

FASHION & STYLE

Antisocial Networking?

By HILARY STOUT APRIL 30, 2010

“HEY, you’re a dork,” said the girl to the boy with a smile. “Just wanted you to know.”

“Thanks!” said the boy.

“Just kidding,” said the girl with another smile. “You’re only slightly dorky, but other than that, you’re pretty normal — sometimes.”

They both laughed.

“See you tomorrow,” said the boy.

“O.K., see you,” said the girl.

It was a pretty typical pre-teen exchange, one familiar through the generations. Except this one had a distinctly 2010 twist. It was conducted on Facebook. The smiles were colons with brackets. The laughs were typed ha ha’s. “O.K.” was just “K” and “See you” was rendered as “c ya.”

Children used to actually talk to their friends. Those hours spent on the family princess phone or hanging out with pals in the neighborhood after school vanished long ago. But now, even chatting on cellphones or via e-mail (through which you can at least converse in paragraphs) is passé. For today’s teenagers and preteens, the give and take of friendship seems to be conducted increasingly in the abbreviated snatches of cellphone texts and instant messages, or through the very public forum

of Facebook walls and MySpace bulletins. (Andy Wilson, the 11-year-old boy involved in the banter above, has 418 Facebook friends.)

Last week, the Pew Research Center found that half of American teenagers — defined in the study as ages 12 through 17 — send 50 or more text messages a day and that one third send more than 100 a day. Two thirds of the texters surveyed by the center's Internet and American Life Project said they were more likely to use their cellphones to text friends than to call them. Fifty-four percent said they text their friends once a day, but only 33 percent said they talk to their friends face-to-face on a daily basis. The findings came just a few months after the Kaiser Family Foundation reported that Americans between the ages of 8 and 18 spend on average 7 1/2 hours a day using some sort of electronic device, from smart phones to MP3 players to computers — a number that startled many adults, even those who keep their BlackBerrys within arm's reach during most waking hours.

To date, much of the concern over all this use of technology has been focused on the implications for kids' intellectual development. Worry about the social repercussions has centered on the darker side of online interactions, like cyber-bullying or texting sexually explicit messages. But psychologists and other experts are starting to take a look at a less-sensational but potentially more profound phenomenon: whether technology may be changing the very nature of kids' friendships.

“In general, the worries over cyber-bullying and sexting have overshadowed a look into the really nuanced things about the way technology is affecting the closeness properties of friendship,” said Jeffrey G. Parker, an associate professor of psychology at the University of Alabama, who has been studying children's friendships since the 1980s. “We're only beginning to look at those subtle changes.”

The question on researchers' minds is whether all that texting, instant messaging and online social networking allows children to become more connected and supportive of their friends — or whether the quality of their interactions is being diminished without the intimacy and emotional give and take of regular, extended face-to-face time.

It is far too soon to know the answer. Writing in *The Future of Children*, a journal produced through a collaboration between the Brookings Institution and the Woodrow Wilson Center at Princeton University, Kaveri Subrahmanyam and Patricia M. Greenfield, psychologists at California State University, Los Angeles, and U.C.L.A. respectively, noted: “Initial qualitative evidence is that the ease of electronic communication may be making teens less interested in face-to-face communication with their friends. More research is needed to see how widespread this phenomenon is and what it does to the emotional quality of a relationship.”

But the question is important, people who study relationships believe, because close childhood friendships help kids build trust in people outside their families and consequently help lay the groundwork for healthy adult relationships. “These good, close relationships — we can’t allow them to wilt away. They are essential to allowing kids to develop poise and allowing kids to play with their emotions, express emotions, all the functions of support that go with adult relationships,” Professor Parker said.

“These are things that we talk about all the time,” said Lori Evans, a psychologist at the New York University Child Study Center. “We don’t yet have a huge body of research to confirm what we clinically think is going on.”

What she and many others who work with children see are exchanges that are more superficial and more public than in the past. “When we were younger we would be on the phone for hours at a time with one person,” said Ms. Evans. Today instant messages are often group chats. And, she said, “Facebook is not a conversation.”

One of the concerns is that, unlike their parents — many of whom recall having intense childhood relationships with a bosom buddy with whom they would spend all their time and tell all their secrets — today’s youths may be missing out on experiences that help them develop empathy, understand emotional nuances and read social cues like facial expressions and body language. With children’s technical obsessions starting at ever-younger ages — even kindergartners will play side by side on laptops during play dates — their brains may eventually be rewired and those skills will fade further, some researchers believe.

Gary Small, a neuroscientist and professor of psychiatry at U.C.L.A. and an author of "iBrain: Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind," believes that so-called "digital natives," a term for the generation that has grown up using computers, are already having a harder time reading social cues. "Even though young digital natives are very good with the tech skills, they are weak with the face-to-face human contact skills," he said.

Others who study friendships argue that technology is bringing children closer than ever. Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer, author of a book published last year called "Making Friends: A Guide to Understanding and Nurturing Your Child's Friendships," believes that technology allows them to be connected to their friends around the clock. "I think it's possible to say that the electronic media is helping kids to be in touch much more and for longer."

And some parents agree. Beth Cafferty, a high school Spanish teacher in Hasbrouck Heights, N.J., estimates that her 15-year-old daughter sends hundreds of texts each day. "I actually think they're closer because they're more in contact with each other — anything that comes to my mind, I'm going to text you right away," she said.

But Laura Shumaker, a mother of three sons in the Bay Area suburbs, noticed recently that her 17-year-old son, John, "was keeping up with friends so much on Facebook that he has become more withdrawn and skittish about face-to-face interactions."

Recently when he mentioned that it was a friend's birthday, she recalled, "I said 'Great, are you going to give him a call and wish him Happy Birthday?' He said, 'No, I'm going to put it on his wall' " — the bulletin board on Facebook where friends can post messages that others can see. Ms. Shumaker said she has since begun encouraging her son to get involved in more group activities after school and was pleased that he joined a singing group recently.

To some children, technology is merely a facilitator for an active social life. On a recent Friday, Hannah Kliot, a 15-year-old ninth grader in Manhattan, who had at last count 1,150 Facebook friends, sent a bunch of texts after school to make plans to

meet some friends later at a party. The next day she played in two softball games, texting between innings and games about plans to go to a concert the next weekend.

Hannah says she relies on texting to make plans and to pass along things that she thinks are funny or interesting. But she also uses it to check up on friends who may be upset about something — and in those cases she will follow up with a real conversation. “I definitely have conversations but I think the new form of actually talking to someone is video chat because you’re actually seeing them,” she said. “I’ve definitely done phone calls at one time or another but it is considered, maybe, old school.”

Hannah’s mother, Joana Vicente, who has been known to text her children from her bed after 11 p.m. telling them to get offline, is sometimes amazed by the way Hannah and her 14-year-old brother, Anton, communicate. “Sometime they’ll have five conversations going at once” through instant messaging, texts or video chats, she said. “My daughter, with the speed of lightning, just goes from one to the other. I think ‘My God, that is a conversation?’ ”

Some researchers believe that the impersonal nature of texting and online communication may make it easier for shy kids to connect with others. Robert Wilson is the father of Andy Wilson, the 11-year-old sixth grader from Atlanta who was good-naturedly teased over Facebook. (Mr. Wilson quoted from the exchange to illustrate the general “goofy” and innocuous nature of most of his son’s Facebook interactions.) Andy is very athletic and social, but his brother, Evan, who is 14, is more shy and introverted. After watching Andy connect with so many different people on Facebook, Mr. Wilson suggested that Evan sign up and give it a try. The other day he was pleased to find Evan chatting through Facebook with a girl from his former school.

“I’m thinking Facebook has for the most part been beneficial to my sons,” Mr. Wilson said. “For Evan, the No. 1 reason is it’s helping him come out of his shell and develop social skills that he wasn’t learning because he’s so shy. I couldn’t just push him out of the house and say ‘Find someone.’”

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