

Can texting be damaging for teens?

[Technology](#), [Mobile Phone](#)



Can Texting Be Damaging for Teens? Now, you have to qualify this by stating that I am still learning how to give a good interview. This was a live interview, and so it was challenging and something at which I was not trained in graduate school. So, with some practice, I know I'll get better at giving a polished interview. So, on to the question as to whether texting can be problematic for teens. Like practically any behavior that we can think of, texting, in moderation, is generally harmless. However, certainly texting can be problematic for some teens. Most teens text around 50 messages per day. This might sound like a lot, but most of these messages are very short and can be entered within a few seconds. However, some teens text several hundred messages per day on average. A few of my teen clients (and their frustrated parents) have informed me of such numbers. There was a recent report on NPR that a teen girl texted over 14, 000 messages in one month alone! So, when is texting a problem? The litmus test as to whether a certain behavior represents an addiction or a problem is whether it significantly impairs a person's performance in a major life domain, such as social relationships, work, or school. For some teens, text messaging is a real addiction and causes such problems. Some teens feel that they must always read and answer a text immediately. This is where the addictive part comes in. Another major problem that I see is that teens are texting well into the night (or morning). Even on school nights, the cell will be left by their bedside and an incoming text will be read and answered quickly - even if sleep deprivation is a result. Sleep deprivation is a well-known cause of impaired memory, concentration, processing speed, reasoning, and mood. Another problem that I often see is that a teen's in-person communications

suffer because their conversations are repeatedly disrupted by incoming texts that they read and answer. If you've ever been on the short-end of this stick, you know it feels pretty upsetting when your in-person conversation with a friend takes a back seat to their incoming calls/texts. Kinda feels invalidating - like you don't matter as much to them as these calls.

Importantly, adults are not immune to cell phone addiction. I know plenty of adults who are quite addicted to their cell phones, Blackberries, and iPhones (and Facebook, World of Warcraft, etc.). How many adults conduct their cell phone calls while driving even though research consistently shows that it significantly impairs driving performance? I even had one friend who is so addicted to his Blackberry, that he found himself texting and answering emails while he was driving! He did have the good judgement to realize that he could not control his inclination to respond to messages, so he got rid of his Blackberry. As a parent, what are you to do? First, you need to be careful not to harshly judge your teen. Given that we are often battling our own addictions, we are in no position to pass judgement. Along those lines, it's important to be a good role model in your own cell phone/email/technology use. When you are in a conversation with your teen, resist the urge to view/answer incoming calls. You can even say something like, " I'll get that later. I'd rather talk to you." Second, realize that texting can truly be addictive. Texting, along with many technologies such as e-mail, Facebook, My Space, YouTube, tap into a primitive reward system in the brain called the nucleus accumbens. It is considered the reward center of the brain. When we are anticipating something positive might happen, the neurotransmitter dopamine is released. That gives us a little burst of

pleasurable feeling. So, it is not the content of text messages that is rewarding. It is the anticipation of something new, something just around the corner, the unknown, that teens (and adults) find so rewarding. It is similar to why, when we were growing up, the build up to Christmas (Christmas Eve in particular) was more exciting than the hour after we opened all of our presents. This reward system in the brain is also involved in gambling and drug addiction. When this reward system is tapped into by an activity, it is hard to fight. I myself have to admit I'm a bit addicted to e-mail. But I'm working on it! Third, regarding how you should handle your teen's cellphone use, I'm a big believer in an ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure. I think, if it is not too late, you should talk to your teen or kiddo about the responsibilities of cell phone use prior to giving them the cell. You should have a discussion around each of your expectations of cell phone use as well as some of the dangers of misuse. Consequences for misuse of cell phones should be discussed up front and prior to them becoming problematic (ideally). Teens should know what the consequences will be before they ever "cross the line." The punishment should fit the crime, too. It is important that all parents understand that cell phone use is an integral part of teen life now and restricting access for prolonged periods of time is likely to result in quite a battle with the teen and many hurt feelings. Finally, teens may need help in thinking about the ramifications of misuse of their cell phones. I will discuss "sexting" in the next blog. Teens' frontal lobes of the brain, which are involved in planning and thinking of long-term consequences, are not fully developed until their mid-20s. That is why teens, as well as many college students, often engage in risk-taking behaviors. We can all probably

look back to things we did when we were young and say to ourselves, "What was I thinking?!?" In a way, you can serve as a surrogate frontal lobes for your teen. You need to do so carefully and not just list out the dangers to your teen. You should try to get your teen to think of the consequences of misuse of the cell phones for him/herself through some Socratic questioning. Again, you should refrain from being judgmental. Realize that, if we were teens now, we'd probably be making many of the same mistakes. Cell phones are here to stay, and least until there's a new technology to take their place. By approaching the situation carefully, you can help mitigate some of the major pitfalls of your teen's cell phone use. Remember, this should be an ongoing dialogue and be sure to remark on the occasions in which your teen uses the cell phone responsibly. Things like, "Hey, I really appreciate how you ignored that incoming text and just kept talking to me" will give your teens the same message in a positive, supportive way.