

How Parents can reverse Digital Communications Negative Effects on their Children

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### *Introduction*

Communication has changed steadily throughout time. With new advancements to social sites, apps, etc., it can be difficult to grasp everything. Yet, since these new innovations to online media have been created and updated so quickly, it leaves little time for everyone to be involved. This form of online media has also attracted a new audience, adolescents. Adolescents are usually the first group of people to understand how a social site works. With the increase in adolescents understanding how social sites work, the possible dangers to online use can become unknown to parents. Some of the many online dangers and problems with digital communication include: the loss of face-to-face communication, cyberbullying, online strangers, sexting, loss of sleep, and dysmorphic body image. Parents are usually the scapegoats when their children get into trouble online, are addicted to digital deceives, etc.; but how are parents supposed to monitor their children when they don't understand the negative effects of digital communication, or don't understand how to use the site/app? This paper will examine digital communication's negative effects on children, which are: the loss of face-to-face communication, cyberbullying, online strangers, sexting, loss of sleep, and dysmorphic body image and how parents can help limit the negative effects of these issues.

### *Negative Outcomes- Loss of Face-to Face Communication*

Face-to-face communication has been declining ever since the introduction to smartphones and social media sites. Although there have been many studies conducted concerning the cognitive effects of children through the medias use of television, there has been few studies examining the effects of using multiple technologies, such as TV, smartphones, videogames, etc. (Pea et al. 327). Since 1999, studies have examined how much children's media

use has increased. In 1999, the total amount of media use per day was 7hrs and 29mins, in 2004, the total hours per day was 8hrs and 33min, then in 2009, it went up to 10hrs and 45 mins (Pea et al. 327). Studies show that media dependency is on the rise and not just with one medium, but this is a mix of TV, smartphones, and computers.

While children are one of the leading users of digital devices, parental mediation and involvement are also factors of children lessening their participation in face-to-face communication. Studies have shown that if parents themselves have an addiction problem to devices, they are less likely to intervene on their children's negative tendencies on digital devices (Hwang and Jeong 737). Researchers have suggested that children's phone addiction must be examined, but parent's own addiction, their risk perception and personality traits must also be examined (Hwang and Jeong 737). All these factors help determine whether parents have a digital addiction problem, as well as how keen they are on noticing and intervening on their children's addiction problems.

While some parents themselves need to reconsider if they have an addiction to their smart device, there are also parents that have no insight onto how these sites work. One way for parents to get a better understanding is by asking their kids how sites work. They may not understand it at first, but a basic run down of how sites work, and how long kids are on the site would be best. Also, setting limits to kid's phone use is another method of reducing the loss of face-to-face communication. This will insure kids are not over using their phones, and lessen the addictive quality.

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#### *Negative Outcomes- Cyberbullying*

Today, most digital sites users are adolescents. Research suggests this is mainly due to the fact most social media sites don't have age restrictions or children falsify their age online

(Livingstone and Brake 75). According to studies performed in the UK, “In 2007, 42% of UK 8–17 year olds had a social network profile, including 27% of 8–12 year olds and 55% of 13–17 year olds” (Livingstone and Brake 75). This shows that the number of children with social media sites is on the rise, whether parents monitor or know their children have these sites is unknown. However, in a study performed by “Ofcom”, their research showed that “61% of social network users overall have restricted access to their profile in the UK and similar figures apply in the USA” (Livingstone and Brake 75). Yet, although users have restricted access, there are no numbers determining of the 61% how many are children.

The increasing number of children online can be detrimental. The cyberspace has been identified as a risky environment for bullying. According to research performed on twelve to seventeen-year-olds, “Approximately 70% of youth report having experienced bullying at some point during their school careers (Juvonen and Gross 497). While bullying in general is used in school or in person, cyber bullying draws a larger audience; this can involve the entire school, town, state, country, etc. With increasing numbers of young adults online and lack of supervision, these two issues have become the concern and causes of online bullying. Research in the US found that 10-15 year olds who claim they used many modes of communication (email, texting, chatrooms, instant messaging, and other social media sites) were 33% more likely to be bullied online (Livingstone and Brake 79). Being bullied online can cause many insecurities; not only do you feel alone, but psychological problems can transpire.

.....The psychological and social implications of cyberbullying are vast. Cyberbullying ..... makes children feel isolated and effects their overall self-esteem and well-being (Livingstone and Brake 79). When children are bullied, it leaves them with lower self-esteem, and more likely to talk to strangers online (Livingstone and Brake 79). Children also experience several

psychological effects, such as anxiety and emotional distress (Juvonen and Gross 497). Being bullied online and feeling alone puts children in a tough situation with parents. Children may become unwilling to tell parents or adults about online bullying due to concerns of restricting their use of social media and online use (Juvonen and Gross 497). Cyberbullying victims are also more likely to know the cyberbully personally. In one study, 351 adolescents were interviewed, of the total, “91% of the reported cyber- bullying incidents youth had experienced themselves or knew of first-hand was related to problems in a relationship” (Meter and Bauman 438). This means that through cyberbullying, everyone is a possible victim. All in all, cyberbullying incidents not only effects children psychologically, but it can affect a child’s personal life and relationships with friends.

On issues concerning cyberbullying, it seems parents intervene or get involved once it is too late. Although, this problem usually stems down from the adolescents, they don’t tell their parents they are getting bullied in fear of what their parents might say or do. As mentioned, researchers suggest children feel afraid of conversing with their parents because they might restrict their access to online or social media time (Livingstone and Brake 79). Most of this can be avoided through conversations with one’s child. According to research on parental involvement on adolescent’s restrictions digital communication use, most researchers suggest,

parental rules about Internet use (e.g., not giving out personal information or talking to strangers in chatrooms) and good communication with parents (e.g., telling parents when receiving unsolicited and inappropriate junk mail) is related to decreased likelihood of risky Internet-related behavior (Smith, Gradisar, and King 274).

Just by having a conversation with children and setting relaxed limits on the use of devices can

decrease the risk of online trouble as well as improving the connect and trust among the parent-child-relationship.

### *Negative Outcomes- Contact with Strangers*

As social media can bring access to new friends, it can also expose children to strangers and individuals who falsify their identity. In the US, studies have been conducted on adolescents ranging from 10-17 years old. In these studies, the kids were asked a series of questions based on whether these kids had experienced unwanted sexual attention. Research found that, “the prevalence of online sexual solicitation to vary from 2% among 10–12 year olds rising to 14% among 16– 17 year olds (with an average of 9% across the age range)” (Livingstone and Smith 640). However, in the UK, “The Child Exploitation and Online Protection Centre receives reports from around 1,000 children each year concerning online victimization by adults” (Livingstone and Smith 640). While psychologists have found online sexual soliciting usually doesn’t get pursued in the real world, that doesn’t mean it doesn’t or can’t happen. In a survey conducted by “Go Online,” the survey asked children about their exposure to sexual or violent material online. When asking the UK adolescents ranging from 9-19 years old, they found that,

57% had seen online pornography, 31% had seen violent and 11% had seen racist content. Further, 31% had received sexual comments online and 28% had been sent unsolicited sexual material. A third had received bullying comments online and 8% had gone to a meeting with someone first met online (Livingstone and Brake 77-78).

This shows that not only is it possible to be exposed to the darker portions of the internet, but some children claim they do meet up with strangers online.

Meeting up with strangers online is becoming more common with exposure to online dating sites, online messaging systems, and various social apps. Today, it is also easy to pretend to be someone you are not. However, out of all the negative impacts discussed, this is usually an issue parents take seriously. The thought of children being abused by older strangers has become a concern to all parents. Studies conducted in Australia found that suggesting integrated awareness groups and education of some kind within schools could help decrease this issue (Walsh and Brandon 734). This research also sought to understand how much parents fully comprehend this issue. If parents don't fully understand the concerns around their children talking to and possibly meeting up with strangers, this could be one of the reasons children are not fully aware of online dangers. Similarly, if parents are not fully educated on social media sites and other forms of communication, this could also correlate as to why children meet up with strangers. While education and forums may be a great option, awareness to these social media sites may also be an option.

#### *Negative Outcomes- Sexting*

The amount of information available to the public is increasing each day, thanks to technological advances. As adolescents get access to the newest forms of technology, the negatives or downsides of these technologies become ambiguous. Today, adolescents and parents are noticing an increase in sexual digital photo sharing known as sexting. Sexting is a form of sexual photo sharing that occasionally can become detrimental if these photos get into the wrong hands. It is haunting how easily these images can be forwarded to the cyberspace. If images are released, they then “become part of a young person's digital footprint, which may last forever and potentially damage future career prospects or relationships” (Walker, Sanci, and Temple-Smith 8). Not only could adolescents impact their future and relationships, the

experience of having revealing photos at the world's disposal also can have psychological effects. Young people who have fallen victims to sexual images becoming public and experiencing shame have reportedly suffered social, psychological and legal consequences (Walker, Sanci, and Temple-Smith 9). Adolescents have also claimed they moved schools, were exiled from social groups, and were suspended along with other legal troubles (Walker, Sanci, and Temple-Smith 9).

In the U.S alone, in 2011 there were over 550 sexting cases involving young people (Walker, Sanci, and Temple-Smith 9). Although having the sex talk with young people is difficult, it is crucial parents have this discussion early, before an issue can arise. According to the National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, "22% of teen girls and 20% of teen boys have sent nude or seminude photos of themselves over the Internet or their phones" ("Teens and Sexting: What Is It and What Can Parents Do?" 1). So why wait until a problem arises? A simple conversation can help adolescents grow empathy and notice the severity of the issue. Other advice for parents includes setting boundaries, and if all other attempts fail, taking the phone away from your child. Regardless, it is import for parents to converse with their children about this issue. This conversation may be uncomfortable, but this could save them from the possible legal and psychological damages sexting results in.

#### *Negative Outcomes- Loss of Sleep*

With the number of devices children have access to today, by decreasing the amount of time adolescents spend on these devices, this could impact their overall well-being. With access to multiple devices in a child's bedroom, this can heighten the risk of addiction to these devices, as well as impacting their sleep routines (Vernon, Barber, and Modecki 386). On average,



children require around nine hours of sleep. With devices in children's rooms and no set time of shutting down these devices, they can become distracting and possibly hurt the child's sleep schedule. Lack of sleep can have several effects on children. For example, "decreased motivation.... Time in bed often now includes sending and receiving text messages, posting on or perusing social networking sites (SNS), or gaming with online 'friends,' all of which can keep adolescents up well into the night, steadily eroding their sleep" (Vernon, Barber, and Modecki 386). Yet, most studies suggest this issue needs to also examine gender. For example, research has found that males tend to use digital media mediums of video games, while female tend to use chatrooms and their cellphones (Brunborg et al. 570). When comparing possible risk facts and assessments of possible cases of social media induced insomnia, gender also needs to be examined because females have higher risk of insomnia compared to men (Brunborg et al. 570). This concern class for more research, but this issue should be a concern for any gender. Research comparing possible ailments of social media is a new concern; but with the amount of research invested into this issue, it is reasonable that insomnia and social media addiction are two concerns.

Restricting adolescents' media use may be difficult, but if academic performance or physical signs of sleep depravity are detected, it should become an utmost concern. Although this issue is not all on parents, digital restrictions should be put in place regardless. Young adults need physical activity to maintain their health; if kids are stuck cooped inside and spending extensive hours with screen use, this affects them in numerous ways. This problem not only comes down to monitoring their screen use, but making sure children are balancing screen use with some sort of activity. If parents are noticing sleep depravity or academic performance slipping, parents can always set limits to children's phone access before bed. These are serious

issues. If a smartphone, tablet, etc., can affect a child this much, restricting kids access is a necessity.

### *Negative Outcomes- Dysmorphic Body Image*

For decades, body image and body expectation have been depicted through media in the form of television and magazines. While men are usually expected to be fit, there are even stronger body image expectations for women. It is noted that in early middle school years, children start to become more aware of how society claims gendered bodies should look. In early adolescents, “[it] is an important developmental period for girls in relation to body image concerns, as the physical changes associated with puberty tend to move further away from the androgynous and extremely slender ideal promoted by the media” (Rodgers, Mclean, and Paxton 706). This suggests that since the physical changes associated with puberty in girls, curvy waists, and increased breast size, societies’ expectations of girls become harder to reach due to these changes. Also, with new media platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram, these unrealistic ideas have become more detrimental to adolescents growing up with access to online communication sites.

The impact of girls not being able to conform to societies view of them, and society having an unrealistic view on young girls in general is devastating in several ways. Through the “uses-and-gratification theory, this imposes how individuals are active consumers of media” therefore, “...body dissatisfaction might spur young women to look for ways of changing their appearance such as those proposed by media” (Rodgers, Mclean, and Paxton 707). The psychological effects of body image perceived through media include, body shame, negative mood, and decreased cognitive functioning (Grey et al. 88-93). Other studies suggest overall

mood changes, and a decrease in activity and confidence (Rodgers, Mclean, and Paxton 706).

While psychological impacts are severe, physical impacts and the lengths adolescent girls go to, to change their negative perception of themselves are just as devastating. The use of social media has become a powerful sociocultural channel that distorts body image. The physical effects of this issue include: increase consumption of beauty products and clothing, cosmetic procedures, diet programs, dietary supplements, and excessive exercising (Strubel, Petrie, and Pookulangara 2). Other studies suggest that instead of caring more about appearance, young girls shut down, gain weight, and decrease the amount of fruits and vegetables they eat (Rodgers, Mclean, and Paxton 706). Other extreme medical cases include young women developing “disordered eating symptoms or, for a smaller number, actual clinical eating disorders” (Strubel, Petrie, and Pookulangara 2). While this issue can affect anyone in society, young women in western societies are usually being the ones targeted. Through constantly being objectified and portrayed in a sexually negative manner, prepubescent girls are usually the targets of mass media scrutiny.

How to alter young girls body dysmorphic image due to online sources is a question researchers and psychologists are still trying to discover. This issue is promoted online, but also through society. To cure this problem, society would have to change its views on women, as well as stop promoting unrealistic standards for women’s bodies. Parents may not be able to make this issue disappear, but encouraging their child’s body image would be one way to lessen the impact of this issue. As discussed, this issue affects young women, as well as men. By rejecting societies take on body image and mass medias negative view on individual’s bodies, this issue may not be able to go away, but can be diminished.

### *Conclusion*

The main overarching theme when researching this paper was *how could parents be so naïve? Or, how could parents not be monitoring their kid's online activity?* Both are valid questions, but these questions must go further. Parents can be blamed for not monitoring their kids, or negligence; but is it fair to blame parents if they don't understand all the negative effects of digital communication? Parents have been the scapegoats of many online incidents, such as when their kids meet with strangers, are involved in sexting incidents, cyber bullying, etc. While adolescents are being blamed, there is an overall sense of *why couldn't a parent monitor their child/ children better?* This paper not only tries to challenge this notion, but help better educate parents of what online dangers there are, as well as informing them on how to monitor the issue, before there are problems. Yet, it is also noted that if parents have an online addiction problem themselves, they are less likely to understand these problems or intervene. So, why not make this a learning experience for both parties, digitally addicted parents and digital illiterate parents? This paper can help educated parents in both environments. There are online risks and negative implications to digital communication, such as: the diminishing of face-to-face communication, cyberbullying, online strangers, sexting, loss of sleep, and an unrealistic view of body image. These issues based around digital communication can be diminished when parents get a better view of the problems at hand, learn how to control the problem, and stop it before it gets problematic.

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