

Using Surveys as a Tool to Help Families and Schools

By Emily Cherkin, Founder of The Screentime Consultant, LLC

When I was in graduate school for my Master's in Education, a professor shared a story about working with fifth graders. My professor was teaching a social and emotional concept and wanted the students to see how their peers in the class would respond, while keeping individual answers anonymous. So he conducted a survey (off-line, in that era), and then compiled student responses into a chart. He then presented the group's responses back to the class. Though I do not remember the details of the survey, I vividly recall his observation that because the students could see a general "snapshot" of their classmates' opinions, their willingness to buy into the lesson was greater. Had he informed the students of his own ideas about the answer, he believed, they would not have had the same connection to the information.

As a former teacher myself, I have found this to be true: most kids, in most age groups, are far more interested in the feedback and opinions of their peers than in what the teacher has to say. This does not mean needing to change the way a teacher teaches; rather, it is an opportunity to use the students' ideas and opinions as a way to get group discussions going. Now, as a frequent speaker at schools around the country on the topic of screen-based technology as it impacts teaching and parenting, I have found that the use of anonymous surveys is an excellent tool to draw an audience by making the talk about their own unique community. Like my professor who saw his fifth graders engage when the lesson was about them specifically, so too are my audiences drawn toward hearing about the attitudes around screen-based technology in their own schools.

I currently utilize the Google Forms tool in Google as a way to administer surveys. In recognition of the quagmire that comes with using online data collection tools or surveys, I am up front with the schools I work with about privacy risks. I do not require identifying information beyond general age group (i.e., middle school vs. high school) or school role (i.e., teacher vs. student), and in my contract with schools I stipulate both that I retain the data as proprietary information, but that I will also not share any data collected (including photos or student work) without the consent of the client.

If you are interested in using surveys as a tool to get a snapshot about an individual school's use of and attitudes about screens and technology, it is not too difficult to build a survey on Google Forms (or another similar site, such as SurveyMonkey).

Here are a few examples of questions I ask in my surveys:

- Do you have your own smartphone?
- Per day, how many hours do you spend on screen-based technology for entertainment (or work, or school)?
- In general, how often is screen-based technology a distraction to you (or to your students or your children)?
- Do you have rules in your house (or school) related to screen-based technology use? And are those rules enforced?
- Do you have a screen in your bedroom every night?
- As a parent/teacher/student, what is one positive thing about technology or screen time? What is one challenge?

Here are a few tips about building surveys that have helped me:

- Use neutral language, especially in answer choices (e.g., Always, Sometimes, Occasionally, Never). Google Forms and SurveyMonkey offer standardized responses to multiple-choice questions, and they help keep the language neutral.
- Mix up the question types: “check a box” or “how often do you...” and have one or two short answers.
- Limit the survey length. Kids especially do not want to spend a long time answering questions on a survey.
- Be prepared for pushback from all groups surveyed. Someone told me once, “Pushback means you’ve touched a nerve.” Use that as an opportunity to discuss.
- Google Forms and SurveyMonkey are useful tools for compiling the data into charts or graphs that illustrate a response. For example, you can give audiences a snapshot of how many students in X age group have screens in the room at night. This can be very helpful for those parents in particular who feel or hear that they are the “only” parent with a no-screens-in-the-bedroom rule.
- Normalize the experience: it is valuable to see how people respond, but it is also important to say that this is something we all struggle with, and no one is going to get it perfectly right. Also, every person is impacted differently by quantity, amount, quality, etc., when it comes to screen time, so take the survey responses with a grain of salt.
- I have found it helpful to provide my audiences with a survey summary. Many schools find this information useful in addressing the screen-based technology questions.
- Remember that surveys like this are intended to get the “big picture.” It is okay if there are outliers. Students in particular care about the trends: what “everyone else” is doing.