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6,473 Texts a Month, But at What Cost?

Constant Cellphone Messaging Keeps Kids Connected, Parents Concerned

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Pam Zingesser relaxes with her daughter Julie, 15, and their dog, Tucker. Julie, who racked up more than 6,000 text messages in one month, sends a quick text. (By Katherine Frey -- The Washington Post)

Julie Zingesser texts at home, at school, in the car while her mother is driving. She texts during homework, after pompon practice and as she walks the family dog. She takes her cellphone with her to bed.

Every so often, the hum of a new message rouses the Rockville teen from sleep. "I would die without it," Julie, 15, says of her text life.

This does not surprise her mother, Pam, who on one recent afternoon scans the phone bill for the eye-popping number that puts an exclamation point on how growing up has changed in the digital age. In one busy month, Pam finds, her youngest daughter sent and received 6,473 text messages.

For Pam Zingesser, the big issue is not cost -- it's \$30 a month for the family's unlimited texting plan -- but the effects of so much messaging. Pam wonders: What will this generation learn and what will they lose in the relentless stream of sentence fragments, abbreviations and emoticons? "Life's issues are not always settled in sound bites," Pam says.

Parents, educators and researchers are grappling with similar concerns as text messaging has exploded across the formative years of the nation's youngest generation. Teens now do more texting on their cellphones than calling. And although it's too early for conclusive data on the effects of prolific texting -- on attention span, social life, writing ability, family connections -- questions abound, even as many experts point to clear benefits.

"It's a huge cultural phenomenon with huge down-the-road consequences," contends David E. Meyer, a psychology professor at the University of Michigan.

Nationally, more than 75 billion text messages are sent a month, and the most avid texters are 13 to 17, say researchers. Teens with cellphones average 2,272 text messages a month, compared with 203 calls, according to the Nielsen Co.

The tap, tap, tap of connectivity can benefit teenagers at a time in life when they cannot always get together in an unscheduled way. Texters are "sharing a sense of co-presence," said Mimi Ito of the University of California at Irvine. "It can be a very socially affirming thing."

For families, the text world can bring convenience as never before in arranging rides, doing errands, letting parents know of changing plans.

But some experts say there are downsides, starting with declines in spelling, word choice and writing complexity. Some suggest too much texting is related to an inability to focus.

There also are concerns about texting while driving, text-bullying and "sexting," or the term for adolescents messaging naked photos of themselves or others. What might have been intended for a friend can be widely distributed, and the texting of lewd photographs of minors can lead to criminal charges.

The American Journal of Psychiatry published an editorial last year by psychiatrist Jerald J. Block, suggesting that addiction to the Internet and text messaging be included in the diagnostic manual for mental illnesses.

Block said no one knows how prevalent digital addictions might be. Overall, he said, "our use of technology today amounts to a large social experiment. We still don't know how it helps us or how it hurts us."

Addicted or not, hard-core texters find it difficult to be "in the moment" with other people because they are constantly being summoned by someone else in another place, said Naomi S. Baron, professor of linguistics at American University.

"It is part of a larger phenomenon of where is your mind, and if your mind is always on your phone, it's not on other things," she said.

There is a cost when people multitask -- "a kind of a mental brownout," said Meyer, the professor at the University of Michigan. If a teenager is reading Shakespeare when a text message interrupts, "Hamlet's going to fade in and out in a ghostly fog."

The problem, he said, is "you're not truly time-sharing. You're flitting back and forth, and the flitting itself is taking processing capacity."

Not everyone sees the change in the same way.

Al Filreis, a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, says he has seen the quality of student writing improve, first in the mid-1990s with the growing popularity of e-mail and again as an increasing number of cellphones have included keyboards.

"In writing, quantity tends to lead to quality," he said, "and we're doing quantity right now." Through texting and other instant communication, Filreis says, his students have learned hard-to-teach lessons about audience, succinctness and syntax. "My students are better writers than they were 10 years ago, 20 years ago, 25 years ago."

For the youngest generation, this profound shift arrives just as they come of age.

"The mode of communication among young people is changing so rapidly that I can't help but surmise that it will change the way they think," said John Palfrey, a Harvard University law professor and co-author of "Born Digital: Understanding the First Generation of Digital Natives." The big question is how.

At George Mason University, professor Peter Pober advised faculty members at a recent brown-bag to limit their sentences to eight words or fewer during lectures, especially in introductory classes.

"We used to be fine with 12- to 14-word sentences," he said. No more, he said. With the advent of texting and other rapid communication, student focus has diminished. "I definitely think there is some relation," he said. "We're still at the groundwork of trying to figure out what that is."

Still, Pober praises text technology for its role in family life, confirming a teenager's well-being or location, connecting during emergencies and sometimes allowing dialogues about subjects that did not happen before.

Others point out that family time at home takes a hit. Parents and teens might be in the same room, but often a texter's attention is elsewhere. Most parents know little about who their children text or what is being said. Sometimes children text their parents inside their homes -- from one room to another.

Sherry Turkle, a professor at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, wonders whether texting and similar technologies might affect the ability to be alone and whether feelings are no longer feelings unless they are shared. "It's so seductive," she said. "It meets some very deep need to always be connected, but then it turns out that always being trivially connected has a lot of problems that come with it."

Texting might affect the separation process between parents and children, she said. There used to be moments when teenagers knew they were on their own -- riding a subway alone, for example -- but now "their parents are always there."

In Rockville, mother of two Pam Zingesser has given it all a lot of thought. Her older daughter, a student at the University of Maryland, texts, but not as much as her high-schooler, Julie.

"I'm concerned that in the long run they will be addicted to instant communication and gratification," Zingesser said, questioning how Julie and her friends will come across in the business world, how they will hone skills of persuasion.

She said she worries that the text generation does not appreciate the benefits of face-to-face conversation and that maybe "they are uncomfortable with it."

Julie says she and a boyfriend once argued, then broke up, all by text message. But the way she sees it, sometimes texts allow time to think about what the other person has said before replying.

With texting, Julie says, she's "always in four conversations at once." She considers herself addicted. Then again, she points out, she does not text while she brushes her teeth or showers. She does not text when she is performing with her pom squad or playing on her lacrosse team. And she is text-free at dinnertime because her parents firmly object.

But lately, she has thought more about the effects from so much texting: in one month, more than 200 messages a day. "If I really look into it, I think it is affecting my focus and my closeness with my family," she said. Sometimes, she said, "I'm not 100 percent present."

Still, she doubts she will change her text life anytime soon. "When I don't have my phone with me," she said, "I feel out of the loop."

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