

LIFESTYLE / FAMILY**'Screenagers' film offers parents tips on teen phone rules****By Beth Whitehouse**

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When Setauket mom Delaney Ruston was deciding when and whether to get her daughter a smartphone — and what the rules for use should be — she went public with her thought process, making a film called “Screenagers.” That movie is now being shown to parents and students at hundreds of schools, religious and community organizations and other venues on Long Island and across the United States.

Ruston, 49, a physician, is currently filmmaker in residence at Stony Brook Medicine; she and her husband, Peter Small, 56, also a physician, moved from Seattle to Long Island in August with Tessa, now 14, and son Chase, now 17.

The smartphone question was causing tension and arguments in the family, Ruston says, so before making the purchase she talked to hundreds of other families from Seattle to the Bronx as well as experts in brain science and social media. Her film is timely — a recent poll by Common Sense Media showed that 50 percent of teens feel addicted to their mobile devices.

“Where do you draw the line is really the question,” says Brenden Cusack, principal of Huntington High School, where the 67-minute film was shown to parents and students earlier this month.

Here are 10 lessons viewers learn from Ruston’s experience and the movie, which can be booked for community viewings by emailing delaney@screenagersmovie.com.

. It's important to acknowledge positives

Photo Credit: Daniel Brennan

“I had so much negativity going into it that Tessa had her defenses up,” Ruston says of her decision making. Small points out that it’s complicated for the older generation to manage kids’ screen time because they don’t have personal experience growing up with it. In the movie, Tessa explains to Ruston that texting



2. Kids appreciate limits -- seriously



hoto Credit: Dreamstime

ids' brains aren't developed enough yet to resist the pull of their screens, say the experts Ruston interviews. When she asks a group of kids whether they are happy their parents set limits on screen time, they respond "Yes." "You would never stop," one says. "Until your phone died," another adds.

. Families should consider a contract

hoto Credit: Daniel Brennan

"I like calling it an agreement," Ruston says. But involve the child in setting clear terms. "I realized I had made a mistake by forcing a contract on Tessa without really involving her," Ruston says in the film. The eventual agreement they wrote together stipulated no cellphones at meals or in the car, and that Tessa



family changed the time Tessa can be on her smartphone to 9:45 p.m. The simpler the rules the better, advises Tessa's dad: "We can spin into these incredibly complicated scenarios and nobody really understands it."

4. Devices should be removed during homework and overnight



hoto Credit: Dreamstime

"If you put this in front of me, yes, I will go on it, and yes, I will find something to do on it," Tessa says in the film. She and Chase now put their phones in another room during homework and overnight. "It's crucial, especially at bedtime," Chase says. "I recognize that I get a better night's sleep when I put my phone in another room, and for me that's reward in itself." Ruston suggests parents buy kids an alarm clock and a calculator, so they don't need their phones to wake them up or to do math homework.

. Kids' days should include other activities

hoto Credit: Daniel Brennan



“The best way for me to be off electronics and video games is to fill my time with other things,” Chase says. He plays the saxophone in the Ward Melville High School jazz band, for instance, and teaches saxophone to kids. “Screenagers” talks about the importance of extracurricular activities to counterbalance smartphone and video game time.

. Parents need to follow rules, too



hoto Credit: Dreamstime

“Can we really tell our kids to do as we say and not as we do?” Ruston asks in the film. “I, myself, was truggling to not be on my computer every evening.”

. Weekly family ‘tech talks’ help

hoto Credit: Dreamstime

ruston’s family introduced “Tech Talk Tuesdays,” when they discuss how screen technology is affecting heir lives. They start with something positive, such as a new app they’re using. Then they revisit any issues



8. Both parents may not always agree



Photo Credit: Dreamstime

"I and many men have different attitudes about this kind of technology," Small says. "I'm much more about letting kids make mistakes rather than preventing them from making mistakes. That was my naive, simplistic view of this. I didn't understand the power of the stimulus." While Ruston tends to equate screens to a drug, Small initially thought of them as being more like TV was for him growing up. "The reality is somewhere in between," he says.

. Many families are struggling with this

Photo Credit: Dreamstime

"I felt like I was completely failing as a parent, and I knew that others were struggling, too," Ruston says in the film, during a scene in which Tess locks her bedroom door because she is so annoyed that Ruston took



make me feel so different,” she says. Once the kids tell each other what their limits are, their friends know that Tessa doesn’t respond when they send texts, she might be in the car or asleep, not ignoring them.

10. Kids may not be truly ‘addicted’



Photo Credit: Screenagers

Kids throw around the term “addicted” to describe their relationship with their phones or video games, but Ruston says that true addiction means that you truly can’t stop and that there are negative consequences to your usage, such as falling grades, losing touch with friends and sacrificing activities that used to bring pleasure. If a child is truly experiencing screen addiction, a counselor can help families. In the film, Ruston also visits a screen addiction rehab center in Washington state called Restart.

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