**'Screenagers' Documentary Looks at Youths' Digital Device Use**

By [**Mark Walsh**](http://www.edweek.org/ew/contributors/mark.walsh.html)

It seems that all of a sudden, parents and other adults are noticing that teenagers are spending a lot of time with their smartphones and other digital devices.

In October, CNN ran an [**Anderson Cooper documentary**](http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/education_and_the_media/2015/10/cnns_being_13_is_a_worthy_look_at_the_digital_lives_of_young_adolescents.html) about the digital lives of 13-year-olds, which raised all kinds of concerns about the time young people were spending on their phones (and that special focused almost exclusively on phones).

Although Cooper spoke with a number of 13-year-olds and their parents, the documentary called "#Being13" relied a lot on survey data and the big picture.

Now comes [**"Screenagers,"**](http://indieflixfoundation.org/screenagers.html) a cleverly titled documentary by Delaney Ruston, a Seattle-area physician and filmmaker who starts right in her own household. (The film is only doing community screenings right now, but it was featured on [**ABC's "Good Morning America"**](http://abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/screenagers-documentary-examines-impact-screens-tech-kids-development/story?id=36703516) on Thursday.)

Ruston's 12-year-old daughter, Tessa, wants her own smartphone. All her friends already have them, Tessa says. Mom presses her daughter to think about and try to convince her why she needs one.

Tessa offers one reason that isn't half bad: With a smartphone, "I could look busy in awkward situations," she says.

Ruston puts off a decision, and she decides to explore the issue of screen time by adolescents. She and her husband also have a son, Chase, who looks to be a few years older than Tessa.

What follows in the documentary of just over an hour is a fast-paced but meaty exploration of digital device use. Ruston doesn't limit it to smartphones, although we learn that in 2015, 68 percent of U.S. students entering high school had one.

The documentary interviews a flurry of academic experts—on adolescent brain development, psychology, technology, and other fields. Amid scene after scene of teenagers focused on their phones, both in school hallways and outside, one expert points out that students have always had the potential for distraction. In that past, that meant doodling or daydreaming in class.

But there is a big difference in the attention of the young person who is focused on Facebook or whatever else is on his or her digital device. "Your mind is elsewhere," the expert says.

Ruston looks at school bans on student cellphone possession, which seem almost passé after the New York City school system ended its ban recently (which the film acknowledges).

She also explores, as the CNN report did, the notion that adolescent girls (more so than boys) spend a lot of time perfecting their digital photos to boost the number of "likes" they get.

Ruston goes beyond smartphones to look at boys' obsession with violent video games. She briefly tackles the debate over the effects of such games—which could be a documentary unto itself—and suggests that the preponderance of the evidence is that such games increase aggressive behaviors and decrease empathy.

The documentary seems a tad naive to suggest that if only there were more after-school activities, such as band, then boys wouldn't be going home to play "Grand Theft Auto" for six hours. (One guardian of a video game-using boy tries to wean him from the screen with a pet turtle.)

On the other hand, scenes of Ruston's own kids actually playing outside without any digital devices in sight lend some credence to the idea.

Again, Ruston packs a lot into this documentary. There is a look at a program for Internet addiction and a brief exploration of school programs that give tablets or Chromebooks to students to take home. (The verdict from some more of Ruston's experts: They aren't helping with achievement.)

My favorite scene involves a boy of 11 or 12 who appears a couple of times during the documentary. At one point, addressing school-provided computers, he says teenagers are going to use them for their own purposes.

"Who's there to catch you at home? Your mom? You can outsmart her really easily." he says. The camera pulls back to show the boy's mom nearby. "Sorry, mom," he says.

Back to Ruston's family: Tessa eventually gets her smartphone, an iPhone. But it comes with a contract about when she can use it, when it has to be stored, and so forth.

"Let me check with my friends," she says about the contract. (For a second, I thought she was going to say, "Let me check with my lawyer.")

Ruston has produced a thoughtful documentary with any number of its topics suitable for further exploration. It is worthy of some screen time for parents and teenagers alike.