

Common Sense on Text Messaging

Texting is becoming the #1 form of communication

If you've ever stared in awe at your child's thumbs moving furiously over her phone's keyboard, you've probably wondered how she does it so quickly, and why it's her favorite form of communication. Kids text because it lets them feel connected and feel as if they can have a private moment with a friend, no matter where they are or what else they're doing.

Some facts

Texting is the #2 use of cell phones — after checking the time.

Teens send an average of 3,146 texts per month, and kids ages 9 to 12 send 1,146 (*Nielsen, 2010*).

75% of 12 to 17 year olds own cell phones and 88% of them use text messaging (*Pew, 2010*).

64% of parents look at the contents of their child's cell phone and 62% of parents have taken away their child's phone as punishment. (*Pew, 2010*).

43% of teens who take their phones to school say they text in class at least once a day (*Pew, 2010*).

Billions of text messages are sent every year from our kids' mobile phones. While most kids use messaging responsibly, it's still a powerful and extremely private communication tool that can be used irresponsibly. With texting, kids can't see the reaction of the person receiving the message, so their actions can be separated from the consequences. Young people can be cruel, and their judgment and impulse control are not yet fully developed. If a text exchange becomes unpleasant, it can be very hurtful or even dangerous to their well being.

Why understanding texting matters

Texting is totally portable, private, and immediate. Kids can send messages to anyone from anywhere at anytime. In other words, they have no boundaries unless we help them to establish some. Almost no research has been done on the impact of immediate communication on kids' social development.

But the instant gratification factor of getting immediate responses from friends has to have some affect. Any parent who has been at the dinner table or on a hike with a child only to hear a pocket buzz with an incoming message knows that texts take your kids out of the moment they are in and connect them to distant friends.

Texts can be used to keep friends close, help parents figure out family logistics, and offer a wonderful way to share experiences. But, as with any powerful tool, texting can also be used to bully or humiliate people. An embarrassing or upsetting image or video can quickly be transmitted or uploaded to an online video sharing site like YouTube. Sexting is a form of texting where kids send or receive graphic images or messages. According to a study from CosmoGirl, 22% of teen girls have sent or posted these kinds of images. And, sadly, the use of texting in school cheating is on the rise as answers can be swiftly passed from student to student.

Kids need to know that abusing the privilege of texting has consequences.

Parent Tips for all kids

- » **Carefully evaluate whether or not your kids need texting on their cell phones.** Just because other kids in their class have it doesn't mean your child needs it.
- » **If your kids do text, get an unlimited texting plan.** Otherwise the charges mount up swiftly.
- » **Make rules around when and where.** No texting during meals, during class, on family outings. Oh, and turn the phone OFF at night!
- » **No texting while they should be concentrating on something else.** This includes driving — nearly half of teens admit to texting while driving — walking, and having a conversation with someone else. Firm rules about this will ensure their safety as well as their social skills.
- » **Establish consequences for misuse.** Cheating, inappropriate messages, sexual communication. These are all no-go's. Want to make your point? Take your kid's phone away for a week.
- » **Watch your own behavior.** Parents are still models for their kids. If you text your child during class and then turn around and tell that child that he or she can't do that, you're sending mixed signals.
- » **If you suspect your kids aren't texting appropriately, you can always look at their messages.** Yes, it feels like snooping, but our first job as parents is to ensure that our kids use powerful technologies safely and responsibly.