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In Their Own Words--Understanding the Communication Styles of Teens

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In Their Own Words--Understanding the Communication Styles of Teens

Abstract

Technology has become synonymous with communication for teens. Eighty-seven percent of teens ages 12-17 use the Internet, and 75% of on-line teens prefer instant messaging to regular e-mail. One of the more popular ways for teens to communicate is social networking Web sites. Although there are a number of these Web sites, MySpace is currently one of the top ten Internet sites, used by teens to share interests and hobbies, post bulletins, and share messages and comments. Educators should become aware of these current methods of teen communication as well as opportunities for education of teens and their parents.

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Hey bf ... sup? Wut u doin? OMG - ldk why u r not goin 2 the prty.
Neways cu 2morrow cuz I ctn. Tttyl - byee! <3

Does the above look like secret code to you? If you were a teen, you would easily be able to read the lines as "Hey best friend, what's up? I don't know why you are not going to the party. Anyway, see you tomorrow because I can't talk now. Talk to you later, bye! (heart)."

Through their preferred methods of communication, which include text messages, AOL instant messaging and Web sites such as MySpace, many teens have begun to develop their own language and way of communicating, most of which adults don't understand. As some teens report, this new "language" has crept into other parts of their lives, and some have received lower grades on reports and tests for "accidentally" using this abbreviated text.

Technology has become synonymous with communication for teens. Eighty-seven percent of teens ages 12-17 use the Internet, and 75% of on-line teens prefer instant messaging to regular e-mail. An overwhelming majority of teens (84%) report owning at least one personal media device: a desktop or laptop computer, a cell phone or Personal Digital Assistant (PDA) (Lenhart, Madden, & Hitlin, 2005).

Social Networking on Line

One of the more popular ways for teens to communicate is through social networking Web sites. Although there are a number of these Web sites, MySpace is currently one of the top ten Internet sites and has outstripped competitors to become the most popular English-language social networking Web site with higher traffic and just over seventy-nine million registered accounts <<http://www.answers.com>>.

MySpace allows users to share interests and hobbies, post photos and videos, post blogs and bulletins, and share messages and comments. For many teens, it's a way to meet people, share things about themselves, and communicate with friends. If it were that simple, it would be fine.

However, the reality of MySpace and similar networking Web sites is that they have become vehicles for sharing too much information. Teens and pre-teens (who set up My Space pages despite the age requirement of 14) post personal information, including pictures, hometowns, e-mail address, and other information that can be a target for on-line predators. Many teens post

provocative pictures and inappropriate comments and language. Some teens develop an "on-line persona" that may be very different from the person adults and peers see on a daily basis.

Teens report that their page is like their "personality" and that they like the fact that their page can get them recognized. Once you find one person, you can learn who their friends are, read what people say about them, learn what they do in their free time, read their "blogs" (which express their innermost feelings), and learn their likes, dislikes, heroes, and even their monthly schedules. It's almost too much information, but, to teens, it's the norm. For teens who are going through the stage where they are constantly looking for affirmation and validation and a to response everything they are, it's addictive (Kornblum, 2006).

Setting Boundaries

Many schools have begun to restrict access to MySpace since it has become a haven for student gossip and on-line bullying <<http://www.answers.com>>. Employers are checking MySpace pages of potential employees to learn more about their life style before deciding whether to hire them. Even summer camps are taking precautions to keep campers safe and prevent posting of pictures in inappropriate places (Belluck, 2006).

At the NJ 4-H Camp, the Camp Director learned that camp staff were communicating with young campers through MySpace and exposing campers to inappropriate pictures and comments on staff's MySpace pages. He took action, and informed staff of methods for appropriate communication including specific MySpace pages for camper and counselor communication <<http://www.myspace.com/campdirector>>. Inappropriate use of MySpace was also used as a vehicle to determine whether staff should be re-hired for summer camp positions.

Along with the popularity and preference by teens for on-line methods of communication, there is a growing trend that indicates that teens are losing their ability to communicate in person. When teens were asked about their communication style, some reported that they feel they are less able to communicate effectively in person since they do so much of it on-line.

Opportunities for Educators

There are opportunities for Extension professionals and other educators to learn more about teens and communication, and to provide educational programs for teens and parents.

- Be aware. Pay attention to new trends and Web sites in use by teens. Visit these sites, and learn what they are about.
- Understand that these types of communication are here to stay (Instant Messaging text messages, MySpace, chat rooms, message boards, etc.). Today's teens have grown up in a world that relies on technology. Although the Web sites may change, the reliance on new technologies won't.
- Communicate "where they are"--via text messages, instant messaging, or through My Space. Being a presence on a 4-H MySpace page helps set guidelines and boundaries for communication among 4-H, school, and other youth groups.
- Take advantage of the opportunity to educate both teens and their parents on issues that affect them as a result of these new methods of communication. Workshops on Internet safety, interviewing and communication skills, and ethical decision-making can be timely and useful. Teach parents and teens how to make their personal information private.

The world of technology and on-line communication can open up doors to learning and discovery, and can provide positive methods for networking with others. Educators and parents need to continue to stay aware and informed, and to help teens understand appropriate ways of communicating and sharing information with others.

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