

# The Digital Lives of Teens: The School is the Neighborhood

JANUARY 23, 2014



[Matt Levinson](#)

Head of School, University Prep

follow:

<http://twitter.com/MDLEV>[https://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=167192106&authType=NAME\\_SEARCH&authToke...](https://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=167192106&authType=NAME_SEARCH&authToke...)

**RELATED TAGS:** [Parent Partnership](#), [Social Media](#), [Home-to-School Connections](#), [Digital Citizenship](#), [6-8 Middle School](#), [9-12 High School](#)

 [Share](#) 132

Share     132

`



Photo credit: Thinkstock

It's hard work to parent a teen. In [a recent \*New York Magazine\* article](#), Jennifer Senior writes, "It's dicey business, being someone's prefrontal cortex by proxy. Yet modern culture tells us that that's one of the primary responsibilities of being a parent of a teen."

Of course, it's no surprise that the last thing teens want is to have a parent looking too closely into their lives. It's a constant push-pull phenomenon for parents and for teens. One minute, a teenager can descend into grumpiness, isolation and solitude, and in the same breath, that teen wants a hug, affection and a laugh.

And, when we throw social media and texting into the mix, the equation does not always balance out.

### Megaphone Madness

For the parent, it can begin to feel like taking middle school algebra all over again, with the elusive search for the meaning of X, the giant unknown variable.

In the realm of social media and texting, teens want to go wherever the adults are not. The evidence bears this out, as Facebook grapples with how to keep teens in the fold. Facebook's failed attempt to purchase Snapchat for \$3 billion fell through to much public fanfare and reflected a larger issue of the migration of teens away from adults. The kids want their own digital playground.

It's a bit like a parent playing four square or pickup basketball on a nine-foot hoop at school recess. With the parent in the mix, the game is going to change. For the parent, sure, it can feel good to dunk on a nine-foot hoop or slam the red rubber ball into one of the four square corners, but the kids are left looking at the adult as though he or she has three heads. It's not the way the game is supposed to be played at school recess. The same thinking applies to social media and teens. Parents are not meant to be part of texting, Instagram or Snapchat.

Rachel Swan, in *San Francisco Weekly's* article "[Spy Kids: We're Snooping on Students to Stop Them From Snooping on Each Other](#)," explains the digital migratory patterns of teens:

*When Facebook became the province of old people showcasing their baby pictures or preening about their lasagna, teens had already fled to [Instagram](#) and [Twitter](#). Then they bounced to a [Twitter](#) video application called [Vine](#) -- which allows users to express themselves through six-second looped videos. Then they moved to [Snapchat](#), the ephemeral photo-sending app through which users send images that are automatically erased shortly after they're opened. Then they tried a text-messaging service called [Kik](#). Some ultimately returned to Facebook, but adjusted their privacy settings.*

Swan quotes Sue Porter, Dean of Students at Marin-based Branson School: "It's as though we've put all teenagers in a room together with megaphones, and left them unsupervised. And now we have to punish them for being loud."

And this is where it gets challenging. We want supervision to happen, but we don't want the adults to take over the space.

Benign neglect is certainly an option, but as many of today's parents may recall from their own teenage years, that option can be just as risky. In the same *San Francisco Weekly* article, Albany High School Assistant Principal Susan Charlip says, "I mean, we did all those things. But nobody put it on a billboard on Route 9."

The notion that kids will be kids and that what happened in the days before social media and texting was somehow OK is dangerous and misguided thinking. The fact that the lives of teens are "public by default," a phrase coined by Microsoft researcher [danah boyd](#), is a reality that adults need to come to terms with.

## Not Alone

What would happen if parents gave kids more space and room to use social media?

This is the ultimate question facing parents right now as they try to figure out how to parent a teen, all the while wanting to be the "proxy" for their teen's prefrontal cortex. Parents are eager for a magical algorithm that will help them solve the equation of monitoring social media use and consumption among teens. It would be nice and convenient if such a thing existed.

An important thing to remember, according to British psychoanalyst Adam Phillips, as quoted in New York Magazine, is this: "The adolescent is somebody who is trying to get himself kidnapped from a cult."

The cult is social media.

For parents and for schools, the place to begin is listening and being present. Be ready to engage in the conversation when something spills out. Set limits, and create spaces to talk to each other as a community, so that parents don't feel alone in trying to figure it all out.

The concept of the neighborhood has changed. Gone are the days of being able to walk next door to ask the neighbor and to share or commiserate about raising a teen. The school has instead become the neighborhood that parents have come to rely on for guidance and support.

When a child complains to a parent, "I'm the only one at school without a phone," and that same parent is able to sit in a room with other grade-level parents and ask how many do not allow their child to have a phone, and ten other hands are raised, that parent feels relief and empowerment instead of feeling alone. The parent can then go back to the child and say, "You're not the only one. We'll let you have a phone when you need one." Of course, that timing is different for each family, based on circumstances and means. But the message is clear. The school community creates bonds for parents to feel connected, educated, up to speed, and in the know when it comes to dealing with issues around social media and texting.

The school community can be the "proxy" for the prefrontal cortex and serve as the digital neighborhood support system.