

NEWS

Smartphones dominate daily life for teens and tweens

[Svetlana Shkolnikova](#) NorthJersey

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Gracie Straub, a 12-year-old from Leonia, typically sends more than 100 text messages to her friends and family on her iPhone by the time she goes to bed at 9 p.m.

She's not allowed to have the smartphone in her room at night, but it's her first thought in the morning, said her mother, Melissa Straub, a social media educator. The girl goes straight to her mother's bedroom each morning so that she can see what's going on, Straub said.

"I don't know what else to do during the morning," Gracie explained.

One day this summer, Gracie spent six hours on her phone, sending texts, posting on Snapchat, checking Instagram and playing the game Hop.

"I'm trying to get her out of the house ... but it's a lot of trying to get them to put the electronics down," said Straub, who also has an 8-year-old daughter, Cassidy. "She'd rather sit here and text than have a phone call. Her friend could be right here, and they're texting each other."

It's a dilemma many parents are familiar with.

Just 25 percent of teens ages 13 to 17 spend time with their friends on a daily basis outside of school, according to the Pew Research Center. But 55 percent text them every day, sending and receiving an average of 30 texts per day. For girls, the percentage is even higher, at 62 percent.

When they're not texting, they're on Facebook, Instagram and Snapchat.

Some 76 percent of teens use social media, largely congregating on those three social networks, according to Pew. Seventy-three percent access them via smartphones.

Gracie received hers on her 10th birthday and asked permission to download Instagram and Snapchat a year later.

“I wanted to get in touch with my friends more,” she said. “I can talk to my friends and see what they’re doing.”

While social media often makes tweens and teens feel more connected to their friends and family, it can also serve as a conduit and amplifier for less innocent behavior.

Gracie and her classmates dealt with an anonymous Instagram user for months this year who posted embarrassing photos of students and barraged them with expletive-laden insults.

The account, created by a fellow student, would go quiet if confronted but eventually start up again, Straub said.

“They feel empowered because they’re anonymous,” she said.

APP: Teen tackles bullying with ReThink app that spots mean words

PSA: Fort Lee High School stars in anti-bullying PSA

EDITORIAL: Bullying still takes too many lives

Gracie said the bullying didn’t affect her, but she felt very upset when a friend was attacked by a stranger for a comment she made on a celebrity’s Instagram post.

After coming to her friend’s defense, she blocked and reported the account and moved on.

But sometimes moving on is not so easy. Sometimes the hateful messages and mean comments add up and eat away.

In June, the suicide of 12-year-old Mallory Grossman, a Rockaway Township middle-schooler, highlighted how tragic the consequences of cyberbullying can be.

Grossman’s parents blame months of in-person and online harassment for their daughter’s death. They say classmates tormented Mallory through texts, Snapchat and Instagram, telling her she was a loser who had no friends and asking, “Why don’t you kill yourself?”

“This phone can kill,” the Grossmans’ attorney, Bruce Nagel, said while holding up a black iPhone at a press conference this month announcing the family’s intention to sue the school district for negligence.

Recent studies have bolstered Nagel’s assertion.

Suicide has become the second-leading cause of death among adolescents in the U.S. over the past decade, outpacing homicide and edging closer to the number of deaths caused by unintentional injuries, according to a 2016 study by the American Academy of Pediatrics.

The study identified a growing connection between bullying and committing or thinking about committing suicide and found that excessive Internet use was strongly associated with higher levels of depression and suicidal thoughts.

The rise in suicide rates is especially profound among 10- to 14-year-olds, doubling from 0.9 to 2.1 suicides per 100,000 middle-schoolers between 2007 and 2014, according to the most recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention.

Jean Twenge, a psychology professor at San Diego State University and author of “iGen: Why Today’s Super-Connected Kids Are Growing Up Less Rebellious, More Tolerant, Less Happy — and Completely Unprepared for Adulthood,” began noticing abrupt shifts in teen behaviors and emotional well-being in 2012.

Year after year, national surveys of teens showed depression and loneliness increasing and happiness and life satisfaction decreasing.

Twenge said she struggled to explain the trends until she saw a study showing that in 2012, the proportion of Americans who owned a smartphone surpassed 50 percent.

The generation born between 1995 and 2012 is shaped by the smartphone and social media, she said, and heavy users suffer from more feelings of unhappiness.

“They’re sucked into this addictive world of responding to texts and social media posts that can just, especially for vulnerable teens, really lead to a spiral of negative emotions,” Twenge said.

The effect is stronger for girls, who use social media more and are more likely to feel excluded and lonely when they see friends and classmates socializing without them, she said.

Snapchat and Instagram have provided mostly positive experiences for Gracie, but she admits to occasionally feeling left out and jealous because of her friends’ posts.

When a friend who had moved away posted photos from her birthday party this spring surrounded by new friends, Gracie said she felt “really, really upset.”

Girls have borne the brunt of social media's emotional toll, said Twenge. Their preferred method of socializing and ostracizing – more verbal than physical – lends itself particularly well to social media and cyberbullying.

“The unfortunate fact is that teen girls have always been vicious in one way or another,” Twenge said. “It’s just that now, they can bully each other on their phones, and that phone is, for many teen girls, always with them. They sleep with it; it’s always there. There’s no getting away from the bullying.”

A 2017 study conducted by the co-founders of the Cyberbullying Research Center found that girls ages 12 to 17 are most likely to be cyberbullied.

Seventy percent of all 5,600 students surveyed said someone had spread rumors about them online and 34 percent had experienced cyberbullying in their lifetime.

The numbers have remained relatively stable over the last five to seven years despite the expanding use of smartphones, said Justin Patchin, a co-director of the center, who began studying the intersection of teens and technology in 2002.

“Youth are going to use whatever tools are available to them to communicate. Some of that is positive; some of that is negative,” he said. “If smartphones went away today, would some cyberbullying go away? Maybe. But so, too, would all the positive benefits associated with connectivity.”

That said, Patchin said he’s noticed more misbehavior on social media, especially new apps created overseas that are anonymous and lack mechanisms, such as options to block and report users, to protect against bullying.

For Anthony Orsini, principal of the Benjamin Franklin Middle School in Ridgewood, even the age restrictions and protections available on Facebook, Instagram and other social media sites are not enough. All students have to do is make up a false birthday to evade the sites’ minimum user age of 13, he said.

Orsini made national headlines in 2010 with a call for parents to ban their children from all social media.

“There is absolutely, positively no reason for any middle school student to be a part of a social networking site!” he wrote in an email. “They are simply not psychologically ready for the damage that one mean person online can cause, and I don’t want any of our students to go through the unnecessary pain that too many of them have already experienced.”

Seven years later, Orsini said his opinion hasn't changed, though the way students treat each other online appears to have improved.

He credits much of that to educational programs by the school, greater diligence by parents, who keep better tabs on their children's social media activities, and the 2011 enactment of the state's Harassment, Intimidation and Bullying law, known as HIB, which is considered one of the strongest in the country.

Orsini said the power of the law allows the school to conduct investigations and discipline students for incidents that occur both inside and outside school.

"Kids are very aware of that," he said. "They think twice before posting because of the consequences."

Still, Orsini fears that those consequences, which can lead to permanent stains on a student's record, are keeping some students from coming forward except in the most egregious circumstances.

He's also worried that with every year, students are gaining access to smartphones at younger ages. Middle school used to be the norm for a child's first cellphone, he said, but now it can be as early as third grade.

Straub, the Leonia social media and cyberbullying educator, said there is constant peer pressure among parents to give their children cellphones at a young age.

She hesitated when Gracie asked for an iPhone at 9 years old but ultimately decided Gracie was mature enough to handle it – with her help.

Straub has constant conversations with Gracie about appropriate online behavior, vets her social media followers and, with her knowledge, monitors Gracie's calls, text messages and Internet activity through an app called TeenSafe.

"It's a fine line we're trying to balance," Straub said. "I'm trying to give her that sense of freedom and still protect her."

She anticipates that task to be more difficult with her daughter Cassidy. The 8-year-old hasn't begged for a smartphone yet, but when she does, she'll be much savvier with it than her sister, Straub said.

"She's going to be exploding into it faster. Gracie eased into it. There was no Snapchat when she got her phone. Cassidy already knows about it," Straub said. "I'm really going to

have to watch her.”

Email: shkolkova@northjersey.com