

GUEST OPINION ESSAY

Texting is Taxing on Adolescent Brains: What Can Adults Do to Help?

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We all know a teenager who is incessantly texting. Is it innocuous or harmful? While it might be impossible to track the exact effects of adolescent texting and its relationship to mental health concerns, like anxiety and depression, some studies have found a

relationship between excessive texting and mental, emotional, and physical health problems.

Just as people go to the gym to exercise their body, they must exercise their communication muscles to ensure that they don't lose their ability to communicate face-to-face. For adolescents who stop working these muscles and text their feelings, thoughts, and emotions on their smartphones, their communication muscles can atrophy.



Marisa Markowitz (left) and Daniel Pollack (right)

Texting makes communication more efficient, but at the cost of losing sight of what's more important: Understanding nuance, knowing when someone is being sincere by the tone of their voice, and the difference between what is true emotion and a false sense of intimacy.

Indeed, texting culture creates this false narrative that real connections can be sustained solely online. Virtual language does not hold the same emotional weight as verbal language. Intonation and subtlety cannot adequately be conveyed through text. The adolescent brain may seek pleasure from the instant gratification of texting, but this should not be conflated with a genuine connection.

So how can parents and clinical social workers work together to help understand the warning signs and step in to help when needed? Here are some helpful tips for parents, adolescents, and clinical social workers to navigate texting usage and encourage healthy habits:

For parents:

- There are **filtering tools** that can obviate the need for overly invasive parental supervision.
- Parents can support their child's communication habits by suggesting other activities that do not involve texting, like team sports. Studies indicate that team sports enhance positive mental health and decrease depressive symptoms.
- Have a 'no phone' policy at dinner. When anyone and everyone can connect at any time, it is important to set aside time that is meant for connecting with family. At the very least, this will foster insight into what your child is thinking and how your child is feeling.
- Recognize that not all texting is treacherous to mental health, if used judiciously. Texting can make plans easier to manage with a simple "Hey, I'm here." The issue is that, generally speaking, cell phones have become faster and quicker substitutes for talking in person. The challenge is to make texting less attractive by replacing it with in-person alternatives.

For adolescents:

- Journaling anxious thoughts might mitigate the need to constantly check for updates or reach out via text. Journaling is a form of self-therapy that assists with personal growth and development, intuition and self-expression, problem solving, stress reduction, health benefits, reflection, and critical thinking. By journaling, adolescents can reflect on their emotional state and perhaps set aside the phone when feeling anxious or lonely.
- Have a discussion with friends about how often the group will text. This will increase interpersonal awareness of how texting affects other members of the group, perhaps culminating into an agreeable amount of texting within the group, and limits to its frequency.
- Make a challenge out of not using cell phones at gatherings. The first person to pick up their phones pays the check. This makes cell phones less attractive, and acts as a buffer for those who don't want to pay for an expensive meal!

For clinical social workers:

Clinical social workers are trained to understand the developmental, social, and emotional changes that occur during adolescence. Part of that training must entail learning how to navigate a tech-focused world. Here are some ways that clinical social workers can continue to support adolescents:

- Clinical social workers can provide psychoeducation about the dangers of over-reliance on texting so that adolescents are empowered to use texting in a healthy way. It is impossible to eliminate the wave of technological advances; indeed, many would argue that growing technology and the burgeoning tech-focused world is a largely positive force. Yet, as with any advances, there are drawbacks and dangers, like unintended consequences for mental health concerns.
- Empathize. When counseling adolescents that have been bullied, or perhaps have relied heavily on texting to satisfy emotional needs, clinical social workers must first empathize with adolescents. Adolescents must be given a safe space to speak freely about their use without feeling attacked. This points to the need to simultaneously empathize while being attuned to potential problem areas.
- Clinical social workers should keep abreast of literature about the relationship between cell phones, texting, anxiety, and other mental health issues. The provision of concrete tools to help an adolescent experiencing mental health concerns due to texting anxiety falls under the category of social work competency. Psychoeducation is key.

Responsibility and trust are the building blocks of good parenting as well as good digital citizenship. Curtailing texting time should not diminish a child—just the opposite. An adolescent’s desire to stay in contact with friends should be supported.

When other children have no restrictions regarding their texting usage, is it difficult to be the “bad guy” parent? Of course. Nonetheless, it’s worth the effort.

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