

Learning to be Yourself: Social Media and Teenage Relationships

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Abstract

The author discusses her findings while researching the effects of technology, specifically social media, on teenage relationships. The author cites research articles and studies related to how teens' use of technology is negatively affecting their ability to create personal relationships. The author begins with how teens use social media to create relationships, including online networking sites and group texting. She then discusses how their use of social media affects their ability to cultivate real relationships by taking away the critical interpersonal skills needed to communicate in person. She concludes with ideas on how to help teens navigate the world of social media. This critical issue affects all teens as technology continues to dominate our society and teens become increasingly dependent on social media to communicate. It is necessary to find ways to combat the negative effects of social media and help teens successfully navigate this digital world they live in.

Keywords: teens, social media, relationships

1. Introduction

After delving into researching the world of the typical American teenager, it became glaringly obvious that they spend an inordinate amount of time on social media. "Aided by the convenience and constant access provided by mobile devices, especially smartphones, 92% of teens report going online daily --- including 24% who say they go online 'almost constantly,' according to a new study from Pew Research Center." (Lenhart, 2015) As a result of this, teenagers are being negatively affected in a variety of ways, including increased stress and anxiety, lower self-esteem, and a decreased ability to pick up on social cues. (Ehmke) Catherine Steiner-Adair, a clinical psychologist, states, "There's no question kids are missing out on very critical social skills. In a way, texting and online communicating -- it's not like it creates a nonverbal learning disability, but it puts everybody in a nonverbal disabled context, where body language, facial expression, and even the smallest kinds of vocal reactions are rendered invisible." (as cited in Ehmke) There is a huge difference between sending a text that says "Can't talk now" and telling someone face-to-face you are busy where they can see the stress on your face and the armload of books you are carrying. Teens miss all of these small nuances of communication that are picked up in person when they only "talk" via technology. This decreased ability to read social cues is especially troubling because as much as our world is becoming technology driven, there is still quite a bit that needs to be accomplished face-to-face, and if this generation and the next can't figure out how to get off their devices and cultivate real relationships, our society as a whole is in trouble. "As human beings, our only real method of connection is through authentic communication. Studies show that only 7% of communication is based on the written or verbal word. A whopping 93% is based on nonverbal body language." (Tardanico, 2012) Our teens need help getting out from behind their phones and engaging in the real world, especially because so much of how they learn comes from interactions with each other. "Young people naturally rely on their interactions with others as way of making sense of the world around them." (Strahan, L'Esperance, & Van Hoose, 2009, pg 30). Teens need to be present with other teens to have conversations and watch body language to learn how to behave appropriately in different social situations.

I teach at a small, private, Catholic high school in an affluent suburb of Charlotte, and I have seen this technological dependency in my own students. They are always on Snapchat or Facebook or Twitter. If something funny happens and they don't record it, it's like it never happened. I teach math to juniors and seniors, and I have an advisory of about 15 students. I meet with the students in my advisory every morning to just chat, play some games, or talk about any issues that are bothering them. The goal is to cultivate a relationship of trust and honesty between advisor and advisee. I may never actually teach the students in my advisory, but I am the faculty member they can come to with any problems, academic or personal, and I will help guide them through it. I have learned over the years, that my advisors will come to me with a variety of issues, but the majority of them center on relationships. I have had both boys and girls come to me upset about what their significant other did or didn't do. It always begins with "We've been texting" as an introduction to how the relationship started, and then spirals into some problem with the other person. I am always amazed when I ask them "Did you actually go and talk to them about this?" that the answer is almost always no, they just tried to figure it out via text. I have tried to explain, many times, that you can learn so much about how a person truly feels about something by looking at their face and reading their expressions. There are too many ways to misinterpret a text because you can't see how the person is feeling when they send the text. They hide behind their phones and computers, not wanting to

actually put themselves out there, and they are suffering because of it. We are raising a generation of teenagers who have difficulty with social interactions because they never have to face people. It is all too easy to say something mean through a text when you have a phone to hide behind, things you would never have the nerve to say to someone's face.

I would like to better understand all the ways teenagers communicate with each other via social media, and help my students to cultivate real, personal relationships by having them interact with their peers in advisory. Our advisory will become a chance for students to talk to their peers and see the reactions on their faces and what is socially appropriate and what is not. The more they can learn about each other, the more they will be able to successfully interact with each other, and that will carry out to the world outside our advisory. The following research questions will guide this investigation: How do teens use social media to create relationships? How has teens' use of social media affected their ability to cultivate real relationships? And finally, how can we combat this dependence on technology and help our teens get out from behind their phones?

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 How Teens Use Social Media

As noted above, teens use their phones all the time. They are posting, chatting, liking, and commenting on each other's social media sites constantly. "For teens, texts and snaps and video calls *are* real life, the equivalent of walking around in the mall for hours in the olden times, trying to catch the eye of a hottie in the food court." (Choi, 2016) Their lives revolve around their cell phones, and teens put everything they do out on social media for comment and approval. There is an actual physical reaction in a teenager's brain when their social media post receives lots of positive feedback. "The same brain circuits that are activated by eating chocolate and winning money are activated when teenagers see large numbers of 'likes' on their own photos or the photos of peers in a social network, according to findings from a new study in which researchers scanned teens' brains while they used social media." (Social Media, 2016) Once they put something out there, they are looking for the right reaction and they put a lot of stock in the opinions of others. If they put something out there that doesn't get enough 'likes,' then they take it down. They even go so far as to try posting it at a different time to see if they can get more likes. According to one article, a teen from Connecticut gives himself a set amount of time to get an acceptable amount of 'likes,' which for him is 40. "The window to reach 40 is about two hours. Sometimes he'll delete a post, save it, and put it up at a better time." (Choi, 2016) Teens treat social media as reality, a reality of their own making which they are able to manipulate to put themselves in the best possible light.

In times past, teens would spend hours on the phone talking to their friends, and now that time is spent on social media, communicating with sometimes thousands of people with the click of a button. Besides texting and posting photos, another way teens present themselves to others is with videos of themselves. I watched a series of videos posted by a teen, Olivia Rouyre, and one that stood out was about her day on a photo shoot. It is simply she and her friend driving in a car, getting something to eat, and getting photographed. (Rouyre, 2017) It is pretty mundane, and in times past, would be comparable to a girl telling her friend about her day. Except it wasn't just a conversation to a friend or even a group of friends. It was a video posted for anyone in the world to view and comment on. This particular video had been viewed over 16,000 times, and hundreds of comments made on her appearance or how much they liked the video. Teens look for validation with everything they do, and now they get it from thousands of people, most of whom they do not know. These vast social networks, are not as personal as before, and lack the real connection of an actual friendship. An article on a pair of shy, teenaged twins from California shows just how far-reaching social media has become. "Each 16-year-old has more than 1,000 followers, especially surprising when you realize that their feeds are locked, and the girls say they at least vaguely know every single person that follows them." (Choi, 2016) These virtual relationships teens create with those that follow them are hollow if they aren't being authentic and sharing their true feelings.

2.2 Social Media's Effects on Teens

All this time spent online cultivating the perfect image takes its toll. Teens are losing the ability to create real, personal relationships because they are afraid to show their true feelings for fear of being rejected on social media. The first relationship to be affected by social media is between teens and their parents. A study conducted in 2016 found "a high positive correlation between adolescents' technology usage and social interactions with their parents. The more the adolescents used technology the more their social interaction with their parents will be affected or decreased." (Moawad & Ebrahim, 2016, pg 176) Teens increased time on their cell phones and computers took away from time spent with their parents, developing critical family relationships. Without the ability to reveal their true feelings to their parents or guardians, teens are even more vulnerable to the judgments of social media. In the aftermath of a teen's suicide, investigators found that just hours before taking her life she had been texting her mom smiling faces. "In the days that followed, it came to light that she'd been holed up in her dorm room, crying and showing signs of depression – a completely different reality from the one that she conveyed in texts, Facebook posts and tweets." (Tardanico, 2012) In this technological world no one is able to be

who he or she really is, instead, everyone is who he or she wants others to think they are. This effort to show oneself as perfect is exhausting and stressful. “Teenage girls sort through hundreds of photos, agonizing over which ones to post online. Boys compete for attention by trying to out-gross one other, pushing the envelope as much as they can in the already disinhibited atmosphere online.” (Ehmke) The constant struggle to get everyone to approve of what you put out on social media leaves teens no time to just be themselves. One author discussed her real life friendship and talks about how important it is to be able to really be yourself. “Her quirks left room for me to exist without fear of judgment, like there was nothing I could do to make her recoil so there was no use stressing about how to act. And that’s true friendship, isn’t it? Giving each other space to be your true, weird selves.” (Chack, 2017)

Teenagers having relationship problems is not a new phenomenon, but teenagers dealing with the stress and anxiety of carrying out a relationship with the pressures of social media is a relatively new one. In order to truly have a relationship with someone, you need to be able to put your true self out there. There is the fear of rejection that comes with making a new friend, and that fear is multiplied when you have to do it in front of thousands watching you on social media. “When friendship is conducted online and through texts, kids are doing this in a context stripped of many of the most personal---and sometimes intimidating---aspects of communication.” (Ehmke) It’s not enough to attempt to just use virtual face-to-face software, either. “FaceTime, the Apple video-chat application, is not a replacement for real human interaction, especially for children, according to a new study.” (Millan, 2016) One needs to be physically present while communicating with someone else to be able to understand how he or she really feels. “As children interact with other people they learn to connect words with emotions. They soon realize that people have different emotional responses to shared events. Later, they begin to understand that the expressions people display do not always reflect their true feelings.” (Strahan et al., 2009, pg 37) A 2016 study found this lack of real relationships may lead to other issues as teens turn to the Internet to find what they are missing from true personal relationships. (Stankovska et al, 2016, pg 259) This study found a correlation between loneliness and increased social networking, even leading to addiction.

The amount of time teens spend on social media contributes to their inability to communicate face to face. “If kids aren’t getting enough practice relating to people and getting their needs met in person and in real time, many of them will grow up to be adults who are anxious about our species’ primary means of communication---talking.” (Ehmke) They have little experience with it, and it makes them nervous. It is difficult to make eye contact and say something to someone when you are used to hiding behind your cell phone. Teens can’t handle what we might consider a normal conversation, one that actually takes place verbally because they have no practice. “No wonder kids say calling someone of the phone is ‘too intense’ --- it requires more direct communication, and if you aren’t used to that it may well feel scary.” (Ehmke) A 2013 study comparing different styles of communication among friends showed that social networking pales in comparison to in-person communication. The results found that face-to-face communication is the best for cultivating friendships. “Nevertheless, our participants reported feeling closer to friends in person than when communicating through text, and their behavior reflected this.” (Sherman et al, 2013) It is not a bad thing for teens to begin a relationship online, but we need to make sure they continue to develop the relationship outside of social media.

In “This Is Really Happening” by Erin Chack, she speaks about how important her relationship with her boyfriend is and how he helped her get through her cancer diagnosis. They met at a park, but their true relationship didn’t begin until they started texting. “The best part of our conversations was that everything was filtered through a computer screen. I felt safe there, behind the glass.” (Chack, pg 33) This online relationship led to a real relationship when they began spending actual time together. “One of our favorite activities is getting into a car, driving for hours, talking about our feelings, and helping the other person talk about theirs more effectively.” (Chack, pg 145) Real relationships require real interactions, and teens today aren’t getting the opportunity to experience those. They are missing out on an essential part of life, a part that allows you to get through the tough teen years because you have real friends you can count on. More than almost anything, teens just want to feel like they belong somewhere. It is so important that when they feel they do not belong, it affects everything else they do, especially academics. “When students do not feel that they fit in with their peers, however, this becomes their primary area of concern---they simply cannot focus on learning.” (Strahan et al., 2009, pg 77) It doesn’t have to be with the popular crowd, but it has to be with some crowd. “Those who do not belong to the ‘premier’ groups form their own sub-groups. Membership in these subgroups may help members sustain themselves through what may seem to be a difficult period in life.” (Strahan et al., 2009, pg 77) Simply put, teens need friends who help them feel connected to something other than themselves.

Teens on social media are embroiled in a constant battle to fit in, be approved, be liked, but unlike years past, they are not just trying to fit into a small group of peers at school. They are trying to fit into a vast network of thousands, and therefore setting themselves up for failure again and again. Facebook is a perfect example.

Initially an individual joins a Facebook network, then after setting up a profile, begins to ‘friend’ individuals within and beyond their network. Individuals who wish to extend their network of ‘friends’ then

search the network for individuals or groups and submit a friend request directly to a person within the network. The request can be accepted, denied, or simply not acted on. Accepting, denying, or ‘defriending’ a particular person has a powerful impact. (Strahan et al., 2009, pg 79)

How often do we, in person and face-to-face, reject someone’s request to be our friend or tell someone they are no longer our friend? It happens, but rarely, and certainly not nearly as often as it does on Facebook. This is due to the sheer raw emotions involved in telling such a thing to someone versus clicking an icon on a computer or phone screen. There is so much more at stake in a physical confrontation than an online one, and it is too easy for teens to forget that when they mistake social media for true reality. The sad truth about large-scale social networking is even if you are “successful” and have lots of “friends,” these online relationships do not lead to an increase in real relationships. A study conducted in 2015 looked into whether social media allows us to increase our social network, which in the real world is subject to constraints such as geographical location, time, and effort to maintain. This study found that despite the large number of friends online, the number of true friendships is still limited, and respondents reported only “27.6% of their Facebook friends could be considered ‘genuine.’” (Dunbar 2015)

2.3 How to Combat Social Media’s Negative Effects on Teens

One way to encourage teens to interact with each other is to limit screen time. Unfortunately, as noted above, most of teens’ lives revolve around a screen. Their phones and their computers are their connection to their friends, and also to classmates who might be able to help with homework. While limiting screen time may not be appropriate in all instances, it should be enforced whenever possible. A study done by Stanford University on the effects of too much screen time and diminishing social skills encourages this exact scenario. “The antidote for this hyper-digital phenomenon is for children to spend plenty of time interacting face-to-face with people, the study found.” (Millan, 2016) The first place we can limit screen time for teens is at home. When not phone and computer use is not involved with doing their homework, it should be reduced to a minimum. Yes, teens need time to connect with their friends outside of school, but there have to be alternatives to digital connections. Setting down rules for when teens can and can’t use their phones or computers is one way to begin. It is up to parents to set reasonable boundaries. “Parents not only have the right to set limits---they have a responsibility to set and enforce them.” (Strahan et al., 2009, pg 75) It follows that if parents are limiting their teens’ screen time, then they should also limit their own screen time to promote a healthy parent-child relationship. “Not only does limiting the amount of time you spend plugged in to computers provide a healthy counterpoint to the tech-obsessed world, it also strengthens the parent-child bond and makes kids feel more secure. Kids need to know that you are available to help them with their problems, talk about their day, or give them a reality check.” (Ehmke) Parents are the first line of defense in this war against technology, and they need to step up and take their role seriously if they are to have a positive effect on their teen.

The second place we, as a society, can begin to limit screen time is in the classroom where appropriate. In one of my recent observations in a public high school, I noticed what a different classroom environment the presence of cell phones creates. The students in my high school have cell phones with them, however, they are not allowed during class and their phones will be taken if they violate the rule. In contrast, the students in the high school I observed all had their phones out. The teacher was reviewing a lesson and only a few students in the front row were paying attention. The rest were on their phones, taking pictures, browsing through apps, texting, or just perusing social media. It was as if they weren’t in class at all. When the bell rang, I asked the teacher how she could teach when everyone was on his or her cell phone, and she said there was nothing she could do about it. The students weren’t supposed to be on their phones, but the school administration had no way to back up the rule. Legally, the school can’t take the phones away, and the students were not willing to give them up voluntarily.

So how do teachers get these students to pay attention? By showing the students they care about them and are interested in what they have to say and what they think. In order to do that, they must first remove the barriers to creating these productive student-teacher relationships by eliminating cell phones in the classroom. I believe it is up to the administration to figure out a way to enforce the “no phones in class” rule. If we start at the top and make education without cell phones a priority, we are not only benefitting our students, but our teachers as well. The students will begin to engage in the classroom activities, become more interested in what is actually going on around them, and feel some emotional satisfaction associated with education. “As students come to trust their teachers and classmates, they cross a threshold and begin to engage more frequently in lesson activities.” (Strahan et al., 209, pg 88) This is a key to helping students learn. In an explanation on the workings of adolescent brain activity as it relates to learning activities, a neurologist found that “when engaged with activities that produce emotional satisfaction, the metabolic activity of the brain accelerates and thinking becomes more constructive.” (Strahan et al., 2009, pg 18) Computers and technology certainly have a place in the classroom, and when used properly, can greatly enhance the educational experience of students. However, unchecked use of the cell phone during class is detrimental to everyone involved, both teachers and students.

Teachers need to get back to creating relationships with students by being present, and not allowing technology to get in the way.

3. Classroom Application

My research into teen's use of social media has allowed me to reflect on how to best help my students become socially cognizant citizens and separate themselves from their virtual social media selves. As noted in the introduction, I am an advisor to about 15 students and it is my job to create that connection between student and teacher that allows each student to feel valued and accepted. In the past, I would encourage discussions and interactions in advisory, but not too much personal reflection. Now that I know how important both of these are to the development of my students, and I will continue to do even more. The book "Promoting Harmony" describes what I am striving for particularly well:

Advisor-advisee programs are designed to provide opportunities for self-exploration. Students are not forced to 'share' everything. Some reflective activities are theirs alone. Discussions provide a chance to hear how others think and feel without taking excessive risks. In successful advisory programs, students learn as much about themselves as they do about each other. (Strahan et al., 2009, pg 94)

I like the emphasis on never forcing a student to "share" everything. I think by allowing the students to open up when they are ready allows them to feel safe and in control. Some students may never feel brave enough to share personal feelings in a group setting, and that is all right. However, if they see that I am not judgmental when others share, then at least they know they can come to me and be treated the same. Providing students with an adult they can trust and learn from is key to helping them navigate a world controlled by social media. "Teens respond best to lessons and advice from adults they trust, especially when dealing with sensitive issues such as online privacy and safety." (Agosto and Abbas, 2016, pg 44) As a trusted adult, I can also model online behavior. "Adults should teach teens to become thoughtful, reflective social media users and to consider the possible benefits and harms of their actions before posting anything online." (Agosto and Abbas, 2016, pg 44)

I also like to play games with my advisory, because I think it is important for them to understand that advisory is not just another class. It is truly meant to be a time for them to just be themselves, and playing games helps everyone relax and not feel as though everyday is a time for formal discussions. Games also provide an opportunity for those who need help with social interactions to be able to see how different people react to different situations and what is appropriate. Seeing these reactions in real life allows them to see how these reactions might be hidden in a social media post to show that everything is OK when it really isn't. The situations that arise in the games we play may prompt a discussion about how to handle a difficult situation online, and allows me the opportunity to teach them how to appropriately handle a difficult situation, something teens desire. "What is clear from my work with students in elementary, middle, and high school is how hungry they are for their teachers to teach them pro-social strategies for dealing with these difficult social dynamics --- online and *irl*." (Steiner-Adair, 2015 pg 38) They are still learning and developing their sense of self, and if they don't get any type of fun, social interactions anywhere else, at least they will have some in advisory. I have one advisee who is an only child and he is very quiet and somewhat awkward. We have had some difficult exchanges about grades, and he has reacted very poorly at times and I have calmly told him that behavior is unacceptable. He has matured enough over the past few years to be able to express himself to me in a calm, collected manner, and I believe this comes from our time in advisory.

Along with discussions and games, my advisory also does service projects. Last year, we established a school-wide program where each week an advisory went to a soup kitchen and helped clean up after lunch. This gave the students a true hands-on service experience, which is another important part of adolescence that is being missed by spending so much time on technological devices. "One of the most meaningful ways that teachers can help students learn more about themselves and others is in service learning." (Strahan et al., 2009 pg 96) The only issue with this service trip is the missed class time. The soup kitchen needs help in the middle of the day, and we got approval for each advisory to miss lunch and a class period each week. My advisory loved their time at the soup kitchen and we were disappointed we only got to go one time, due to the large number of advisories and limited weeks available.

Another project we did last year that I would like to do again this year is make packages for the homeless. We brainstormed some things we thought would be useful, like ponchos, non-perishable snacks, and water bottles, and we each brought in a particular item. We packaged them up in Ziploc bags to keep in our cars and hand out to those in need as we drove around town. It was hands-on, the results were immediate, and it didn't take too much time. As the student government faculty advisor, I hope to establish more school-wide service projects, ones that we can work on all year and make a real difference in the community. I would like to see some of these volunteer opportunities take place on the weekends, giving the students some time to get together outside of school in service to others. Whether it means simply cleaning up a park or organizing a food pantry, the students are giving time to the community that does not involve missing class.

In my math classes, I feel it is my duty to combat the negative effects of social media by creating

opportunities for social interaction. I plan to incorporate more group work wherever possible, while maintaining a focus on academics. I realize how important it is for everyone to feel included, and knowing what I do now about the stress of acceptance created by social media, I will pick the pairs or small groups so no one feels undue pressure to fit in. I want students to look forward to my class as a safe space, one where they will learn and be challenged, but also where they know they will not be judged.

I enjoy getting to know my students, and will continue to make an effort to go to their after school activities to support them. I believe they know that I care about them and who they are outside of the classroom because they see me at their plays, games, and musicals. They know I support them and they, in turn, are attentive and respectful in class. The most important thing I can do for my students is to make a positive connection with them. “Successful teachers engage students in conversations that enable them to learn more about young adolescents as individuals, understand their personal and academic strengths, and listen actively to them.” (Strahan et al., 2009, pg 13) They may not love math, but I hope they at least enjoy coming to school because they enjoy my class and know that I enjoy having them there. I will continue to strive to be there for my students, both in and out of the classroom, so despite what happens on social media, they know there is someone out there who knows and likes the person they are in real life. I would like to see future research done to see how positive teacher-student interaction affects teens’ view of themselves on social media. I believe the positive impacts of a caring adult in students’ lives would do a lot to combat the negative pressures of social media.

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