



By Caryn Sullivan

The Challenge of Texting Teens

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School's out, and for the next couple of months young fingers will fly across keyboards as classmates strive to remain connected during the school recess via text and Facebook. That may work for them, but what about their parents?

Recently, this paper reported that 28 percent of Americans surveyed in 2008 reported spending less time with household members (is Facebook replacing the face-to-face?). This trend coincides with an increase in social networking and Internet usage, and, I submit, text-messaging. Michael Gilbert, a senior fellow at the Annenberg Center for the Digital Future, which conducted the study, noted, "It can't be a good thing that families are spending less face-to-face time together. Ultimately it leads to less cohesive and communicative families."

I long for the pre-cell-phone days when we conducted warrant-less surveillance of our older kids' social lives by monitoring their calls. When phones were attached to the wall, we could keep tabs on who they were hanging out with and what they were doing if we were within earshot. Caller ID was a faithful ally.

The home phone was also a vehicle for teaching etiquette. If it rang during family dinner hour, our kids returned the call later. If they answered the phone by saying, "yello," we interjected that yellow is a color, not a greeting. When we overheard them making plans, we raised the question that is reasonable to parents but ridiculous to teens: "Do you have a ride home?"

These days, the house phone never rings for our youngest, a high school sophomore. In fact, her cell phone rarely rings. Yet, if that electronic device were a power generator, it could keep a whole city illuminated with the volume of text messages that come and go in a 24-hour period.

The generation that has never seen a typewriter can work a keyboard so proficiently that bystanders often do not know they are doing so. They take their phones to the dinner table, to school, to bed, and even into the bathroom. They use them at parties and in the car. They connect on Facebook at all hours. Consequently, parents experience an information blackout created by methodology now universal and overarching.

With the scarcity of harmless eavesdropping opportunities, parents have a dilemma. If their kids don't volunteer information, they can either probe, risking the ire of their teen,

or do their own reconnaissance. In the spirit of “desperate times warrant desperate measures,” one mom confided to me that she scours her daughter’s texts while she showers.

Operating in a vacuum, parents have limited chances to influence social behavior. For when most conversations are texted, we don’t know when Susie is ditching yesterday’s best friend for a new one or blowing off her girlfriends for the cute guy from Spanish class. Ignorant parents can hardly offer guidance about issues which have plagued generations of teenagers.

I worry our kids are failing to acquire time-honored social graces, opting instead for new mores parents are ignorant of. If they are having a party, they don’t make a list and extend invitations; rather, they send one text, which cascades into another, and the word gets out. Similarly, they don’t call to accept a party invitation; they either show up or they don’t. Calling to ask a date to a formal dance can be an awkward exercise for those not accustomed to actually conversing with members of the opposite sex.

Electronic communication is laden with benefits and drawbacks – and is here to stay. So, a decade from now how will my daughter’s generation communicate at home or work, having spent their socially formative years frenetically typing cryptic messages? Will they master the nuances of verbal communiqués — anger, sarcasm, and humor — that can enhance or strain relationships?

If, as teens, they hook up and break up by text, will they do the same as adults? While it is humorous to imagine marital moments playing out in texts, i.e. “u didn’t pk up dty clothes!!!!” or “toilet seat!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!” or “U CHEATED ON ME YOU ****!!!!!!” or workplace disputes resolving with the clicking of keys (u r fired!), it is also conceivable and concerning.

Some parents of texting teens are slow to come around to this newfangled way of communicating. Others of us have jumped in, using our cell phones to e-mail and text friends, family and even our teens. Before we take issue with our kids’ behavior, we need to consider our own. Is the Crack Berry ever dormant? Or is it always fired up, like junior’s cell phone? Texting from the school parking lot to let your child know you are there is convenient and innocuous. But texting from the driveway when retrieving the teen from a party, instead of going to the door, while also convenient, forfeits a valuable opportunity to connect with another parent.

Our challenge is to find ways to gather important information and to influence behavior without invading the privacy of hormonal teens and jeopardizing somewhat fragile relationships. Our obligation is to find ways to pass along time-honored social graces so that our young ones are not only technologically savvy, but also considerate and well mannered.

We must encourage — or require — our kids to step out of their comfort zones, turn off their phones, and engage in meaningful conversations, face to face, so they are better prepared for functional adult relationships. To do so, we need to set an example which just might force us out of our own comfort zones.