

can i sext you some time?

The innocence of adolescence is becoming increasingly less innocent. And it's written all over your kid's Facebook.

by Andra Coberly



The kids aren't all right.

These days, with the way youngsters are, *Girls Gone Wild* seems like mild sexual exploitation and youthful rebellion. Sneaking into dad's Playboy collection, like Atari and the concept of the family phone, has become passé. And the playground—where prior generations learned how to flirt and fight—has been traded in for a different playing field: Facebook and Myspace, text message and instant message, Twitter and YouTube.

And who knows what else?

Adolescence and the digital revolution have collided: tech-savvy kids are coming of age online and experiencing communication, relationships and life through text-message shorthand, LCD monitors and Kanye West's tweets. *Porky's*-era tomfoolery of youth, lust and puberty has gone worldwide and wireless, leaving some convinced that puppy love and teen angst are not PC compatible.

"You have a generation that is way more isolated than past generations—even with all the information they are sending back and forth," said Leslie Seppinni, doctor of clinical psychology, family therapist and national mental health examiner for Examiner.com. "It's a real problem. It's creating a false social sense and a false sense of group and network. It's a false sense of interaction."

The kids are not all right. Or at least, experts say, when parents are too busy, too clueless or too unconcerned, social media and cell phones can become a child's personal Sin City. Sexting—taking provocative photos of oneself or others with a cell phone and texting them to friends—has become the *Girls Gone Wild* of the text generation: Who needs to go to Cancun to show off her goodies when she can do it from the comfort of her princess bed?

Not only has sexting become something of a buzzword for parents and educators, it is now a quagmire for the judicial system: Can we charge kids with making and transmitting pornographic images of themselves? But the hype has given hope to some psychologists and family experts, who say public awareness may bring attention to the problem and eventual solutions. Still, they are left asking what happened to common sense, modesty and flirting?

While there are many theories, most say it is simply a perfect storm for the digital age.

Peter Ferioli, director of operations for Net Nanny, which creates parental-control software, says technology and teens have matured together and the rest of the world is playing catch-up. Parents and educators who barely understand what Twitter and OMG mean now have the job of curbing things like cyber-bullying, compulsive Facebooking and sexting.

“Technology is passing us by as parents,” Ferioli said. “We were never prepared to turn these tools over to teens. We empowered kids with the ability to contact anyone anywhere without giving them a curriculum of how to deal with this responsibility.”

Some posit that it’s the increasingly overt and gratuitous sexuality seen in media that has seeped into the psyche of unsuspecting youth, triggering a questionable barometer of what one should or shouldn’t capture on tape. Corinne Gregory, founder and president of SocialSmarts, a program that puts “civil” back in civilization by teaching children and teens behavior, character and social skills, says increasingly scandalous media has caused a “removal of stigma,” which teaches kids that showing skin is a normal way of getting attention.

“It’s a popularity contest, and it’s all about the shock factor,” Gregory said. “...So, on some level, they are getting exactly what they want: attention and notoriety.”

In that same fashion, sexting is also a means of getting overworked, under-concerned parents to pay attention. It’s the familial 15 minutes of fame: kids acting out in ways they know will shock, embarrass or horrify their parents. And when that youthful want for attention is combined with “our society’s gladiator mentality for the raw and unedited and you throw in a little technology, you have a powder keg that was waiting to go off,” Gregory said.

“Kids aren’t playing postman anymore,” she said with no hint of humor.

Others would certainly agree: Sexting and cyber-bullying are not the products of one societal flaw but of a cocktail that packs a mighty punch (the veracity and force of the hangover we have yet to see).

“It’s a change in culture. People feel anonymous when they are online and that they don’t have consequences,” said Judi Warren of Web Wise Kids and Ask.com, two entities that are working on a program called Safe Search Schools for schools to increase online protections for students. “I used to spend hours on the phone. Now, we are seeing the same motivation to connect but in a completely different way. Everything is global and everyone is texting instead of talking. There will be implications to that, especially because we are seeing kids share intimacy more quickly and with a broader audience.”

Many kids do not yet understand the repercussions to their online actions. It is not until the photo or conversation is posted on Myspace or texted to everyone in school that they realize nothing is sacred. It’s then they learn that dirty old men are not the only people they should be wary of

encountering online—but their friends, love interests and acquaintances as well.

“Kids want to be liked and loved. Most sexting is sent to a partner they think they will be in a relationship with at some point or they are currently in a relationship with. They think it will not be abused,” Warren said. “They don’t understand that they might not be in that relationship forever—or that when that relationship is done that he or she is capable of doing horrible things, like exposing those pictures.”

Local public school systems are already starting to tackle issues like sexting. St. Vrain Valley School District held an information session for parents and students about technology, specifically discussing sexting. And Boulder Valley School District has brought the issues of sexting into classroom conversations within health and other curricula.

“We are really trying to be proactive instead of reactive,” said Geoff Sandfort, health curriculum coordinator for BVSD. “...Our over-arching message is that we believe in open communication with students. We want to provide kids with information that can help them make safe choices.”

If they haven’t already, parents might want to take notes from educators. In fact, child psychologists and web safety specialists have a message for you: join the “instant parenting” world. Begin by setting some restrictions; don’t be afraid to see what your kid is up to online—get yourself a Facebook page and befriend your children and their friends—and teach your kids about the dangers.

“Parents should see their kids’ online activity as a partnership. It’s very important. If they take them off the Internet entirely, their kids will not be willing to talk to them openly about what they encounter online,” Warren said. “You want to foster communication. Parents can help their kids understand the ramifications of sending a picture.”

Listening to psychologists, media or youth experts talk about this generation of tweens and teens may feel like watching a TV special on the predictions of Nostradamus: a bit scary and fairly depressing. But that’s not to say we should give up on the text generation. In fact, it’s now about taking action—something must be done before innocence is lost.

“The ideal of what we always wanted childhood to be is going by the wayside—unless we do something to turn the Titanic,” Gregory said.

May 2009

[News](#)

No comments yet.

[RSS feed for comments on this post.](#) [TrackBack URL](#)

Leave a comment

You must be [logged in](#) to post a comment.

Powered by [WordPress](#)