

Good technology gone bad

Instant messaging, texting, twittering—communication technology is an integral part of our society. We can now communicate instantly with almost anyone in the world. When used improperly or carelessly, however, these technologies can create big trouble for adolescents. The media is filled with stories of students who use technology to send “sexting” messages, cheat on exams, or harass others. Parents who understand the power of instant communication will be better able to protect their children from the personal—and even legal—consequences of its pitfalls.

Technology and social networks are here to stay

The statistics are clear; technology is growing at an incredible pace. Consider these facts:

- A current generation cell phone that fits in your pocket has 1000 times more computing power than MIT’s most advanced computer in 1965. Experts predict that in 25 years that same computing power will fit inside a space the size of a blood cell.
- We will generate more information in this year than was generated in all of the past 5,000 years.
- In 2006, Internet users searched Google 2.3 billion times each month. Today, that number tops 31 billion per month.
- The first commercial text message was sent Dec. 1992. Today the number of text messages sent and received exceeds the population of the planet. (The average kid sends 2272 messages per day!)
- Estimates vary, but 200-300 million people use social networking sites (online sites such as MySpace and Facebook where users share personal information).
- Twitter was the primary means of sharing information during the 2009 Iranian elections.

So what does all of this mean? Technology is an integral part of our society. The changes come quickly and will come even faster in the future. No amount of complaining or ignoring will change the facts. Everyone, especially our children, is a part of this phenomenon.

The upside

Technology has opened new frontiers and opportunities. Our schools are preparing students for careers that will use technologies that no one has even invented. Those students will use those technologies to address problems and opportunities that we have yet to recognize. We have nearly instantaneous access to answers to the most detailed questions concerning the most serious world crises. Walls that formerly divided nations around the world are being torn down thanks in part to the free flow of communication.

The downside

Technology is not perfect; in fact, with new opportunity comes new problems. That's not to say that trouble began with technology—there has always been bullying and pornography. What has changed is that technology places such things within easy grasp of all ages in all places. For students, some of the problems are:

- **Cheating**—Passing notes and copying papers have become high-tech. Cell phones snap photos of exams and transmit them to classmates; text messages relay test questions and answers; online sites place papers and sources within a mouse-click — making plagiarism a simple task.
- **Bullying**—Threats and taunting used to be restricted to school grounds, but that has changed. Students gang up on others via Facebook and MySpace, create unkind or untrue photos and videos that are posted on Youtube, and send bullying messages via Twitter and texting. And students can do this 24 hours a day.
- **Wasting time**—Research shows that the average teen spends about 30 hours per week on the Internet. That time is taken away from studies, household chores, actual time with friends, or sleep.
- **Viewing pornography**—Just 10 years ago, pornography was found in magazines, books, and videos. Today it is the number one income generator on the Internet.
- **Sexting**—Sexting is the sending of nude or semi-nude photos or sexually suggestive messages electronically. Most students are unaware that sending a photo, even of themselves, could be considered distributing child pornography – a felony. It is a growing problem among students, one that deserves a closer look.

The shocking statistics behind sexting

Sexting is far more widespread than most adults realize. A survey by the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy interviewed teens (ages 13-16) to determine their use of sexting. Although the data measures teen use, it is a fair indication of what is happening among adolescents. Here are some of the scary facts:

- 48 percent of teens have received a text message containing nude or semi-nude photos or sexually suggestive language.
- 20 percent of teens (22 percent of girls, 18 percent of boys, 11 percent of young teen girls) have sent or posted nude or semi-nude photos of themselves—most often to a boyfriend or girlfriend.
- 39 percent of all teens (37 percent of girls, 40 percent of boys) have sent or posted sexually suggestive messages.
- 3 percent of teens have sent nude or semi-nude images of themselves to someone they know only online.
- 48 percent of teens have received such messages.

- 21 percent of teenage girls and 39% of teen boys have sent such content to someone they wanted to date or hook up with.
- 36 percent of teen girls and 39 % of teen boys admit it is common for nude or semi-nude photos to get shared with people other than the intended recipient.

Things an adolescent should consider before pressing “send”

- Don’t assume anything you send or post is going to stay private. The research is clear; messages you send are often shared with others.
- There are no “take-backs”—just because you delete that photo from your phone or computer doesn’t mean it will go away. It may have seemed funny or flirty, but that image can be copied and shared and may turn up at school, online, or even in the hands of future college recruiters or employers.
- Consider how the recipient will react. A young girl’s flirty message can be perceived as something much more by the boy on the other end.
- Nothing is truly anonymous. Sending a photo or text to an online stranger is dangerous. If that person truly wants to find you, he will.

Helpful questions for parents

A simple conversation can go a long way toward avoiding the problems that come with technology. Kids need to know that cyberspace can be a fun and exciting—but dangerous—place. Parents need to be informed and involved, because kids are generally more tech-savvy than their parents (a good reason for parents to try a Facebook page or Twitter to familiarize themselves with the technology). A few simple questions can help parents learn:

- What their children are doing online or on cell phones;
- Who their kids are communicating with;
- Whether they need to place limits on electronic communication. This might include removing a computer from a child’s bedroom or taking away the cell phone at bedtime.
- What their adolescents are posting on their MySpace, Facebook and other networking sites. Kids may accuse parents of snooping—but that information is out there on the Web where everyone can see it, why should parents?
- Whether kids are violating parents’ boundaries. Parents often set limits regarding speech and clothing. Parents need to know if those same guidelines are being followed online.

Additional resources

Looking for more information? Try some of the following:

Online (the best and most current resources are found online)

- Real-life stories—a series of stories and videos about the dangers of cyberspace <http://www.netsmartz.org/resources/reallife.htm>
- Finding Theresa—a step-by-step video showing how easy it is to collect information about an online teen. <http://www.netsmartz.org/stories/teresa.htm>
- Web-Wise Kids—a list of games and resources for students and parents teaching Internet safety. http://www.webwisekids.org/Internet_safety_games.htm
- Common Sense Media—Internet safety tips and more resources; offers several in Spanish— <http://www.common Sense Media.org/internet-safety-tips-middle-school-kids>
- WiredSafety—a vast resource of online safety tips and articles. <http://www.wiredsafety.org/>
- Just 4 Kids— a government interactive site for kids addressing many health and safety issues http://www.attorneygeneral.gov/kid_site/middle_school/index.htm

Books

- “Internet Safety Kids' Guide” by Victoria Roddel
- “Internet Safety Family Guide” by Victoria Roddel
- “Cyber-Safe Kids, Cyber-Savvy Teens: Helping Young People Learn To Use the Internet Safely and Responsibly” by Nancy E. Willard
- “Totally Wired: What Teens and Tweens Are Really Doing Online” by Anastasia Goodstein