

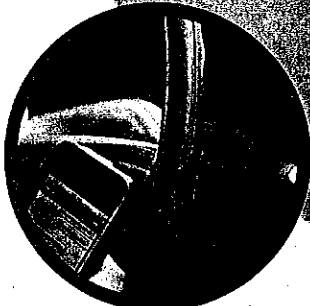
# Weaning Children Off Their Cell Phones

**D**AWN HAS A PROBLEM. More accurately, she believes her teenage daughter Angie has a problem. Angie's cell phone, you see, has become an appendage to her body. She texts all day—during class, at the dinner table, instead of doing homework and while driving her car. She'll even reach out to check for texts while she's in the shower, for crying outloud! And when she's not texting, she's talking on that same phone, checking tweets (yes, tweets) on Twitter or chatting on Facebook. The only view of the real world she sees is through her cell phone camera.

A decade ago, parents and teenagers noticed when their attention spans shortened as they started using computers, cell phones and laptops. But, for parents who wanted to keep track of their teens, cell phones provided a reassuring sense of security.

For today's teens, cell phones are just a normal way of life—like breathing or complaining. They have a hard time imagining what the pre-cell phone days were like. They like being constantly connected and will probably look at you with complete shock, dismay and incredulity if you tell them you think there's something wrong with that.

Nonetheless, researchers are realizing there are some downsides to excessive reliance on technology. Most teen cell phone users don't qualify as "addicted" when compared with substance abusers, but experts say the novelty of receiving a new message can prompt a squirt of dopamine, a chemical that pleasantly signals the brain to ask for more and more and more. That wouldn't be a problem except that constantly plugged-in

- 
- Children and adolescents ages 8–18 spend, on average, seven hours and 38 minutes per day (more than 53 hours per week) using entertainment media.
  - In the last five years, the percentage of 8 to 18-year-olds who own cell phones has increased from 39 percent to 66 percent. The percentage of those who own mp3 players has increased from 18 percent to 76 percent.
  - Young people now spend more time listening to music, playing video games or watching videos on cell phones than they do talking on them. One in three teens admits to sending more than 100 text messages per day. One Sacramento Calif., teen sent 303,398 text messages in a single month!

young people have a higher risk for depression, and some become isolated and withdrawn. Also, some compulsive cell phone users who part with their phones exhibit signs of withdrawal and anxiety, similar to addicts.

**So how can you rope in your text-happy teen's out-of-control tech habits? Good question! There may be no right answer, but here are a few suggestions:**

**End Texting While Driving.** Commit your son or daughter—right now—to never, ever, ever text while driving! Doing that may save your car, or, more importantly, your child's life. If you need a guide for how to have this conversation, you can use this form provided as part of Oprah's No Phone Zone campaign: <http://www.oprah.com/questionnaire/ipledge.html?id=4>

**Take a vacation.** Ask your kids to give their cell phones to you for the first 24 hours of your trip or (GASP!) leave them behind. You could even travel to a place that is outside of cell phone range (yes, such places do exist).

**Set bounds.** Ask your teen to agree to give up his or her phone after a certain hour each night or to take certain days of the week away from cell phones and the internet. Help him or her see sleep and homework as more important than digital socialization.

**Fill the Void.** Dance class, soccer, chess club—help your teens replace phone and internet time with face-to-face interaction.

**Positive Reinforcement.** Offer a reward to a son or daughter who minimizes cell phone usage for a certain period.

**Go Prepaid.** Save time and money by eliminating the "unlimited" aspects of your teen's cell phone experience.

**Reconsider Your Philosophy.** Is a cell phone really a necessity? Could your teen get along with just borrowing yours when necessary? If you haven't already given your teen a cell phone, could you save yourself the expense and the hassle?

One of the best suggestions comes from our own *Seven Critical Business-Building Activities: Lead by example!* Remember, when it comes to children, love is spelled T-I-M-E. So show your teens how important family relationships are to you by turning off your own phone or shutting down your computer once in a while. *M.S.*

The following experts were consulted for this article: Dr. Carlton Erickson, Director of the University of Texas Addiction Science Research and Education Center; and Dr. Paul Rosenblatt, University of Minnesota Department of Family Social Science.

