# **Teenagers and social networking – it might actually be good for them**

Is too much online socialising among teenagers really creating a generation who can't relate face to face? Not according to the evidence, says Clive Thompson

*Clive Thompson*

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 Research shows that avid texters tend to spend more time socialising in the real world. Photograph: Alamy

**I** ask a teenage girl, how often do you text? "250 times a day, or something," she tells me. Shocking! The digital lives of teenagers have become the target of weekly attacks. In a [recent essay for the Guardian, the novelist Jonathan Franzen bemoaned online socialising](https://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/sep/13/jonathan-franzen-wrong-modern-world%22%20%5Co%20%22), arguing that it was creating a uniquely shallow and trivial culture, making kids unable to socialise face to face. Then the American comedian Louis CK proclaimed on TV that he wouldn't give his daughters cellphones for fear they wouldn't develop empathy.

There's also the scientist and writer [Susan Greenfield](http://www.susangreenfield.com" \o "Susan Greenfield)'s famously apocalyptic warnings: "We could be raising a hedonistic generation who live only in the thrill of the computer-generated moment and are in distinct danger of detaching themselves from what the rest of us would consider the real world."

As a parent of two boys at primary school, I'm not immune to worry about these issues. And you don't need to be a parent to fret about the effect of all this technology on young people. Newspapers are constantly filled with frightening accounts of pornography addiction and aggression supposedly caused by violent videogames – particularly now, as Grand Theft Auto V hits the shelves. But even when these titillating accounts touch on real concerns, they do not really reflect the great mass of everyday teenage social behaviour: the online chat, the texting, the surfing, and the emergence of a new teenage sphere that is conducted digitally.

That trend is real. Is it, as Franzen and the others fear, turning kids into emoticon-addled zombies, unable to connect, unable to think, form a coherent thought or even make eye contact? Could this be true?

I don't think so. Let's go back to that girl who texts 250 times a day. The truth is, she was an extreme case I cherry-picked to startle you – because when I interviewed her, she was in a group of friends with a much wider range of experiences. Two others said they text only 10 times a day. One was a Facebook refusenik ("I'm all Instagram, pictures of what I'm doing in the city, with my friends. We're visual people"). A few were devotees of [Snapchat](http://www.snapchat.com/%22%20%5Co%20%22), the app that lets you send a picture or text that, like a cold-war communiqué, is destroyed after one viewing. One had a phone filled with charmingly goofy emoticons, another disapproved: "I'm a skilled writer," she told me. "People sometimes misunderstand tone, so you have to be precise." As it turns out, the diversity of use in this group of friends is confirmed by research. Fewer than 20% of kids send more than 200 texts a day; 31% send barely 20 or fewer.

New technologies always provoke generational panic, which usually has more to do with adult fears than with the lives of teenagers. In the 1930s, parents fretted that radio was gaining "an invincible hold of their children". In the 80s, the great danger was the Sony Walkman – producing the teenager who "throbs with orgasmic rhythms", as philosopher Allan Bloom claimed. When you look at today's digital activity, the facts are much more positive than you might expect.

Indeed, social scientists who study young people have found that their digital use can be inventive and even beneficial. This is true not just in terms of their social lives, but their education too. So if you use a ton of social media, do you become unable, or unwilling, to engage in face-to-face contact? The evidence suggests not. [Research by Amanda Lenhart](http://www.pewinternet.org/Reports/2012/Teens-and-smartphones.aspx%22%20%5Co%20%22) of the Pew Research Centre, a US thinktank, found that the most avid texters are also the kids most likely to spend time with friends in person. One form of socialising doesn't replace the other. It augments it.

"Kids still spend time face to face," Lenhart says. Indeed, as they get older and are given more freedom, they often ease up on social networking. Early on, the web is their "third space", but by the late teens, it's replaced in reaction to greater autonomy.

They have to be on Facebook, to know what's going on among friends and family, but they are ambivalent about it, says Rebecca Eynon, a research fellow at the [Oxford Internet Institute](http://www.oii.ox.ac.uk/%22%20%5Co%20%22), who has interviewed about 200 British teenagers over three years. As they gain experience with living online, they begin to adjust their behaviour, wrestling with new communication skills, as they do in the real world.

Parents are wrong to worry that kids don't care about privacy. In fact, they spend hours tweaking Facebook settings or using quick-delete sharing tools, such as Snapchat, to minimise their traces. Or they post a photograph on [Instagram](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/instagram), have a pleasant conversation with friends and then delete it so that no traces remain.

This is not to say that kids always use good judgment. Like everyone else, they make mistakes – sometimes serious ones. But working out how to behave online is a new social skill. While there's plenty of drama and messiness online, it is not, for most teens, a cycle of non-stop abuse: a Pew study found only 15% of teens said someone had been mean or cruel to them online in the last 12 months. As wrenching as the worst-case scenarios of bullying are, and as urgently as those need to be addressed, they are not, thankfully, a daily occurrence for most kids. Even sexting may be rarer than expected: Pew found only 4% of teenagers had sent a "sext" and only 15% had received one – less of an epidemic than you would imagine.

But surely all this short-form writing is eroding literacy? Certainly, teachers worry. Pew Centre surveys have found that teachers say that kids use overly casual language and text speak in writing, and don't have as much patience for long, immersive reading and complex arguments. Yet studies of first-year college papers suggest these anxieties may be partly based on misguided nostalgia. When Stanford University scholar Andrea Lunsford gathered data on the rates of errors in "freshman composition" papers going back to 1917, she found that they were virtually identical to today.

But even as error rates stayed stable, student essays have blossomed in size and complexity. They are now six times longer and, unlike older "what I did this summer" essays, they offer arguments buttressed by evidence. Why? Computers have vastly increased the ability of students to gather information, sample different points of view and write more fluidly.

When the [linguist Naomi Baron](http://www.american.edu/cas/faculty/nbaron.cfm%22%20%5Co%20%22)studied students' instant messaging even there she found surprisingly rare usage of short forms such as "u" for "you", and as students got older, they began to write in more grammatical sentences. That is because it confers status: they want to seem more adult, and they know how adults are expected to write. "If you want to look serious," as the teenage Sydney told me, "you don't use 'u'." Clearly, teaching teens formal writing is still crucial, but texting probably isn't destroying their ability to learn it.

It is probably true that fewer kids are heavy readers compared with two generations ago, when cheap paperbacks spiked rates of reading. But even back then, as the literacy expert Wendy Griswold says, a minority of people – perhaps 20% – were lifelong heavy readers, and it was cable TV, not the internet, that struck a blow at that culture in the 80s. Griswold still finds that 15% or more of kids are deeply bookish. "The ambitious kids. I see no reason that says that it's going to change."

In fact, the online world offers kids remarkable opportunities to become literate and creative because young people can now publish ideas not just to their friends, but to the world. And it turns out that when they write for strangers, their sense of "authentic audience" makes them work harder, push themselves further, and create powerful new communicative forms.

Consider Sam McPherson. At 13, he became obsessed with the television show [Lost](https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/lost%22%20%5Co%20%22) and began to contribute to a fan-run wiki. "I jumped in and just started editing," Sam says. He developed skills in cooperating with far-flung strangers and keeping a cool head while mediating arguments.

This type of interaction online with strangers can make kids more community-minded. Joseph Kahne, a professor of education at Mills College in California, studied 400 teenagers over three years. Kahne found that teens who participated in fan or hobby sites were more likely than other kids to do real-world volunteering. Interestingly, this wasn't true of being on [Facebook](https://www.theguardian.com/technology/facebook).

Indeed, you could argue that parents should encourage their kids to spend less time on Facebook and more on sites devoted to their obsessions. Take Tavi Gevinson, a 17-year-old student who founded and edits [Rookie](http://rookiemag.com/us/%22%20%5Co%20%22), a site that features articles by and for young women. She says online socialising is "the opposite of isolation – it's all about connection. I've made some of my closest friends online, through blogging communities."

Teachers who understand this insight have begun to transform their classrooms. One day I visited the class of [Lou Lahana, a computer teacher at a school in a low-income area](http://lahana.edublogs.org" \o "Lou Lahana). I met one student who was frequently in trouble, with a bad truancy record and rock-bottom grades – a classic drop-out risk. But in Lahana's class, he had discovered a talent using [3D SketchUp software](http://www.sketchup.com/%22%20%5Co%20%22). The student began to produce gorgeous renderings of famous buildings, which Lahana posted online for the world to see.

"I could be an architect," he told me, as I watched him sketch a version of New York's Guggenheim Museum on screen. "This is the first thing I've seen where I thought, OK, I get this, I love this – I could do this."

Few would deny that too much time online can be harmful. As Louis CK points out, some of the dangers are emotional: hurting someone from a distance is not the same as hurting them face to face. If we're lucky, the legal environment will change to make teenagers' online lives less likely to haunt them later on. Just last week, California passed a law allowing minors to demand that internet firms erase their digital past and the EU has contemplated similar legislation.

Distraction is also a serious issue. When kids flip from chat to music to homework, they are indeed likely to have trouble doing each task well. And studies show that pupils don't check the veracity of information online – "smart searching" is a skill schools need to teach urgently. It's also true, Lenhart points out, that too much social networking and game playing can cut into schoolwork and sleep. This is precisely why parents still need to set firm boundaries around it, as with any other distraction.

But many teenagers recognise this. "Maybe it's a natural part of maturing," one girl says about her reduced use of social networking. "I try not to check Facebook until I've done my homework."

"You do not," laughs her friend. "I've seen you!"

"Well, it's discipline! I'm trying!"

So what's the best way to cope? The same boring old advice that applies to everything in parenting. "Moderation," Lenhart says. Rebecca Eynon argues that it's key to model good behaviour. Parents who stare non-stop at their phones and don't read books are likely to breed kids who will do the same. As ever, we ought to scrutinise our own behaviour.

As for young people, they are perfectly capable of considering the richness, and the contradictions, of their own experience. Tavi Gevinson knows there is a dark side to online life: "That's very sad to me and I wish it weren't true." Yet she sees powerful advantages. "For a lot of people my age, it's not like we meet online and only talk online. The goal is to meet in person and to forge that connection."