Communication in the 21st Century

Right now as you pause to read this article, you have probably received 3 text messages on your phone: one from your husband at work, one from your child who is staying at a friend’s house, and one from your Twitter group you have signed up for to stay in touch with, perhaps to get a shot at winning something.

In the 1990s, beepers were the in-thing. Everyone had a beeper. Beepers were used by doctors, professionals, even moms and dads to keep in touch with their children. I knew high school and even some middle school children that had a beeper, just so a parent could ask them to call at a moment’s notice. From the beeper, came the personal cell phone, then came the internet, then email, then something called Instant Messaging via the internet. Now communication tools such as MySpace, Facebook, Text Messaging, Blogging, and now Twitter have replaced just about every form of direct communication possible.

Staying in touch with one another has definitely been one of the trademarks of the 21st century. Paradoxically, our variable communication methods that emphasize immediate connection do not necessarily produce healthy forms of connection at that.

What is the motive of these various forms of communication? Is it not connection? And yet in the desired connection we are traversing one another’s boundaries and jumping the various protocols we have used for millennia for just how people meet one another for relationships, friendships, and life partners.

I have known a few teenagers who, in the context of text messaging one another, have met a boyfriend/girlfriend and started a relationship formed primarily from texting one another; from nothing to something in a few text messages. Texting does not include eye-to-eye contact, a sense of personal discernment, or the feeling of vibes/energy/chemistry. From another person’s phone comes letters and characters of intent, the intent of connection. What occurs during texting is a dodging of the usual forms of reason that we use to understand another, void of the ability to discern what is intended hidden into textual characters.

Text messaging is the phenomenon of the 21st century and yet it has been around since before WWII, believe it or not. Really, texting is a graduated form of Morse-code that was one of the original forms of communication since radio began. When used appropriately, Morse-code, radio teletype (RTTY), ASCII, machine code, digital teletype, and even text messaging can be effective, low cost, efficient forms of relaying information for one point to another. Oddly enough, in most every way texting forms of information are used some sort of license is required in order to understand how to properly utilize that method: the ethics, the rules, the frequencies, and then the authority to utilize. Cell phone texting incorporates none of these. There are no common accepted rules, no test to take to show one understands how to use either the cell phone or the texting.

Teenagers and adults text message while they drive, putting others at risk. In fact, there are studies available now to shoe how reaction time is drastically reduced when texting while driving. People who become proficient text’ers can speak with almost short hand proficiency, saying allot of information in short burst of digital data between one phone and another. What if you were sitting at home watching tv and a random text came in on your phone saying “hi.” You quickly assume the sending person knows who you are because they have called your phone number. No voice, no gender notification, no tone, no body language, no emotion. Just a simple “hi.” Of which most of us would assess the phone number (if it is listed) and then respond back with a “hi back.” From that would begin a series of communications all without knowing anything else about the person(s) on the other end of the phone texting.

For ***parenting purposes***, I believe the cell phone and text-messaging present a number of challenges to the teenager and young adult. I also believe that parents need to be more aware of these challenges and to intervene appropriately in order to help teenagers manage through these difficulties. While I am personally not a fan of text messaging in general or even think that young people should be availed to this form of communication through cell phones, text messaging is the current fad and here to stay. What I believe can be done is to educate parents to some of the pitfalls of this form of communication and encourage parents to assist their children in their relationship building.

**Challenge #1: There are no understood rules or boundaries**

Boundaries are those understood emotional spaces that exist between persons. Normally, a person has physical, emotional, spiritual, or psychological space whereby others ask to be invited into as we encounter others in relationships. It is the eye contact, the general greeting, the handshake all discerned upon in the encounter with another. In that place of time and space we are given moments to engage or disengage, as we collect the necessary information. In that time and space we have at our disposal such information as emotion, feeling, body language, voice, gender, tone of inflection, body chemistry energy, temperature, smell, taste, touch, as well as the psychological sciences at play. Our brains quickly assess this plethora of information to give us an appropriate response cognitively that leads us to engage or disengage that person in that moment. The connection of two persons is an innately complicated and intimate moment that needs all the information possible in order to derive at a good decision. All this takes place in that “Hi, how are you doing today,” encounter in the office, at church, with family, and with friends.

With text messaging, none of this information is available but the words coming across the screen “Hi, hw r u doin?” Nothing else is at our disposal to utilize, unless we happen to already know the person we are texting with. Even if we know the other person, we have strictly limited the available information necessary to simple characters across the screen. An intimate and deeply personal exchange is put into simple text void of all emotion, void of interpretation, void of reality.

So why are there no understood rules and boundaries in text messaging? The main reason is that any sense of rule or boundary is constantly changing, the “rules” being set by the sender at that moment. The boundaries are constantly being pushed, broken, and violated. Any understood boundary is assumed by the sender to the receiver. It is one of the reasons why business contracts between businesses cannot be formed strictly over email or faxing. One person needs to literally look the other in the eye as agreements are made, to get that feel from the other that the business relationship is real, personal, important, contracted and be held in agreement.

As a family therapist, I strongly encourage persons not to have intimate relationships over the internet, the phone, text messaging, MySpace, Facebook , or blogging as the primary form of their communication. We need to hear one another’s voice, we need to personally encounter the other, to interpret intent, feeling, exchange emotion, a sense of connection. We need meet with one another, to use body language, inflection, actually feel emotion, and utilize the available senses to gather as much information as possible so as to “hear” the other. As Jesus said in the Gospels, “To them that have ears let them hear.” How can we hear if we are not hearing and how can we see if we are not seeing. How can we feel if there is no feeling. How can we discern if the only information we have to discern are texts scrolling across the screen with emoticons trying to fill in the emotions, a character replacing a deeply complicated feeling.

**Challenge #2: No text message is private between two parties.**

Every text, picture, or message sent over the cell phone is held as a copy on some server from the telephone company. That intimate, private, personal exchange between two kids is forever held in memory and can be generated at will by the telephone company. The same could be said for much of the internet communications as well. With cell phones children are taking graphic sexual pictures, messaging intimate exchanges, sending bulk messages with no regard for personal space, personal privacy, or personal rights of another. As was said earlier, there are no rules to govern the cell phone user as one sends any and all information over to others. The recent Michael Phelps photo with him hanging over a marijuana pipe at a party in Columbia, SC, a photo which deeply damaged his reputation, was taken with a cell phone camera which was then stolen and the picture downloaded to a tabloid for lots of money. One photo from one moment in time sets forth a change that forever marks a lifetime. That photo is forever saved on the hard drive of the telephone company’s server. It will never go away. And so is every text, photo, message sent by you or your child’s cell phone – forever stored.

A recent article from a college recruiter’s office noted that some colleges have begun doing online research on potential students. Doing online searches for potential student’s names reveals much that is not contained in applications. Even job recruiters have resorted to searching out applicants MYSpace, Facebook and blogging sites only to find information that may conflict with the image being portrayed in any application.

Any information you send over the internet or through your cell phone is not private to just yourself. It is accessible to others and may be accessible to those you would never intend. Why would a parent potentially enable their child to utilize a resource that could permanently damage them forever? And the answer given typically is “well, everyone has one.” But “everyone” doesn’t justify the immaturity of your individual child in using this communication tool.