

When Push Comes to Love: Check your kids' texts

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I was recently talking with a teenager and the subject of text messaging came up. The teenager asked me to take a look at their phone and give my perspective on the texts messages they were receiving from a love interest. I was floored! That experience, combined with a recent question from a colleague helped me decide to depart from the usual topic of this column, anxiety and children, and focus on what on earth is going on in text messages - or messaging in general - with our kids.

First let's start with the teenagers. Why was I floored by the texts I read? The language used: compliments, pick-up lines, "advances," were more like what I would hear on the dance floor of a club. An adult club. With adult who had likely had a couple of adult beverages. And then it hit me. Those cell phones are pretty powerful. Using text messaging removes the fear of person-to-person rejection. It removes the fear period for some kids. This result in kids making overtures that are far beyond their maturity. Using a cell phone or social networking site allows kids to have more false bravado than in real life. And it is sad. And scary.

Once these messages are sent, they cannot be taken back but they CAN be forwarded. I ask you, are you monitoring your kid's text messages? If not, I suggest you do. This may cause some people to gasp in horror at the thought of violating their kid's privacy. I don't suggest you do it in secret, but I highly recommend a surprise request to see their cell phone text messages and their social networking sites. And I don't mean log on as you and check their page. That does not allow you to see messages that come through, and that is an important component. Check them. Regularly, without warning.

This is not, of course, intended to get them into trouble. It is a safety watch. Honestly. Kids do not understand the impact of their words through text and email. If your kids are sending texts or messages that are too forward, it is a good teachable moment. If your kid is receiving inappropriate messages or texts and is uncomfortable saying anything for fear that they will get into trouble, or perhaps get the sender in trouble, it is a way to open the lines of communication. Think back ten years - it is nearly the equivalent to parents overhearing their kids' telephone conversation while they were washing dishes and kids were sitting on the couch talking to their bestie (on the cordless phone!). Times are changing and parental interventions must also change. If you want to find an actual program that allows you to monitor your child's messages, those are out there. Simply call your mobile service provider and see if they offer any programs or do an Internet search for 'monitoring kid's text messages'.

Onto the next, similar topic. A colleague of mine recently posed this question. "Do boys ever take their girlfriends out on dates anymore?" My response to her was that it is not a one-sided situation. Traditionally, boys were the ones asking girls out on dates, this I understand. But on the flipside, girls struggle just as much with the idea of actually going out on a date as the boys may struggle asking. Relationships are happening through the phone and social networking sites these days. Start to finish, sadly. Within hours of "going out" they are texting "ilu" back and forth. I love you? Really? It's been 10 minutes. They don't actually GO OUT. Yet, they are missing out.

I would never go so far as to suggest taking their cell phones and computers and throw them out the window, although I already envision myself doing that when my 5 year old hits

preadolescence. I do, however, strongly encourage involvement and balance. Ever-present and consistent involvement in their communications. It's important. If you don't know what you are talking about or feel unknowledgeable about messaging, time to get schooled. You are the single most important person in your child's life. Your influence and ideas of change can be helpful and enhancing to their text-focused lives.

I have two lines that I repeat over and over again to adolescents regarding messaging and relationships.

- 1) "If you wouldn't say it in person, don't say it through any type of messaging."
- 2) "Talk more, text less." I remember being on the phone for hours as a teen. It annoyed the hell out of my mom, but it was so important.

I know teens text for hours these days but it's not the same. Let them text, but encourage more person-to-person relationships, where they can actually hear tone and inflection in the other person's voice. Or see facial expressions and body language. They are losing so much of those experiences. No emoticon is going to communicate what an honest-to-goodness belly laugh or eye roll can communicate.

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