

Both my 17-year-old daughter and 13-year-old son have cell phones. I initially got the phones because I wanted to be able to keep in touch with them when they're not home and to give them a sense of security. But now their cell phone use is out of hand. Walking out the door without their cell phone in their pocket causes a complete meltdown. My daughter doesn't seem to communicate anymore. She's always texting instead of just talking. The part I can't stand is when she messes with the phone while the two of us are talking – checking messages and even responding to texts, not paying a lick of attention to what I'm saying.

My son uses his smart phone to access Instagram and Twitter. He gets updates all the time, even at night. He's obsessed with it and has gotten in trouble at school for using his cell phone during class.

Are my children addicted to their cell phones or is this just a passing fad teens go through?

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The good news is addiction to cell phones is not a recognized addiction . . . yet. The bad news is your children are probably addicted. Some typical signs of a person being addicted to something material in nature like this would be:

- Do they have feelings of withdrawal when they don't have the phone?
- Do you notice irrational reactions to being without the phone?
- Do they compulsively check the phone?
- Do they feel anxiety when they can't check the phone?
- Do they use the phone to make themselves feel good?
- Do arguments start between family members involving the use of the phone?
- Is the phone bill causing financial hardships?
- Is the use of the phone causing behavior problems?
- Does the use of the phone create problems falling asleep or being woken up with text, updates, or calls?
- Does the phone interfere with the ability to do their job - school or work?

Through history, people have prized their status symbols. In the United States, teens used to show off their car, but times have changed. Cell phones are the new status symbol. This addictive status symbol is weakening personal relationships.

Even if your child is not addicted to electronic devices, family rules need to be put in place. These rules have two goals: to improve personal relationships and to teach when electronic device use is okay and when they should be turned off.

At night, leave all cell phones in a common place. This will prevent people from staying up too late texting, talking, and browsing the web. It will also prevent the phone from

waking people in the middle of the night. This is a good habit even for adults. Unless you are on call for work, your texts and calls can wait until the morning.

When talking with people face-to-face, put your cell phone away. It's rude to be handling your phone when you are talking with someone. It screams to them, "This phone is far more important than you, what we are talking about, or our relationship." Having the phone put away during face-to-face conversations will regain people's respect and help foster quality relationships.

Set further guidelines as to when the phone can be used during the day. If the phone is interfering with someone's ability to get their job done, they have a serious problem. When the phone gives that sweet little tone that someone texted you during class, it is too tempting not to look. Even on silent mode, the phone lights up and vibrates, alerting the teen, "Someone is thinking about you." With the need to feel socially accepted and to combat the loneliness, the desire to check that text is too powerful. With the phone off during class time, the text and calls won't be heard but can still be accessed between classes, during lunch, or after school.

You also need to set aside times at home that the phone is off. There is nothing harder to enforce than an unclear expectation. Clear expectations could be: The cell phone will be turned off during dinner time, the first 15 minutes we are driving in the car together, when we go out as a family or mother-child date night.

These specific expectations will reinforce the importance of personal relationships and how they should behave when they are with people they care about such as friends, adults, and a potential girlfriend or boyfriend. Girls don't want to date a guy with sagging pants nor a guy more interested in his phone than her. At first boys may accept the girl's tendency to use her phone while on a date, chalking it up to social norm but will quickly tire of it and find a more realistic reason to break up.

Love can't be built on 180 characters at a time through text messaging. Both boys and girls need more out of a love relationship than sarcastic quips back and forth. If boundaries aren't set now by the parents, than your little ones will be establishing their potential marriage on text messages.

To begin to make strides at overcoming any addiction, it is imperative to pinpoint the underlying issues such as fear of not fitting in, loneliness, using their phone to provide comfort, a desire to be close to others, or a sense of importance (popularity, social status). Once the reason for cell phone addiction is identified, you can help your child fulfill those needs in other ways, such as getting involved in extra-curricular sports or simply going to sporting events and sitting in the student section. Not only will they be spending less time on the phone, they will increase their face-to-face peer relationships.

The activity may also help improve low self-esteem. Low self-esteem may be the reason they are addicted to the social connection the child believes the cell phone is providing.

When (not if) your child claims that they're not addicted, have them keep a log of their cell phone use. Easier than that, check out some tracking programs that will monitor cell phone use to determine how long they are on the phone and how many text messages they are sending and receiving. Even they will be surprised how much actual time is spent. Once a baseline is figured, have them try to reduce their use by an hour, then two. The child's goal should be a realistic one that they, along with your guidance, determine for themselves.

With any addiction, simply being told to stop will not get someone to curtail the behavior. Lasting change needs to come from within. My hope is that a few words written here may help motivate you and your children to make those enduring changes for their own benefit. Those changes will have a lasting impact during college classes and the ability to develop relationships with their future spouse and your grandchildren.

If you have a question about your child's attendance at school, feel that your child refuses to go to school, or have a question about your child's education, you can Email me at DrJimK@yahoo.com and your question with my answer may be published in this magazine.