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Family Life in the Digital Age

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“Thank goodness for texting,” Claire says of life with two teenage daughters, one who lives two time zones away in college. The older one is so busy that there’s little time for phone calls and, of course, there is no opportunity for casual visits over meals. They text throughout the day. As for the younger one, her mother says, “It’s the only way she communicates, so I’m just grateful we have that!”

Jake is fifteen, a first-year tenth grader at boarding school. His mother says that she and Jake’s father try to keep their texts and calls to specific times of the day because they have learned that all-day texting interfered with and pressured Jake during his day.

Margaux is eight years old; her parents are divorced, and texting makes it possible for them to stay in touch about pick-up times, schedule changes, traffic delays, and the million things that can fall between the cracks or trip up even the most conscientious kids and parents in an ordinary day.

The great thing about texting with our kids is that it makes our packed multitasking lives so much easier and, in many ways, so much fun for our families. Video chats and social media bridge distance and often generation gaps with creative opportunities for sharing our lives. The days of parents as helpless dinosaurs in a new digital age are past. Many parents are as active texting or online as kids are. It has become the family norm.

Connectivity is Not Closeness

We have also learned an important lesson: Connectivity alone doesn’t amount to closeness. This can be a jolting discovery. Our habit of tech talk is crowding out the face time—unmediated

presence with one another—in real life that is so vital to children’s healthy development and the quality of relationship we all want.

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In my practice, I encounter barely verbal young children who draw pictures of themselves isolated in family settings in which everyone except the family dog is preoccupied on a screen or cell phone. At the park or on walks, parents and nannies preoccupied with text-

ing send a child a message, too: Everyone and everything elsewhere is more interesting or important than you. Whether that’s true or not doesn’t matter. It’s what the child experiences.

One concerned research-oriented pediatrician at Boston Medical Center and some colleagues did an informal study in which they closely observed 55 parents and caregivers eating with one or more children in fast food restaurants. Forty of the 55 adults used a mobile device during the meal and were more absorbed in the device than in the children in their care. And the kids? Those whose parents were preoccupied that way acted out far more to get their attention.

When we get swallowed up in our screens our kids take the emotional hit and more. They lose the face-to-face time they need to learn: about language, how to have a conversation, how to read other people’s facial expressions and emotional cues, and about their own emotional self-regulation.

With each new device or app, life in the digital age is full of exciting choices and new opportunities. What we sometimes forget, though, is that the most important choice we really make about technology is how we use it. Tech can support close, healthy relationships, but it can’t substitute for them.

Research and everyday life tell us that children need direct

human experience—the “human moment,” as author Ned Hallowell has called it—to develop the social, emotional and cognitive connections that, in the most essential ways, will define their lives and future success. We all know how a quick message can be a perfect heads-up to plan a call time, and how endearing it can be as a postscript after a call or visit. It’s lighthearted fun to text or share via Instagrams, and those mini-moments can make us feel close and connected. Instagrams can be instant joy. But as tech becomes ubiquitous, the trick is to also cultivate closeness among family members by grounding ourselves in the human moment. We can use technology as an ally to build strong connections, emotional intimacy, and thriving relationships.

Interaction vs. Transaction

The convenience of texting with our kids has a way of reducing our interactions to transactions, or informational downloads: *Who? What? Where? When?* Sometimes that’s all anyone needs. It’s quick, easy and efficient, and we get a quick, easy, efficient text back. Done. Not only do we feel the satisfaction of quickly accomplishing something, but it also feels good neurologically, because we get a dopamine hit to the part of our brain that loves to check off a to-do on the never-ending list. Texting is a great option.

However, compare that to calling your child: “Hi, Honey—just calling to check on pick-up time today. How are you doing?” You may need to ask a few different ways to get past the monosyllabic “okay” or “fine.” But more than likely you get an answer. In that answer you hear your child’s emotional tone of voice. You might hear about a disappointing grade, a cause for celebration, a broken heart, or a new idea about what to do with the summer. You have a communication, and you can hear her emotional weather report. It’s a mini-moment of connection in which we truly hear one another and detect feelings. At the very least, even in a voice mail, your child hears your voice, calm and caring, with

a question that goes beyond efficiency to her well-being. That interaction might take three minutes instead of three seconds, but there is a world of difference between the two options.

Every time we text or call we are making a choice. It’s not that tech or talking is all good or all bad, but in that choice we shift

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how we actually think about connecting, and how we think about one another. When we text, we miss out on the feelings attached to the words that strengthen our understanding and connection and build our relationship. We guess, imagine or assume the feelings and

tone. If we guess wrong, we create drama and misunderstanding. Think about how often you and your child speak and you’re able to listen for your child’s tone of voice and the tenor of her day. If transaction is replacing interaction, we need to shift the balance.

Turn Down the Emotional Heat

The parenting truism “pick your battles” now requires that you pick the medium, too, and getting into text wars with your child never ends well—even if you win. Since conflict is part of life, how can we turn texting from a messenger for conflict to an avenue for conflict resolution?

A main reason kids prefer to text is that they can put their thoughts and feelings in writing at their own time and pace, without feeling scared of, or overwhelmed by, your response in the moment. When used this way, texting is a one-sided conversation starter. Some teens tell me they are more comfortable telling their parents unwelcome news, asking for a favor, or arguing through texting, which is not all bad. In some ways it’s a new iteration of writing a thoughtful letter when you want someone to just hear

your side of something. But the difference between writing a letter by snail mail and texting is that when we're mad or upset, we can get caught up in the neurological stimulant of texting's speed, which can escalate the intensity of angry and upset feelings—what teens call a “text war.”

Connie's daughter Maya, a high school junior, routinely used texting to deliver bad news to or argue with her mother. The volley might begin with a snarky comment from Maya about a teacher or a friend and quickly segue into ten reasons why this person was impossible to deal with and why Maya was right and the teacher or friend was wrong. Connie would wait, and eventually the news would surface: Maya had gotten a bad grade, or was on the outs with her friend, or was caught up in some social drama that was going from bad to worse. Or Maya might text that she was going to a friend's house after school even though mother and daughter had agreed that morning that she would come home from school and turn to some onerous schoolwork that needed to be done.

Connie might text, “What about your homework? Plan was for you to come home.” Then Maya would either fall silent, which was aggravating for her mom, or she would launch into attack mode with angry, defensive responses. Whenever this happened, Connie felt frustrated, manipulated and ineffectual. She could see the pattern once the conversation turned heated or edgy, but until it did, she thought Maya just needed to vent her frustrations with the day. It felt like the right thing to be there for her daughter. And it was, up to a point. It was her own escalating tension and the rising emotional intensity between them that was the cue she needed to heed. Once she learned to listen for it—not only in Maya but also in herself—Connie was able to tell when to call a timeout on the texting and shift to making a call.

Emotional intensity in texts, email or any online chat is a clear signal. It means it's time to push the pause button and have

your last message be, “Let's pick this up on the phone. What's a good time?” Or, “Too important (or “too complicated”) to do this way—let's talk when you get home.” We're all guilty of using tech to avoid each other sometimes.

Parents tell me they will text a message—“Sorry, no sleepover”—to avoid their child's angry meltdown. Instead, we need to show them we're not afraid to say what needs to be said and deal with any frustration, disappointment and anger in an appropriate way. Setting limits and explaining why, working through anger and conflict, and explaining your reasoning, is a hard part of parenting. When managed well, however, this is an essential way we connect to our children and foster their development. Social and emotional intelligence—the ability to self-manage, to communicate, and to avoid the easy way out—is so important.

Relational Fatigue

One important lesson kids learn in school is to get by without us for periods of time. It only works if we resist the temptation to

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“pop our heads in the door” throughout the day with texts or online chat. Parents should text their kids as little as possible during the day. In my focus groups with kids about challenging school days, they say that it's parents who text who add to the sense of distraction

that, in itself, is stressful. When I work with faculty on issues surrounding tech integration, parents who text throughout the day is a common theme. Texts disrupt your child's ability to be fully present at school, focused on the teacher.

Children of all ages are easily annoyed and distracted when there are texts from their parents with questions or information

that could really wait until later. There are some kinds of information they really don't want to hear in a text.

There's the big stuff: A tenth-grade girl was surreptitiously checking her phone at the beginning of biology class to see if her best friend, who earlier had been upset, was okay. Instead she discovered a text from her mother that her beloved grandfather had had a heart attack and died. In the moment she stared riveted on the text her teacher reprimanded her for being on her phone—against the rules for class time. Infraction aside, ultimately this sad private moment became an upsetting public one instead. That's not the kind of thing to send a child in a text. A message with emotional content is best delivered face-to-face, or at least voice-to-voice. We need to be mindful about the message and the medium we use as messenger.

Then there's the small stuff. As nice as it is to be able to share the day via texts, the constant connection increases kids' dependency on us—and on texting. Over time, we want our children to feel confident and to increase their personal sense of autonomy. When they start their day with questions about which shoes to wear, or which dress, then continue with endless texted questions, we decrease our child's ability to handle situations without us or to think on their own. We need to allow children to do the necessary work of thinking on their own or making the transition to asking friends and others for advice and deepening those connections. Also, a seemingly supportive or innocuous "What did you get on your math final?" can read as additional parental pressure that adds to stress and grade anxiety.

For parents of students about to leave home to go to boarding school or college, texting can be a wonderful way of staying connected, or it can be an extremely long tether. I have worked with high school and college kids who were destined to have a hard time making the transition to a more independent life as adolescents or young adults on their own. Yet this is a necessary evolution, one

that we want to encourage. We want to help our children to be more self-reliant and independent, to think for themselves, and to find wise friends and other adults to learn from.

It is not uncommon to hear stories about college freshmen who text their parents all day and into the night. I recently sat next to a dad on a plane who told me that his daughter, a not-so-happy freshman, was texting him and his wife twenty-plus times a day, sometimes about tiny details of everyday life. He and his wife were struggling to wean her of what had become a troubling new pattern of texting ("Should I go out again tonight?" "Which elective looks best to you?"). These are all questions that should now be directed to college peers.

Some parents have told me that they text their children during the school day or play online games with them to keep them company or encourage them. Perhaps their child struggles socially or complains of being lonely at school. But good intentions backfire when a parent's presence is so easily maintained that there is little need to develop new social skills, social confidence and new friends.

Transitions are Sacrosanct: Be Here Now

For parents of younger children in elementary or middle school who drive, walk or carpool to school, it's important that the transition to and from school be technology free. There are several reasons.

The transition from home to school is an important little journey neurologically in a young student's day. Psychologically, kids are dealing with the challenge at hand, to move from home to being present at school. For many children, this can be a time of anticipatory anxiety, on a low key or a high key:

Will my teacher be sick again today? I really didn't like that substitute.

Have I studied enough for my French midterm?

*Will I be quarterback at recess?
Did everybody see that embarrassing photo of me on Instagram before I got it taken down?*

Children need the transition opportunity to play through different mental scenarios and prepare to deal with whatever challenges their day holds for them. In cars and carpools, when kids are just looking out the window, that's what they're doing. Psychologically and neurologically, it's preparation for the school day. You, and they, have to remain free of technological distraction so that they can get that time and, if they want it, an opportunity to talk with you about what's on their mind.

Using technology as a preferred default mode of distraction can be a coping mechanism. But the problem is that it's a psychological distraction or detour. Games such as Candy Crush and Angry Birds are stimulants. Teachers often can tell when a child has been playing games before arriving at school. They are behaviorally and interpersonally more reactive, restless and agitated. They are more likely to be socially aggressive than calm or prosocial in their responses, and have a harder time calming down and paying attention.

Kids also find it stressful when parents use travel time for their cellphone conversations. In the closed setting of a car or taxi, the phone conversations dominate the air space and the headspace. Children worry about our driving while immersed in a call, or they pick up on our tension. In those moments they feel invisible to us, not as important as whoever is on the other end of our call. That's not how we want our children to feel when we take them to school.

This may not seem to bother some children because they're so used to this new cultural norm of distracted parents and superficial

communication. We need to think hard about that. Are these the new behavioral norms we want to model for our children? Do we want them to assume that it's perfectly okay to be together with the people you love the most and ignore them while in a conversation with a person who is not physically present at the dinner table, in the car? Are we using these wonderful devices to be the best people we want to be? Are we creating the cultural norms of the family life and childhood that we want our children to learn from? Or adapt to?

Of course there are times as adults that we have to be on the phone. If a call comes in as your children get dressed, have breakfast, get ready for the day or are on the way to school, it is always good to ask yourself, "Can this wait?" Most often the answer is, "Yes, it can."

We need to make sure home and parent-child relationships continue to help us strengthen our human connection in the deep, irreplaceable ways that count the most. Family and face-to-face communication are the most valuable language and learning lab for our families. We have precious little time to be present with our children. They feel the mini-moments of disconnection and they feel it as a loss. Our undivided attention in these transition times means the world to them. Who do we put on hold? It's our choice.

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