What are their social connections like? What are their family connections like? Have they experienced a loss? Do they have enough food to eat? Are they able to access the curriculum in the school they're involved in? So there's so many things that play into our mental health, but phones are one of them. So we know that we want to look closely at what are they looking at? How much time are they spending looking at it? What are they getting from it? What's still missing? What are the gaps?

Dr. Laura Markham (16:53):

Is it the devices or is it the social media or is it both?

Dr. Katie Hurley (16:58):

It's everything. Yes and yes. The other thing is at this age, this sort of 8, preteen, tweens are now that sort of 8 to 12 and then it's teens. So from that eight plus age group, what we know about brain development is that the amygdala, which is the part of our brain that's a little teeny tiny part of our brain that has a huge impact on our day to day. So that part of the brain is very hypersensitive. That part of the brain is responsible for processing emotions, emotional responses, responding to stress and anxiety. And from an evolutionary perspective, that part of the brain has been super important to our brains since forever. It was the part of the brain that warned us to run away from a large animal so we didn't get eaten. The large animal right now in some cases is social media or is technology or video games. We always say social media and we forget to add gaming. Gaming functions very much like social media right now. So we want to add that in.

(18:00):

YouTube. We think, "Oh, they're just watching shows or they're just watching things." That has a social media component to it. So we want to think about all the things they do online when we talk about technology use and social media use. So that part of the brain is very hyper reactive. The prefrontal cortex, which is supposed to come in and regulate, is very much under construction and underdeveloped. And so what happens is often the information just bypasses the hypothalamus and just explodes into this reaction. And so their brains are constantly running on stress and then they get a dopamine hit when something good happens on social media, enough people like their posts or they get positive comments. But then when they get a negative comment or their post doesn't get enough likes or nobody's responding to them, boom. It's just all those levels come crashing down. So their brain levels are very up and down when engaged with this stuff. Long-term, are we going to find that that might not be healthy for our brains? That's what I would guess.

Dr. Laura Markham (19:06):

So are there structures, boundaries, house rules that you generally recommend for guardrails around this digital use?

Dr. Katie Hurley (19:18):

Yeah. So first of all, I always say build the on-ramp early. So be talking about it, the functions of it, how people use it, the pros and cons, benefits and risks long before you hand over a device to a kid that's their own. Often kids get trained on their

parents' devices, whether it's a phone or a tablet, and that's fine. That's actually like a safe sort of scaffolding training ground. But be sure that you're having those conversations before they ever enter into it. If you don't have enough information, then you've got to learn before you hand that stuff over. Apps are going to come and go, all kinds of social media apps pop up, become real hot for six months to a year and then disappear into oblivion or Meta buys them and then they become part of that.

(20:08):

It's not so much like, "Oh, I have to stay on every single trend that's happening," as much as just understanding that the reason there are so many lawsuits right now, and the reason Congress is trying hard to step in with KOSA is because the social media companies do not have to be responsible for algorithmic transparency right now. They also don't have to be responsible for algorithmic development that takes youth and teen brain development into account. So they can push and push and push to hook kids in and get them coming back for more over and over again, which it's not really in the DSM yet, but do we look at it and say, "Is this becoming an addiction?" Yeah, for some kids, it is. So we have to look at what's in front of us. So I forgot the question. Sorry Laura. I just went off on a tangent.

Dr. Laura Markham (21:01):

Well, I was asking about specific rules, but before we go back to that, following up on what you just said, are other countries doing anything different? Because it is part of the business model of the social media companies to grab the attention of every human being. And if you can get someone addicted at an early age and get the brain wrapped around this and depending for dopamine hits on this engagement with the social media, of course, that's their business model.

Dr. Katie Hurley (21:28):

The UK has passed legislation on that algorithmic transparency piece and protecting youth online so they have more guardrails in place from a policy perspective, and we need that in the United States. And I would encourage everybody to email their senators and their Congress representatives to say, "Hey, I want this. KOSA has been tied up and back and forth and back and forth, and it needs to pass the House now." I've seen it, I've seen the latest iteration of it, and it will be much more protective of our children and teenagers, and it's really, really important legislation to kind of help start digging out from this experiment that was created. I mean, we were all kind of told it was safe and fun and social connection and that's not what it is. I mean, they are hacking brains for advertising dollars and they're doing a lovely job.

Dr. Laura Markham (22:24):

It's effective.

Dr. Katie Hurley (22:25):

Very effective.

Dr. Laura Markham (22:25):

So we're going to put information, just a little bit of information below our interview on KOSA so people can see that and know what they're writing to their legislators about.

Dr. Katie Hurley (22:34):

Amazing. Great.

Dr. Laura Markham (22:35):

So going back, and before you move on to going back to the boundaries and rules question, I gather also that Europe, many European countries have age controls on things. So like pornography, you have to be able to register and get a little number or ID or something that says, "Yes, I'm really 18," and you can't go online and look at pornography without that. Is that correct?

Dr. Katie Hurley (23:03):

Yes. And also in terms of age verification, it's a more strict system so that the kids can't get around. I mean right now it's just like the arbitrary age is 13, it's meaningless and kids just pick a birth year that makes them 13 and parents do it for them in some cases. So that. So from a policy perspective, we also need, and that's something that we're pushing for in the field.

Dr. Laura Markham (23:27):

[inaudible 00:23:28].

Dr. Katie Hurley (23:28):

Yeah, because we need to have parent consent to age verification is ... Instagram is rolling that out, I think. If they haven't already, that's coming. Again, that's going to require that parents are courageous enough to say, "No, you're not actually 13. So we're going to wait."

Dr. Laura Markham (23:49):

So while we're on the courageous enough thing, because it's very hard for parents who worry about their child's well-being and about social ostracism, what do you think about the wait until 16 movement?

Dr. Katie Hurley (24:00):

Very. Well, honestly, Laura, I have been saying this for 10 years. Every time I speak on this, which is often, I get that question at the end of a parent ed night and parents will say, "What's the perfect age?" And honestly, 16 isn't a perfect age, but it's developed enough in the prefrontal cortex to be able to make reasonable decisions. They're not going to do everything right. It's developed enough. Still going to be problems, but I think it's hard. I have seen kids on both sides of that. The kids who use it all the time, so much so that it's really harming their social interactions and they're feeling pervasively lonely even though they have 1,000 friends on Snapchat or whatever. And then I've seen the kids who are totally left out and can't find their friends and they feel very isolated and lonely. So it's difficult, it's frustrating that every kid has essentially moved from texting to Snapchat, what they call texting is Snapchat group chats. It's not SMS texting through the texting app.

(24:59):

In some cases, like college students, a lot are using WhatsApp because if there's international accounts, that's a way to get everybody together without high fees and things, which is great, but that's what they're using it for. So kids are left out of get togethers. A young person was just saying this to me yesterday, her Snapchat got taken away because of something that went wrong, and she was like, "There was this kid last year that was the only kid in school that didn't have Snapchat, and we were all like, 'Oh God, don't forget to text him.'" And she's like, "I'm the new him." [inaudible 00:25:36] was like, that's hard. I mean also sometimes kids need a pause so they can learn how to connect. So that's why I always say try and connect with other parents as much as you can. If not 16, try ... The Wait Until 8th movement has been popular and that has been a little bit more successful.

Dr. Laura Markham (25:56):

Right.

Dr. Katie Hurley (25:56):

Things that we're seeing that kids are struggling with as they get older that they need to know how to do is call to make a doctor's appointment. Call to make ... You can't do actually everything online. You can do a lot of things online, but you can't always schedule a doctor's appointment online. You can't always order a pizza online. So

we've got teenagers that are petrified to pick up the phone and order a pizza because everything's been text or an online order or an online schedule. So there is a value in waiting and having them practice those skills.

Dr. Laura Markham (26:34):

Having them practice real life skills that they're going to need and otherwise they're not doing if relying just on devices. Yeah.

Dr. Katie Hurley (26:44):

The other thing is in the day when I was young, 1,000 years ago, the parents were the gatekeepers of the telephone. So when I called my best friend, I had to say, "Hi, Mrs. Walker, it's Katie, how are you? Is Sarah home?" [inaudible 00:26:59] "I'm good. How are you? Is Sarah home? Can she come to the phone?" We don't do that anymore, which that's not necessarily the worst thing in terms of the gate-keeping part of it, but kids don't really greet parents as much anymore, and that's an important skill, and it's an important part of developing deeper connections. When parents really get to know the kids' friends, that's important, and we don't do that if we're only doing it on social media.

Dr. Laura Markham (27:32):

I'm going to veer off here into co-regulation because I know you have a unique take on this related to screens. Tell us about that.

Dr. Katie Hurley (27:42):

So one thing I've discovered, and I will say I discovered it out of my own desperation of how I know too much. Also, I don't want my kids to be totally left out of the world. I did make them wait until 13 to get Instagram, and I made them wait until 9th grade for Snapchat. I just felt that that was better timing. That's me. That was my personal opinion. Most middle schoolers did have Snapchat. I work with a lot of middle schoolers, I was seeing a lot of things go wrong. So I just wanted to wait on that. So that's not like, I'm not saying parents have to do that, but that's how I did it. What I discovered as I was walking these murky waters with my own kids is that the more I engaged with them both offline in my home, talking to them about the different social media companies and the different things that we can find and how it can be useful.

(28:35):

I mean, I always joke with parents, "What's the first thing I do when I don't know how to fix something?" YouTube, there's a video to teach you how to do anything. You can

build anything with YouTube. So it is something that's good, that's a positive of social media. Sometimes you can find useful information on Instagram and even on Snapchat. You just have to know what to look for. So I really decided I was going to co-regulate with my kids. I was going to work with them on this. So sort of getting back to those parameters, we sat down as a family and said, "What's a reasonable amount?" We started with Instagram. "What's a reasonable amount of time to spend on Instagram every day and feel like we're connecting with people but not feel like we're losing our lives to it?" And each of my kids had a different take.

(29:22):

So my son, who's super practical and just likes to do things with his hands, likes to move. He was like, "10 minutes tops, I don't even need ..." And for the first two years, if he spent six minutes on Instagram a day, that was it. My daughter was like, "But everybody shares stories and I like to watch people's stories, and that's kind of fun." And so she said 25 minutes, and she stuck to that for a while. We would revisit all the time, and I said, "Look, you can do these things, but I'm going to follow you and you need to follow me, and I'm not going to embarrass you. I'm not going to comment all the time and embarrass you. I just want to know what you're engaging with, whatever." So that's how we did it. And then my daughter said like, "Oh mom, it's okay if you comment on my post. I like it. My friends know you. They like you. It's okay. It's not embarrassing." So I don't comment on everything, but I will sometimes comment on things and try and lift her up.

(30:16):

If she sees something scares her, there has been a scenario recently where some of her friends were in a bad accident and some of the updates are not accurate, and there's a lot of sharing on social media that's not accurate and is really scary. So I've been diving into that with her and then honestly physically holding her and saying, "Here's what I know from the adults who know the situation, and I will promise to give you updated information as I see it, but we're going to stay away from the story updates because this is just people trying to make sense of a difficult situation. No one's trying to lie or make it better or worse than it is. They're trying to make sense of it, but it's scaring you." So that's an example of co-regulating with a 17-year-old.

(31:02):

When they were younger, it was more about sharing things back and forth. "Oh, show me the funniest thing you saw this week. Or show me something interesting you learned this week, or you think you learned this week or whatever. Tell me about the creators you like." And I would follow those creators. As we did that and we worked through it together as a secret team, nobody knew we were doing it that way, so

connected on it, her friends started to follow me and her friends are very cute, and they all call me Dr. Mom. So they started following me, and then when I do mental health videos, they're like, "It's Dr. Mom." They share it to their stories and stuff. I'm now co-regulating with a number of her friends because they like to learn from me and they like to be connected to me.

(31:46):

So it's really about diving in. I'm Gen X and I get it. We want to put our heads in the sand and we're doing all the things and we feel like the world is on fire and we're the only generation handling it, and I get that. I feel that every day at work. But also we got to find the time. If you can find 10 minutes a day to do this with your kids, you can help them build the skills they need to use social media in a positive and healthy way.

Dr. Laura Markham (32:19):

I love that you put it in terms of skill building because these are skills they'll need for the rest of their lives and who knows how this all will continue to evolve and the skills will evolve. Is it possible to delineate some about what those skills are exactly?

Dr. Katie Hurley (32:35):

Yeah. So we talk a lot about knowing who is a content creator who's just sort of trying to gather information and put it out there versus who has a skill set in a certain field. So an example, we're sitting here together, Dr. Laura, I would say, "Oh, you could follow Dr. Laura and get some information on co-regulation and attachment and this and this, and she would be able to give you really good research-backed information on these topics because that's her skill set," like a lot of people send their teens and young adults to me, to my Instagram account to get cognitive behavioral therapy skills and different regulation skills and stuff. So we talk about that. What does that mean in the beauty industry? What does that mean in music? What does it mean in mental health? What does it mean in environmental science? That's a big thing kids search on TikTok. What does it mean in politics, in election stuff? Who are the folks who have the up-to-date accurate information? How can you spot misinformation or disinformation?

(33:46):

So misinformation is sort of accidental, incorrect information. Disinformation is deliberately spread lies. So how can you spot those things? Sometimes there will be on X, you'll see a warning flag, things can get flagged for disinformation, so you can see it. You can't necessarily see that on all the other platforms, so you have to learn

how to spot it or when you need advice on it. And that's where we get back to co-regulation because you can send that video to your parent or caregiver and say, "Is this real?" And my kids do that. "Do you think this is real Mom?" I once fell for an AI thing about during the NBA finals, and my son was like, "No, mom, that's not real. That guy would never say that." I was like, "Oh, okay, good." So co-regulation, he regulated me because, "Can you believe this interview?" And he said, "Mom, that's not a real interview. That's AI." I'm like, "Oh, all right."

(34:45):

So those are kind of the skills that they need. How do they find what's real and what's helpful? And then what do you do when you accidentally take a left turn down a rabbit hole you didn't mean to? What does eating disorder content look like? So there are adolescent nutritionists out there who share really great information, and then there are people who will tell you how to eat only 500 calories in a day. That's dangerous. So how do you find what's real and what's not? Those are good skills to have.

(35:15):

And how do you know when your brain has had enough? And we all know when our brain has had enough of something. So I always say talk early and often about the mind-body connection. When you are stressed or overexcited, what happens to your body? For me, my neck, my shoulders get tight, my jaw gets tense. I start to just feel irritable, like, oh, everything's bothering me. That's a sign that ... I mean, I have to use that barometer with the New York Times. Okay, I've had all I can take. This is all the news that I can handle for today because my body feels really dysregulated and uncomfortable. It's okay to be uncomfortable, but it's not okay for social media to make you uncomfortable. So we have to learn when to exit.

Dr. Laura Markham (36:02):

So if I'm scrolling and I'm 13 years old and I'm feeling uncomfortable, I'm also hoping that something is going to happen with my device, giving me some sort of positive something that's going to make me feel better, and that's part of my desperation in continuing to scroll. So what do you tell the kid at that point?

Dr. Katie Hurley (36:22):

So I say that everybody needs their own toolkit for what to do instead. So for me and my kids, it's going to be like ... For my son, he's going to go out and shoot hoops. That's a 100% what's going to regulate him if he gets irritable from things he's seeing or just too much time. Our brains can only handle so much screen time period, whether

you're an adult or a child or whatever. So you start to feel irritable and just not well. So having that toolkit handy, is it going to be a breathing exercise? Are you going to do square breathing? Are you going to go outside and get some fresh air? Are you going to try to get some exercise? Are you going to connect with someone in your house face to face? Are you going to try to connect with a friend face to face out in the world? Are you going to shift from social media to FaceTime so that at least you're having a conversation if you can't get to a person in real life? So what are your tools?

(37:17):

Have that written down somewhere handy so that when you hit that boiling point, you can look at that or someone can hand it to you, a parent can say, "Hey, here are the tools you said help you when you feel this way. Which one do you want to choose?"

Dr. Laura Markham (37:33):

This leads perfectly into my last question, which is about the whole family's digital wellness plan because what you just described is important for every human who interacts with technology. So if families are trying to approach ... The parents want to approach their devices in a healthy way, and we all know how addictive devices can be. Do you have any advice about creating a family digital wellness plan?

Dr. Katie Hurley (38:04):

I do. There are some plans out there that you can download and just kind of fill out analog style, which can kind of help. Post it up somewhere, kitchen, family room, whatever, where everybody sees it. The more we see things, the more likely we are to do those things. That is just human behavior in general. One fun thing that I have families do that I suggest, and I have done this with my own kids, is all of our devices now have screen time functionality to them where we can set, so for instance, on a phone, you can set that your child is only going to use Instagram for 15 minutes a day. You can set a code so that when they hit 15 minutes, it shuts down. You've met your time limit, see you tomorrow basically. I say to families, have the parents set the codes for the kids, but have the kids set the codes for the parents so that parents can't override because adults are going to override it when they are trying to regulate themselves.

(39:03):

We think that watching 500 TikToks is going to regulate us because they're funny dog TikToks, whatever. But it doesn't. It keeps dysregulating our brain because it's giving that inconsistent feedback loop of like good, bad, good, bad, funny, not funny. It's

messing with our brain regulation while we're engaging with it, even if we don't notice it right away. So you each set the codes for each other so that nobody's overriding the codes and you agree on the time limits in advance so that you're working on it as a family. If you have found that you set them so impossibly low that nobody's getting their needs met for that social connection piece that can exist on social media, then you increase them a little bit, but you keep the code secret so that nobody's overriding and everybody's working together. That's one of my favorite ways to do it.

Dr. Laura Markham (39:54):

I love that because it acknowledges it's not about the parents controlling the kids. It acknowledges we're all in this situation together, this grand experiment of learning to use technology, and it's interacting with our brains all the time. So every human has to learn to manage their brain and physiology and this just makes it more of a challenge, but I love your idea that we can help each other in the family.

Dr. Katie Hurley (40:17):

Yeah, because the other thing is we tend to try to scare kids and scare tactics have never worked. It didn't work for DARE. It's not going to work to tell them all the bad things that are going to happen to them. They're going to make mistakes. We are going to make mistakes. They're going to see things they don't like. We're going to see things we don't like. So it's more about telling them, "I believe in you. I know you can learn how to do this. I just know that it's going to take us all time to learn how to do this in a healthy way. So we're going to do it together and we're going to do it step by step and climb that ladder slowly so that we're not trying to rush into things."

Dr. Laura Markham (40:52):

Wonderful. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you so much for being here today. But I know that people watching us are going to want to find out more about your work and the research and follow you on Instagram. So we'll of course put your Instagram account and your website, but do you have particular advice for people about how to follow you?

Dr. Katie Hurley (41:19):

Yeah, I would say Instagram's probably the most active place and Facebook, the same handle for both. So you can just find me at Dr. Katie Hurley, LCSW. But yeah, reach out to me and I'm the slowest emailer in the world. I always say that, but I do get back to everybody eventually. But I share tons of content on Instagram and Facebook, and I also work for a nonprofit called The Jed Foundation, and we are one

of the leading national nonprofits that works on protecting the mental health and suicide prevention for teens and young adults. And we have a mental health resource center there that parents and kids can use to talk about mental health topics that might be scary to talk about, and there's lots of resources there to get started. So I encourage everybody to check out The Jed Foundation as well.

Dr. Laura Markham (42:03):

Wonderful. Thank you so much for being with us today, Katie. This was terrific.

Dr. Katie Hurley (42:07):

Thank you so much for having me.

