

Dear Connie—

I am about at my wits end with my children and their devices. My fifteen-year-old son is in his room, on his iPhone or computer every waking minute that he's home. I suspect it goes on after he's gone to bed, too. It's impossible to have a conversation with him—all my husband and I get is grunts. We gave our thirteen-year-old daughter an iPhone for her birthday and not only have her grades fallen, she seems equally addicted to her devices and increasingly distant from us. I wish I'd never heard of social media! What's a parent to do?

Sincerely,
—Meredith

Dear Meredith,

These are difficult issues, and frankly I'm glad I raised my kids in an earlier time, when social media didn't exist. But they do, and their impact on adolescents, in particular, does need to be understood and addressed by parents, schools, and communities.

Today's teenagers and most adults stay connected with their friends, families, and culture through texting, e-mails, and web sites. The ability to connect with anyone immediately, to research just about anything, anytime, is incredible. The entire world is accessible in seconds! It's exciting and, at its best, contributes to life in countless ways.

The downside for adolescents is that, well, they're adolescents. This means they do not always have the maturity to use their devices wisely, to know when to turn them off, to resist the attraction of some of the less desirable sites and ways of connecting. Pornography, bullying, sexting, are the most common negative and potentially dangerous ways adolescents are using their devices, often unbeknownst to their parents.



Because cell phones can be put on vibrate, calls can be made and received secretly during the night, interrupting sleep and affecting concentration in school the next day. Photos on Instagram and casual information put on Facebook can be used irresponsibly and hurtfully by others.

Teens don't always connect their behavior with the potential negative consequences that their parents, if they knew, would understand immediately.

At the least, overuse of cell phones, in particular, is a distraction from life. We've all seen couples

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in restaurants paying no attention to one another, glued to their cell phones. I saw a video recently of a man in a sailboat focused on his cell phone when a large whale surfaced nearby. The man never looked up. It's a great example of how impossible it is to be present to your surroundings and the people you're with when you're distracted by your cell phone.

Here are some ideas for you to consider:

- ✓ Start from the premise that having a cell phone is a privilege, not a right. The privilege should be earned, and its responsible use should be a condition for continuing to have it.
- ✓ Have a frank discussion with your kids about the dangers of cyber bullying and sexting, and the potential for becoming addicted to video games and pornography.
- ✓ Keep the lines of communication open, being attentive to the way your kids use their devices and how it might be affecting them. Are they tired when they get up after a supposed good night's sleep? Do they seem stressed after spending a lot of time texting back and forth? Are they getting their homework done, maintaining decent grades? Is there any evidence that they are participating in or are victims of cyber-bullying?
- ✓ Model the behavior you want to see. Put down your cell phone, turn off your computer when your teenagers want to talk to you. Let them know you care about what's happening in their lives. Otherwise you may miss important opportunities to hear what's going on with them. If you're spending a lot of non-work related time on your cell phone and computer when your

Do you have a relationship question?

Connie is now offering sessions in person and by phone from Bozeman and leads regular groups and workshops. (See ad.). Call Connie at 406-582-7450 or e-mail mtlionlady@gmail.com. E-mail sent to Connie is read only by Connie and will be held in strictest confidence. No identities will be published.

Disclaimer: The responses to questions in this column are for information only. Never disregard professional advice or delay seeking it because of anything you read here. Working with a skilled professional is highly recommended.

kids are home, they get the message that you're too busy, that you don't really care.

- ✓ Set some ground rules. Insist that homework be done before the cell phones are used after school, or take them away at a certain time in the evening, like 9 p.m., to be returned in the morning at breakfast. Forbid cell phone use during family meals. Set up computers in common rooms rather than bedrooms, and restrict video games to weekends. On family outings, turn cell phones (including yours!) off except for emergencies.
- ✓ If you notice falling grades or unexplained emotional distress, try to get to the root of it. If your teen won't tell you, talk with other parents or the school counselor to see if there is anything troubling going on.
- ✓ If you feel the cell phone is being used in an unhealthy way, and talking about the problem isn't helping, take the cell phone away. No matter how much your teenager protests, it could be the most responsible action for you to take. ■

Good Luck! Blessings, —Connie

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