



BE SMART

Left to Our Own Devices

Many of us began 2026 with a familiar promise: we wanted to devote more time to our personal relationships this year; foster deeper bonds with friends and family; show up more for our children, coworkers, and neighbors; and overall, make more time for the things that matter.



The theme of this month's Smart Families newsletter is Left to Our Own Devices. When we are overloaded with devices, we don't just lose time—we lose connection to something deeper.

We miss the small moments that build closeness: eye contact across a room, shared laughter, and the unplanned conversations that make a home feel safe. In a world that offers constant scrolling and constant stimulation, it's easy to forget that true human connection isn't replaceable.

“We need four hugs a day for survival, eight for maintenance, and twelve for growth.”

- Virginia Satir



The Science of Human Connection

Human connection isn't just a preference or a personality trait – it's a core need built into the way our brains and bodies function.

For as long as humans have existed, people have lived in groups not simply for convenience, but for safety. Even today, our nervous system works best when we are surrounded by familiar, trusted people. We are designed to do life together.

Modern psychology and neuroscience explain this through something called Social Baseline Theory: the idea that the human brain expects support and closeness as a normal, "baseline" condition. When we are connected to safe people, our bodies don't have to work as hard to manage stress. We regulate emotions more efficiently and our sense of threat can decrease.



Researchers have observed this in the brain. In one well-known study, adults faced a stressful threat while inside an fMRI scanner. When they held the hand of a spouse (especially in a high-quality relationship), their brains showed less activation in regions involved in threat response. It wasn't that the threat disappeared—it's that connection helped the brain feel safer.

You can see this same "wired for closeness" design in everyday parenting. If your child follows you to the bathroom, it's easy to joke about it; what you're seeing, however, is a child's instinct to stay near the person who represents safety. Sometimes the most basic question a child is asking isn't "Where are you going?" but "Am I still safe with you?" In the science world, this is known as Attachment Theory. Research in Attachment Theory consistently shows that children thrive when they experience adults as a dependable "safe base".

Knapp's Model and the Brain Chemistry of Bonding

Knapp's relational development model reminds us that healthy relationships usually grow in stages: initiation, experimentation, intensification, integration, and bonding. To put it succinctly: real closeness takes time.

Early on, the excitement of being noticed, getting a message back, and feeling "chosen" is strongly connected to dopamine, the brain's reward and motivation chemical. Dopamine fuels the rush of new connection.

Since dopamine is designed for novelty, however, that "high" naturally fades. Over time, deeper attachment depends less on excitement and more on bonding chemicals like oxytocin (the 'cuddle' chemical), which are associated with trust, closeness, and emotional security.

This matters online because digital relationships can jump quickly across development stages to create dopamine-driven closeness before trust and safety are truly established. Knapp's model reminds us that bonding comes after time, testing, and discernment; it is not just the product of strong feelings.



The Cost of “Good Enough” Connection

For many people, disconnection now feels normal. This sad state of affairs represents an adaptation to the reality of our hyper-online, socially isolated world. When simulated connection becomes the norm, our brains start treating constant pings as “social safety,” and silence can feel threatening. Over time, face-to-face interactions can start to feel like more effort than they are worth.

The result? We don’t always notice what we’ve lost, because the digital counterfeit feels “good enough.”



Left On Read

For teens and adolescents, being “left on read” isn’t interpreted as a neutral delay—it can feel like an obvious rejection. Read receipts turn silence into a visible social cue: “I saw you and chose not to answer.” That kind of digital diffidence mirrors what psychologists call ostracism (being excluded or treated as if you don’t exist), and can quickly threaten a young person’s need for belonging and social safety.

What makes it worse is the ambiguity. Not knowing why someone hasn’t responded keeps the brain in a loop (“Did I say something wrong?” “Are they upset?” “Am I being ignored?”), and that lack of closure can create more anxiety than a clearly negative response.



Touch Psychology

Touch is one of the simplest ways human beings communicate comfort, safety, and love. Long before children can understand language, their bodies understand closeness. Appropriate, caring touch sends an immediate message to the nervous system: you are safe, you are held, you belong.

This is one reason the need for “contact comfort” is so strong in children. Many kids want to sit close, hug, lean against you, snuggle on the couch, or simply be nearby. These are not just sweet habits—they are physical cues of connection, and they help regulate a child’s stress response.

Here’s the challenge for modern life: we have the world at our fingertips through touchscreens; but we’re out of touch with people near at hand. One report found the average smartphone user touched their phone 2,617 times a day. In the United States, the average person touches another human being only twice a day, according to Psychology Today. All of those “touchscreen moments” may create the illusion of connection; but they fail to provide what the body receives through real, safe contact.

Research on touch and well-being shows that positive touch can influence the body’s stress system. Reviews have found that caring touch is associated with decreases in stress indicators like cortisol and increases in oxytocin, a hormone involved in bonding and closeness.

Touch is not a “bonus” or a luxury. It’s one of the ways our bodies learn calm, trust, and connection—especially for children. In a world that often substitutes screens for presence, science reminds us of something simple: people were made for people.

COMMUNITY NORMS

Prioritize Your Family and Your Values

Core values like avoiding temptation, humility, self-sacrifice, and acknowledging evil are less mainstream than in generations past and must be fought for.

Delay Smartphones Until High School

Smartphones are addictive, heighten anxiety and depression, and expose children to harmful content. Children thrive when they live free from the disordered influence of smartphones.

Delay Social Media Until 16

The evidence is overwhelming: early social media is not only correlated with poor mental health, but is actually causing it.

No Phones in Schools

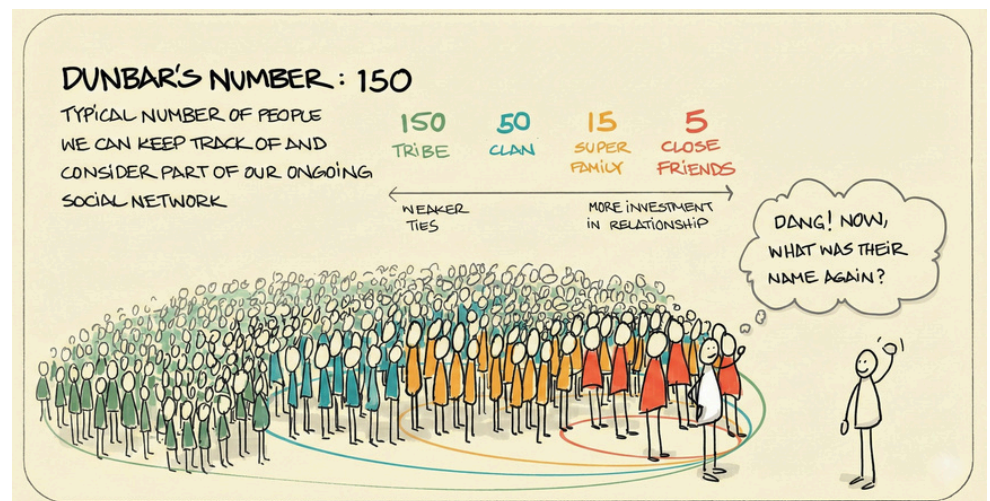
Families should strive to keep schools free of distractions. School should be a place where children have authentic human experiences, growing not only intellectually, but socially and emotionally.

How Social Media Changed the Meaning of “Friend”

In today’s world, social media has quietly redefined what the word “friend” means.

A “friend” used to imply a life in common: time together, mutual trust, and a relationship built through repeated shared moments. Now, the word can mean a click, a follow, or a username in a group chat. A child can have Roblox “friends,” hundreds of Snap streaks, a dozen group chats, and still feel deeply alone. In reality, digital closeness creates the illusion of connection without the substance of it.

Social media also changes how we evaluate relationships. Instead of getting to know someone through shared experiences, we often scan their online presence and quickly infer who we think they are. That can make “friendships” feel more numerous, but also make them disposable.



Even though social media makes it feel like we can keep up with everyone, our hearts and brains have limits. Anthropologist Robin Dunbar suggests that most humans can realistically maintain about 150 meaningful connections organized into layers: a small inner circle, then wider circles of friends and familiar faces.

So yes, social media can widen our circle. But it can't replace the inner circle. It can make us feel surrounded, but it can't make us feel known.

So when a child says, “I have so many friends,” you should ask: Do you have trusted people? Do you have people you can be fully known by? Because real connection isn't measured by followers. It's measured by whether someone will notice when you're not okay.

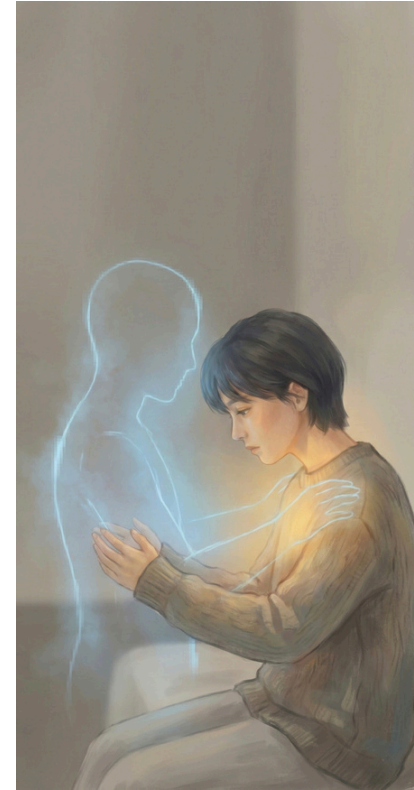
The Paradox of AI Companionship

If all of this leaves you curious about the impact of AI chatbots, you're not alone. AI companions are marketed as a solution to loneliness: a friend that's always available, always kind, always ready to listen.

Some early research suggests AI companions can feel helpful in the moment, especially for people who feel isolated, anxious, or disconnected. People may become more emotionally expressive over time and learn to share thoughts they might not otherwise vocalize. And yet, analyses of AI interactions also show increases in language related to loneliness—even suicidal ideation—to suggest that temporary relief doesn't always translate to psychological benefits.

This is the paradox: AI companionship can simulate connection, but it can't provide closeness. True closeness requires reciprocity from another human being, one that can see you, respond to you, challenge you, and love you in real time.

So maybe the goal isn't to panic about AI, but to keep it in the right bucket. Digital tools can support everyday life. But a "tool" cannot replace the relationships that make life worth living.



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TAKE THE PLEDGE

To help children grow up well in today's tech-saturated world takes more than personal resolve—it takes community. Behavioral science shows that lasting cultural change occurs in cycles: first comes awareness, then commitment, modeling, and reinforcement. When we shift from a focus on “me” to “we,” we can create strong, permanent change. Together, we can reduce the pressure to conform, strengthen our shared motivation, and support one another through the inevitable bumps along the way.

That's the “why” behind our Pledge to Delay Smartphones. It's not just a personal decision—it's a shared commitment to protect childhood, prioritize connection, and build a healthier culture for everyone.

To take the Smart Pledge, visit www.Smart-Families.org/Smart-Pledge

THE SMART PLEDGE

My family pledges to delay giving our child(ren) a smartphone until high school.

Parents First Name

Parents Last Name

Email Address



Sign the Pledge



Take the Smart Pledge