

# Offline and left to their own devices

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**Peter (front and centre) worries about having his birthday during the screen-free trial.**

Photo: Craig Sillitoe

IT'S hard to imagine any teenager willingly giving up their smartphone or computer for a week, but that's exactly what a group of Glen Waverley year 11 students will do from 5pm today when they turn off all their screen-based technology as part of a social experiment.

For some students from Brentwood Secondary College's environmental science class, going without their phones, laptops, televisions, Wiis, iPods and other screen devices until 5pm on Friday will be a huge challenge - like learning to communicate all over again.

Their experiment highlights the two competing tensions at play within schools and families. On one hand, technology is viewed as a wonderful tool that delivers information to the classroom and engages kids in learning. On the other, there is growing concern about the amount and quality of time teenagers spend on Facebook, their mobile phones and online games.

Brentwood's trial follows the distribution this year of 700 iPads to state school students as part of a pilot program investigating how the devices affect learning.

The screen-free experiment is inspired by the American documentary *Play Again*. As one of the film's subjects puts it, today's teens are under "virtual house arrest" due to the hours they dedicate to using technology.

As the psychiatrists, scientists and environmentalists quoted in the film see it, this over-exposure to technology leaves them under-exposed to nature and life outdoors.

In the film, which screens in Melbourne next week as part of the Environmental Film Festival,

hardcore teenage technology users are taken on their first camping trip. Upon returning home, they are asked to see how long they can last without their screen devices.

This inspired Brentwood Secondary College teacher Thea Nicholas to challenge her year 11 environmental science class to conduct its own technology-free experiment.

It is a test that, judging by the grimaces on some of the students' faces, not all are relishing.

Peter, 16, has a birthday on the final day of the experiment. He anticipates the going will be tough that morning when he would usually receive a flood of birthday wishes as text messages or on Facebook.

It is not the lack of Facebook love that troubles him, but the feeling that he will be seen to be ignoring the well-wishers by not replying instantly.

He estimates that on an average weekday he spends four to five hours using his mobile, two to three watching television, half an hour on the computer (he mostly accesses the internet via his phone) and half an hour playing other games such as Wiis. He uses less technology on the weekends, he says, because he plays sport and goes out with his friends.

Compared with his classmates, Peter seems to use his phone more than most boys but less than most girls. The girls estimate they spend up to eight hours each day using their phones. "I'm always checking it," says Natalie. They use their phones mostly to send text messages, check Facebook, email and other accounts and to use the internet to help with their homework.

They rarely make calls on their mobiles. "The only person I ring on it is my mum," says Mikayla - a comment met with vigorous nods. She envisages the challenge to go for five days without any screen devices will be really tough, because she cannot imagine how she will stay in touch and make plans with her friends. She is not sure whether she even has the landline telephone numbers of all her mates.

The consensus among the class is that the girls use their smartphones a lot more than the boys, mostly to stay in touch with their friends. The boys spend the bulk of their screen time playing violent online games of strategy.

"But we're socialising while we play them," says Simon, explaining that the games have chat facilities.

Thea Nicholas, 28, is participating too. Like her female students, she uses her smartphone to stay in touch with friends and is unsure how she will cope without it. "I'm of the generation where we still talk to people on our mobiles," she says, noting no one has bothered connecting a landline at her share house.

"And [as for] my social life, all the parties seem to be organised on Facebook."

Brentwood Secondary College principal Vicki Forbes looks forward to seeing what the experiment turns up. As she sees technology, it is all about time and place. "There is no turning back the clock on Facebook or mobile phones," she says. "It is simply where we are at. What we have to do is manage it."

*The Sunday Age* will return to the school after the holidays to find out how the students coped.

For screening details for *Play Again*, visit [effm.org.au](http://effm.org.au)

Read more: <http://www.theage.com.au/technology/technology-news/offline-and-left-to-their-own-devices-20111001-112ws.html#ixzz1bfZgnoH8>