

DOES SOCIAL NETWORKING INCREASE THE RISK OF TEENS DRINKING, SMOKING, AND USING DRUGS?

In a recent survey of several thousand teens researchers reported that adolescents who engage in “hyper-texting” and/or excessive social networking are more likely to have had sex and/or use drugs or alcohol than peers who do not send as many text messages or spend relatively less time on social networking sites. Experimentally, whenever research is based on survey data, one must be careful about drawing definite conclusions. For example, most teens when anonymously interviewed are likely to present themselves as more anti-establishment than they probably are. Additionally, finding an apparent correlation between two variables (A and B) does not necessarily mean causation; instead of A causing B, B could be causing A, or A and some other variable, C, could be causing B.

The above being said, I am not at all surprised by the results of the survey. To begin with, we have to consider about what these teens are spending most of their time texting and networking. To maintain an adolescent’s attention for hours at a time it is likely that the primary topics of discussion involve “drugs, sex, and rock and roll.” If a teen spends most of their free time communicating regarding sex and drugs—having no other model—it is quite likely that that adolescent is going to actively participate in those behaviors. (Then they will have even more about which to text and network.)

Since many teens are spending untold hours texting and networking, they have no time to devote to more appropriate pursuits, such as participating in athletics, school activities, and religious endeavors. In addition, these adolescents have little remaining time to effectively study, interact with family, exercise, and to socialize with peers in a face-to-face manner. Devotees of obsessive video gaming, I believe, have the very same problems but the medium of most video games is even more pernicious.

I know it is common that the older generation always believes that the younger generation is “going to hell in a hand basket.” With the advent of technology, though, this psychologist truly has major concerns for today’s teens and young adults who are “obsessed” with texting, networking, and video gaming. For example, I believe, the current documented rise in obesity in children and teens is a direct result of our youth spending much of their childhood staring at a video screen instead of riding their bikes or playing with their friends.

Parents allow their children to overuse electronics because it keeps the kids quiet and out of the way. I contend this is a poor bargain. Parents must strive to limit their child’s use of electronics and encourage them to engage in other, more healthy, activities.

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