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"Teens and the Telephone"

The Social Connection

By Kimberly Blaker

If anything is synonymous with adolescence, the telephone certainly tops the list.

Of course, this phenomenon isn't unique to today's teens. Think back to your own teen years. Remember the carefree days of lingering on the phone with your friends discussing such important matters as what to wear to your brother's (and his cute teammates') baseball game, your secret crush on the new boy next door, and the oppressive rules your parents have laid down for the summer?

In many respects, today's teens are no different. A study conducted by the University of Illinois found that the average teen spends 2 to 3 hours a day on the telephone (although only about half of that time is actually spent in conversation). While these statistics may seem excessive when considering how unhealthy such amounts of time spent plopped in front of the TV set or playing video games can be, there are significant differences in the effects.

Psychologists say that teens need such opportunities for socializing in order to broaden and strengthen their social networks according to the May 1999 issue of *Globe*

Magazine. “Teens have a developmental need to check in with each other, to reaffirm their place in the group,” explains Sharon Gordetsky, President of the Massachusetts Psychological Association, and “They get panicky at the prospect of being left out.”

During the teen years this need for constant socializing, that sometimes appears a lack of responsibility and a shortage of other interests, is actually crucial to your teen’s social development and sense of identity. Nancy Cobb in *Adolescence: Continuity, Change, and Diversity* explains that adolescents’ friendships define “who they are and what they are going to be in life.”

With modern technology, teen phone issues have become more complex, however. One third of all teens now own cell phones, according to a report in the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. More than half of these teen owned cell phones have been purchased by, and to alleviate, worried parents, as revealed by the *Detroit News*.

Whatever the reason for teen cell phone use, some additional concerns that have arisen include high cell phone bills and safety issues that are posed when less experienced drivers are talking on the phone.

Regardless of teens’ high phone use, another related issue has evolved. According to twenty percent of teens surveyed by the Pew Internet & American Life Project, the use of online correspondence has become teens’ main means of communication with their peers.

For families with a cable modem, this is good news as it frees up phone lines for family use and incoming calls. However, for those connected via the phone line, there’s no relief.

Unless phone use is interfering with homework or chores, is substantially replacing physical activity and family time, or is tying up the phone line preventing others from its use, there's no harm in lengthy phone conversations.

However, while parents need to make allowances for their teen's growing need to socialize, teens must also earn that privilege by adhering to general household courtesies. These courtesies are best learned, not only by the establishment of rules, but by the examples that parents set. Courtesies should be extended both ways.

Rules and Solutions the Whole Family Can Live With

There may come a point that an additional phone line for your teen is the optimum solution. Families are often able to work out schedules and rules to eliminate most problems posed by a single phone line. However, an additional line is sometimes necessary, or if nothing else, may eliminate much tension that can arise. If business calls come directly to your home, you have a large family, or Internet access significantly ties up your phone line, a second line may be the best solution.

In addition, to reduce aggravations compounded by the summer heat and additional time that families spend together during the long summer months, set rules regarding phone use. Allow for your teen's input, and take into consideration the needs of all family members. By establishing rules during the summer, you'll also avoid conflict for the school year just ahead.

- Specify what times the phone may not be used including mealtime, during homework, and after a certain hour at night.
- If you have more than one adolescent, set specific times that each can use the phone and ask that they plan accordingly.

- Require homework and chores be completed before using the phone, or allow only a portion of the phone time to be used before completion.
- Have consequences for not abiding by phone rules. Loss of phone use would be appropriate.
- Get call waiting or voice mail so that incoming calls can be retrieved.
- Get a cable modem, and free up the phone line by setting aside a daily phone allowance. If your teen wishes to socialize beyond this allotment, she can do so by email or instant messaging.
- Keep phone pads and pens next to the phone and require written messages.
- Require your teen to answer any incoming calls that have not been picked up by the second ring.
- If your teen has a cell phone, require that he pay a determined portion of the bill.
- Purchase prepaid minutes to keep teens from racking up high cell phone bills.

PULL QUOTE: During the teen years, this need for constant socializing is crucial to your teen's social development and sense of identity.

PULL QUOTE: However, while parents need to make allowances for their teen's growing need to socialize, teens must also earn that privilege by adhering to general household courtesies

SIDEBAR IDEAS OR WAYS TO LOCALIZE: Include a quote or suggestion by a local parent on how he or she has effectively handled telephone use.

Kimberly Blaker of New Boston, Michigan writes for parenting and women's magazines across the United States and other publications.

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