

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 spouse 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.

Communication in the 21st Century

Teenagers and adults text message while they drive, putting others at risk. In fact, there are studies available now to show 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." 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 challenges. 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 challenges 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

Communication in the 21st Century

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 to meet with one another, to use the interpretation of body language, inflection, we need to 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. Such exchange of sexual pictures is now called "sexting." Young men and young women are taking pictures of their body parts and sending those to others over the phone.

As was said earlier, there are no rules to govern the cell phone user as one sends any and all information over to others. Back in December 2008, a recent Michael Phelps photo showed him hanging over a marijuana pipe at a party in Columbia, SC, a photo which deeply damaged his reputation. That photo was originally 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 set

Communication in the 21st Century

forth a change that forever marked Michael Phelps 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 applications.

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.

I strongly recommend that parents reconsider whether their child really needs a cell phone at their age and maturity level. If it is determined that your child somehow deserves this "perk," then make certain that the cell phone is strictly a phone, with no texting ability and no camera. Make sure when you activate the phone you insist on no texting services and disable the function from being utilized. Teach your child when and where it is appropriate to use the cell phone and restrict their use or remove the "perk" if they are unable to use it properly.

Challenge #3: Text Messaging and Cell Phone use is very expensive!

Cell phones and texting costs **BIG** bucks! Unless you have unlimited text-messaging enabled on your cell phone plan or unlimited minutes (and I am willing to bet that you DON'T), each text sent AND received has a fee attached to it, typically \$0.20 per text. Teenagers can type so fast and send 100's of these messages per day. You do the math! When parents finally do confront their child with a \$500 monthly cell phone bill, most kids respond along the lines of "well I have to have that capability to stay in touch because everybody does that."

A cell phone is a mode of communication. For many adults and those who work, it is an extension of the office, extension of a service, or a means of communication for them. But a cell phone and texting are poor substitutes for the more proficient communications namely face-to-face or personal contact. Parents should really consider very carefully whether it is a good stewardship of family moneys to be spending between \$30-\$500 per month for this poor form of

Communication in the 21st Century

connection. In the "olden days" of cell phones, they were purchased with minimum minutes just for "emergencies." Now cell phones have become a staple of the American individual.

Please don't misinterpret what I am trying to say. Cell phones can be effective and essential tools, but in my professional opinion they are not for the young person nor teenager. Typically, young persons just do not exhibit the appropriate restraint, maturity, and responsibility necessary to manage the use of the valuable cell phone. It is a toy much like the Xbox or video game.

What can parents do then? First of all, I think it is the parent's responsibility to set the family budget and be in intentional control of the family finances. That is probably the first place to start. See what is being spent monthly on everything. Take a close look at receipts and bills. See what is going out and compare that with what is coming in financially. Secondly, as parents set aside some time to evaluate your child's needs and wants. Ask yourselves the hard questions about effective family communications (or as is the case the lack of them). Why does your child need a cell phone or text messaging? Remember that there is a home phone that is paid for every month that is not being used.

I think when parents sit down and do a thorough review of the family finances, most families will conclude that the added expense does not justify the need. But I can hear a parent saying "but my child has an added line that is only costing us \$9.95 a month." This is not a discussion of just cost but also of necessity and responsibility of use. For those families who think a cell phone is an essential tool, then make the effort to reign in your child's use of the cell phone. Teach them how to use it responsibly. Tell them that you will be checking up on their texting, even if they erase the messages - that you can get a copy of everything they send/receive via the cell phone company. Give them guiding rules and then follow up those guiding rules with monitoring their time usage. Limit them with minutes and cut off texting (as well as the camera/photo capability) altogether. It might make them mad for a few days but they will eventually learn to adjust.

Grace and Peace,
Dr. Trey Kuhne