

Helping Adolescents Use Electronic Communication for Good

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Adolescents use electronic communication heavily: text messaging, Facebook, email, and chat rooms.

- 75% of 12 – 17-year-olds own cell phones, 88% of cell phone users use text messaging, 75% of teenagers with cell phones have service plans for unlimited text messaging, 54% of adolescents contact friends daily via text messaging, adolescents report communicating with friends more via text than any other mode of communication, including face-to-face interaction (Lenhart et al., 2010).
- 54% of girls and 40% of boys report that their social lives would end or be greatly worsened if they could not text (CTIA, 2008).
- 7.5 million of the 20 million minors on Facebook are younger than 13 (Consumer Reports, 2011).
- Time spent on Facebook may relate to adolescent depression (American Academy of Pediatrics, 2011).

Why are young people attracted to electronic communication?

- Adolescents are comfortable with technology, want to establish autonomy, crave peer contact (for companionship, intimacy, and self-disclosure), and are working on creating and exploring possible identities.
- Electronic communication offers immediacy; is handy for making social plans, communicating about school work, and exchanging information; can be discreet and private from adults; allows young people to play with slang and develop their own languages; and is a context for developing and exploring identity.

Nothing about electronic communication is inherently negative. Adults can teach children a code of conduct for Digital Citizenship, for using electronic communication for good.

- Before you post anything on Facebook or send a text message or email or IM, ask yourself whether what you are saying is honest, kind, and necessary. Consider whether anyone reading it could be hurt by what you are saying: the person you are talking to, anyone you may be talking about, someone who wishes they were your friend, someone who used to be your friend, your family, or any adults in your lives.
- Do not post, text, or send any information about your physical location or who you are with, for two reasons. First, broadcasting your location is unsafe. Second, posting who you are with could easily hurt other people's feelings.
- Be considerate about when you send messages and communicate online, plan ahead if you need to ask something of someone, and never demand that people get back to you immediately.
- If you would not say it to someone's face, do not post it, text it, or IM it.
- Remember that lying, telling secrets, and being mean hurts even more in cyberspace.
- Think before you reveal.
- Never share passwords, except maybe with your parents in certain situations.
- Remember that all private information can be public.
- Remember that anything posted electronically can be permanent. Even if postings are deleted, they can be retrieved through Internet archival sites (e.g. waybackmachine.org)
- Stay away from Internet sites designed to hurt people's feelings (Formspring) or designed to bring you into contact with strangers (Chat Roulette).
- If adults outside your family try to contact you electronically, check with your parents before responding.
- Pay attention to how much time you are spending on electronic communication. You have one chance at this time in your life. Do you really want to spend all of it on Facebook or texting?
- If a form of electronic communication is making you upset, spend less time doing it or stop altogether.
- Remember that great people talk about ideas, average people talk about things, and small people talk about other people.
- Use electronic communication to build each other up, not tear each other down.

What can parents do to guide their children's electronic communication?

- Socialize children in this domain just as you would any other social context.
 - Decide when children should have access to each form of electronic communication. Respect age requirements, but also feel free to set your own family rules.
 - Require that children talk with you before starting any new kind of online communication.
 - Make clear that you will be monitoring.
- Monitor electronic communication until the child is around age 18.
 - Keep track of passwords, spot check text messages, and be children's Facebook friends to see what they are broadcasting to the world.
 - Be reasonable in how you monitor electronic communication, and respectful of the child's developing autonomy. Do not post on your child's Facebook wall, do not friend your child's Facebook friends, and respect boundaries of their relationships.
 - Do not spend vast amounts of time reading the tremendous volume of electronic communication that will likely be generated by your children and their friends. Guard against becoming overinvolved in the details of their relationships. Spot check occasionally; use electronic tools for more targeted monitoring if you have a reason to be concerned.
 - Intervene only when necessary. Speak to your child about their electronic communication only when you see that something they are saying is exposing your child to risk or hurting others. Address it privately, calmly, respectfully, and suggest what might be a better strategy.
 - Do not let any monitoring of electronic communication substitute for talking with your child.
 - Talk with children about their electronic communication activities.
- Set guidelines about when electronic communication will be permitted.
 - Consider prohibiting electronic communication while spending your valuable time driving children to activities, during family meals, during homework time, and certainly during the night.
 - Be mindful of how electronic communication may be interfering with your child's sleep. Establish the routine that computers are turned off at a certain time, and phones spend the night outside of children's bedrooms. Offer to charge their phones overnight, or set up a family charging station where all communication devices are turned off and plugged in for charging at a certain time every evening.
- Model constructive, respectful, reasonable use of electronic communication yourself.
 - Be positive and affirming and encouraging in all electronic communication with your child.
 - Address problems face to face.
 - Be careful about how you use Facebook yourself, especially if you are Facebook friends with your child.
 - Do not spend your precious time while you are raising your children engaging in vast amounts of electronic communication.
 - Be mindful of the role you let electronic communication play in your own daily life.
- Value the opportunity to shape your child's electronic communication for the rest of their lives.
 - Establish yourself as someone they can consult when they are unsure.
 - Suggest that they use email for appropriate communication with other trusted adults in their lives as they get older. As they mature, guide them in more advanced etiquette of using electronic communication for academic or business reasons.
- Remember that nothing about electronic communication is inherently negative. All of these communication technologies can be used in positive ways. Electronic communication will be a way that your child can maintain contact with you as they go out into the big, wide world.
- Electronic communication has transformed all of our lives. Youth are the creators and the leaders in this new arena. *The Machine is Us/ing Us* by Michael Wesch http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NLlGopyXT_g

Resources

New Social Media Guidelines from the American Academy of Pediatrics

<http://www.aap.org/advocacy/releases/socialmedia2011.htm>

Common Sense Media Guide for Digital Citizenship

<http://www.common Sense Media.org/be-good-digital-citizen-tips-teens-and-parents>