

Adolescents' Text Messaging and the Development of Antisocial Behavior

February 14, 2014

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Antisocial behaviors are actions that are aversive to the victims (such as physical or social aggression, or being intentionally defiant to parents or teachers) or violate legal or social rules (such as skipping school, substance use, or theft).

Engaging in antisocial behavior during adolescence is associated with a variety of negative outcomes during the transition into adulthood:

- Conduct Problems
- Dropping out of school
- Incarceration
- Substance Abuse

Peer influence is one of the strongest predictors of engaging in antisocial behavior during adolescence.

- The frequency of interaction with peers increases their influence over children and adolescents engaging in both positive and negative behaviors
- *Deviancy Training* is a process by which peers may encourage antisocial behavior by:
 - o Laughing and encouraging youth when they engage in problem behaviors
 - o Modeling antisocial behaviors for children and adolescence to imitate
 - o Providing instrumental knowledge for how to engage in antisocial behavior (e.g. where, when and how to do these behaviors)

Text messaging (as well as other digital forms of communication) are extremely popular among children and adolescents, and may provide unique opportunities to communicate about antisocial topics:

- The majority of adolescents own cell phones and report sending at least one text message every day.
- Teenagers report preferring to communicate with peers via text message over every other form of interaction (including face-to-face)

What about text message communication may be problematic for adolescents?

- Text messaging is a very discreet and accessible form of communication that is very rarely supervised by adults. This may make it an ideal venue for discussing antisocial topics and *Deviancy Training*.
- Examinations of the content of adolescents' text messages revealed that more than half of participants in 9th grade discussed antisocial topics (substance use, property crimes, physical aggression, or rule-breaking).
- These antisocial conversations oftentimes exhibited the features of *Deviancy Training*, known to predict increases in problem behavior.
- The rate of antisocial communication positively predicted increases in aggressive and rule-breaking behavior across the 9th grade.

Parental Monitoring is important to almost all aspects of children and adolescents' development, including academics, social functioning, involvement in antisocial behavior, and health-risk behaviors (Hill & Tyson, 2009; Li, Stanton & Feigelman, 2000)

- Parental monitoring is critical to ensuring children and adolescents are using digital communication appropriately:
 - o Discuss what constitutes appropriate phone usage and 'digital citizenship'.
 - o Begin monitoring and talking about digital citizenship more broadly from an early age.
 - o Ensure that parents have the ability to monitor digital communication by knowing passwords, limiting access to phones and computers throughout the night, and periodically monitoring activity.
 - o Periodically check-in to ensure that youth are not discussing antisocial activities
 - o Ensure that your child's digital communication is developmentally appropriate and legal (for example, despite a minimum age of 13 to join Facebook, it's estimated that over 10 million children younger than this have active Facebook accounts).

Do NOT.....make drastic and instantaneous changes to the rules. Your goal should be to institute monitoring policies without appearing that you're trying to trap your child.
...use your monitoring as a way to interact with your child's social network. Your goal is to monitor activities, not participate in their social interactions.
...use your monitoring as a way to micro-manage every aspect of your child's life

Remember! Your monitoring efforts should be focused on identifying and preventing major problems. If you weigh-in on every minor infraction, you'll likely foster distrust and resentment

Helpful Resources

Lupold, A. B. (2013). *Raising Digital Families for Dummies*. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Steyer, J. P. (2012). *Talking Back to Facebook*. New York: Scribner.

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