

Kids, cell phones & text messaging

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If you knew what your daughter's BFF was sending to her cell phone in the middle of the night, you might not be LOL.

While BFF (best friend forever) and LOL (laughing out loud) are two perfectly acceptable abbreviations commonly used in text messaging today, there are hundreds if not thousands of other text lingo terms, as well as photos and other downloadable materials, that you may not want streaming in to your child's cell phone.

"I know of a dozen or so of those incidences that have happened right here on Daniel Island, where children have received something inappropriate," said Thad Schmenk, an island resident who is also assistant principal at an area high school. "So it's out there."

"There's always issues with cell phones," added Dean Fowler, a Charleston Police Department School Resource Officer based at the Daniel Island School. "The unfortunate thing is that kids have unlimited access to cell phones. In fact, it's easier to find kids with a cell phone than kids without, starting at ages 10 and up."

According to the Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association (CTIA), there are more than 158 billion text messages, some 300,000 per minute, sent each year in the United States. Many of those messages are acceptable and harmless, but others could be dangerous for kids.



"The biggest thing that I tell parents is that when their parents were raising them, they had to monitor one or two televisions in the home, the newspaper, and your phone conversation – which was probably restricted to a wall," said Schmenk, who has made raising parental awareness of cellular and internet hazards a priority. "Therefore, most of the interactions that kids had with peers could be highly regulated. Nowadays, kids can give and get so much information and so much communication without parent supervision. That's the part that I think is the most scary."

Daniel Island parent Pam Thesing closely monitors the cell phone usage of her boys, Noah, 11, and Gabe, 14.

"I originally got the phones just so I could always be in contact with them, and for safety purposes" said Thesing. "They are on my plan and I get detailed billing so that I know who is calling who, and who is texting who. One of the things that we discovered was the texting could go on all night long, and for some kids it does."

ELIZABETH BUSH Left, Noah Thesing, 11, sends a text message to a friend from his Cochran Park home. Fortunately, Thesing reports that he has not received anything inappropriate on his cell phone.

Thesing, who said that Gabe once received over 400 text messages in 15 days, now asks each child to put their cell phone at a central charging station in the kitchen so they can't text after hours.

"We do that because otherwise they might not get any sleep!" added Thesing. "They text more than they talk. I keep telling them they are going to lose their verbal communication skills if all they do is text message!"

Gamble Ouzts, another Daniel Island parent, has the same rules in her house for her 14-year-old daughter.

"If you leave lines of communication open at all hours, it's just setting your child up for temptations," said Ouzts, who requires that her daughter turn her cell phone in before bedtime.

Being aware of the dangers is the first step towards preventing them, according to Schmenk. With every cell phone capable of receiving messages comes the possibility of mail with foul language, sexually explicit material, or even inappropriate photos and videos. Sometimes, when phone numbers are shared with others or posted on Web sites like MySpace.com, kids are even targeted by those who could intend to do them harm.



ELIZABETH BUSH Above, Thad Schmenk, a Daniel Island resident and assistant principal at an area high school, poses in front of a PowerPoint presentation he created for parents about the hazards of cell phone and Internet use among kids and teens.

"Most kids are very naïve about it," added Schmenk. "It's just like those studies that show no matter how much you tell your child not to talk to strangers, they're still going to talk to strangers. And teenagers, unfortunately, are the same way if not worse. Because they want to challenge you that talking to strangers isn't bad or they think they know people better or they convince themselves that it's safe."

"Text messaging is a scary thing, and we've had some issues with that," added Ouzts, who said her daughter does minimal texting now. "...I just feel like unless you know where your phone is at all times, it's very easy for someone to grab your phone and send a text message that is not from you. And it's not necessarily something you would want out there."

Cell phone dating is another disturbing trend, said Schmenk.

"It used to be you'd write letters. Nowadays we have seen where girls and boys will say 'if I like you, I will send you a picture of what you could have.' And I'm not talking about pictures of my face. It's pictures of compromising positions, suggestive things, and even full nudity. And again, if your child has a phone, and I stress that it's not necessarily your child that is going to be doing that, but do you want your child receiving that?"

The practice that Schmenk said shocks him the most is the transmission of "homemade porn" among some teens using cell phones.

"They have video cameras on their cell phones, and they do it so that they can show their friends," he said. "And it's not just the boys showing the boys...And then when people break up, then that gets spread everywhere. The hard part is, once it's out there, you can never get it back."

Other cellular activities, such as using phones to cheat on tests or to bully other kids, have also been occurring. In addition, kids now have their own "secret text language" of abbreviations that many parents don't know about. Schmenk recommends that parents think long and hard about whether or not a child needs a phone.

"I think parents are very well intended. They want to give that cell phone to children because it's a safety thing, they want to be able to get in touch with that kid at all times. You can't blame a parent for that. Unfortunately though, I think it breeds a false sense of security. And perhaps they are more willing to let their children stay out longer or go a little bit further or do things that perhaps aren't as appropriate for this day and age."

Both Thesing and Ouzts are staying on top of their children's cell phone usage and have "laid down the law" about when and how it can be used. They monitor the cell phone bill to assess when their children are receiving messages and from what numbers. Their children are also required to answer the phone when mom or dad call.

"We've lectured about the importance of not letting the phone out of your sight and not letting your friends borrow your phone, locking the keypad," said Ouzts. "You hate to make your child think they can't trust anybody, but it's just the world in which we live. You have to be constantly aware."



Parent tips for minimizing cell phone dangers to kids:

Monitor your children's monthly cell phone bills for dates, time and duration of calls, as well as where text messages are coming from.

Look through messages and pictures on the cell phone to be sure your child has not sent or received anything inappropriate.

Do not allow children or teenagers 24-hour access to their phones. See that all phones are "turned in" at the end of the day and charged in a central location monitored by parents.

Consider allowing kids to only have access to a cell phone for a special event or activity, instead of for full-time use.

Consider the child's responsibility level before buying a phone. Some suggest not giving a cell phone to a child until 7th or 8th grade, and even then monitoring closely.

Text Speak!

Experts recommend that parents learn the language of text messaging to help keep kids safe. These commonly used abbreviations, and hundreds more that include explicit words, can be found at the Web site www.netlingo.com.

BRB - be right back

TTYL - talk to you later

IDC - I don't care

L8R - later

BFF - best friend forever

KWIM - know what I mean

LOL - laughing out loud

DWI - driving while intoxicated

POS - parent over shoulder

ILY - I love you

KIR - keep it real

TRDMC - tears running down my cheeks