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Chapter 8

TEENS TEXTING

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter we summarize the current literature on texting use amongst adolescents. A brief overview will be presented on the prevalence of texting among teenagers, the use of texting for sexting and cyberbullying as well as the dangers of texting while driving. This chapter will serve as a brief overview of these topics in order to bring to light the emerging challenges that texting presents to the mental and physical well-being of adolescents in an effort to evoke further discussion regarding the need for increasing awareness and education to parents, educators, law makers and health care providers concerning these issues.

INTRODUCTION

Since the advent of mobile cellular phones, they have become a staple in everyday life. Although initially intended primarily for making phone calls, today cellular phones are used for a variety of additional purposes including text messaging, social networking, and the exchange of photos and videos. While phone calls still remain the primary use of the cellular phone, text messaging has become the second most common use of the cellular phone (1). According to the Cellular Telecommunications Industry Association (CTIA), in December 2009 alone, an average of 534 text messages was sent per subscriber per month. At first glance, this figure may seem large, until it is compared to the astounding average of 3,339 texts sent per month by teenagers aged 14-17 years (2). In 2010, the Nielsen Company

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calculated that female teenagers send 4,050 texts per month and male teenagers send 2,539—figures that have been steadily increasing (2). As with most advancements in technology, young people are the quickest to integrate any new innovations into their personal lives. Text messaging is no exception. It is an extremely popular form of communication that can easily be misused, especially by adolescents with under-developed decision-making capabilities. In this article we will summarize the existing data on three major areas of concern with regard to adolescent texting including: sexting, texting while driving, and cyberbullying.

SEXTING

In recent years, parents, educators, advocates, and the media have become increasingly concerned about the role of cellular phones in adolescent sexual interactions and exploration (3-5). The leading concern is regarding “sexting” a term blended from the words “sex” and “text,” that describes sending sexually explicit text messages and images. To determine how widespread this practice is, multiple national surveys have been conducted. One such study, entitled *Sex and Tech* surveyed teenagers, aged 14-19 years and young adults, age 20-26 years, about the use of cellular phones in their sex lives during the fall of 2008 (3). Thirty-nine percent of surveyed teenagers admitted to sending or posting sexually suggestive messages by text message, email, or instant message, and 28% of teenagers had received such messages (3). One in five teenagers admitted to sending or posting nude or seminude pictures or videos of themselves (3). Interestingly, 44% of teenage girls and 36% of teenage boys believed it was common and possibly even acceptable for these messages to be shared with people other than the recipients (3). Male and female teenagers reported that the main reason to send a message with such content was that it is “fun or flirtatious,” (3). With this kind of motive in mind, it is clear that this carefree generation of adolescents may not have a clear understanding of the potential consequences of sexting.

The most troublesome dilemma to this new phenomenon is that it involves including minors in sexually explicit material. Lawmakers and prosecutors have begun to approach this issue around the nation with varying degrees of severity (4). Likewise, teenagers and others are unfortunately discovering that taking images of anyone under the age of 18 years, even if it is oneself, is a state and federal offense (4). In some states, teenagers who have created and distributed such images have been charged under laws that originally were only reserved for those involved with child pornography (4). In Florida, one case labeled an 18-year-old male as a registered sexual offender for 25 years after he distributed nude images of his 16-year-old girlfriend following a quarrel between them (5). This case demonstrates the grave and lasting consequences teenagers may unknowingly face when engaging in the increasingly trendy activity of sexting.

With this rapid increase of teenage sexting, it is essential that parents, educators, even health professionals become vigilant about monitoring the activities of their adolescent children, students, and patients, respectively. Furthermore, it is important to increase awareness regarding the consequences of sexting. By targeting teenagers in multiple settings including school, the healthcare environment and the media can serve to increase awareness regarding the legal and numerous social implications for sexual messaging (6-8).

DRIVING AND TEXTING

The United States Department of Transportation divides distracted driving into three main categories: visual, manual, and cognitive, all of which many drivers do routinely while driving (9). A visual distraction results from the driver taking his eyes off the road. A manual distraction is when the driver removes his hands from the steering wheel, and a cognitive distraction is when the driver is focused on something other than driving (9). In 2009 alone, 20% of injury crashes reported at least one type of distracted driving. While every type of distraction may endanger a driver, the most concerning distracting activity cited is texting while driving due to the fact that it encompasses all three classes of distraction (9). Given the novelty of texting, there are limited statistics regarding the harmful effects of texting while driving; however, there are numerous studies examining the dangers of any cellular phone activity while driving. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), 18% of fatalities in distraction related cases were related to cellular phone use (9). The age group with the highest incidence of distractions while driving was for people under age 20, where 16% of those involved in a fatal crash reported distractions while driving (9).

Currently, twelve states have banned talking on a cellular phone while driving (9). This measure has encouraged more drivers to actively pursue hands-free alternatives. However, despite the restriction in these states, texting while driving remains a common distraction. In an effort to decrease the distraction of texting, thirty states, the District of Columbia, and Guam have enforced texting restrictions while driving (8). In these states, 12% of drivers reported texting while driving, whereas in states without restrictions, 14% of drivers reported texting while driving (10). Unsurprisingly, drivers aged 18-24 were the most likely offenders including, 45% in texting restricted states, and 48% in unrestricted states (10). This 2010 study revealed that restricting the use of text messaging while driving is unfortunately ineffective in any age group (10). In a similar study focusing on high school students, 45% of teenagers admitted to some sort of cellular phone during their most recent car ride (11). Fifteen percent admitted to only talking on a cellular phone, 15% admitted to sending or reading messages only, and another 15% admitted to talking and texting (11). Astonishingly, these teenagers also reported employing strategies to decrease associated risks while driving. Of those reporting texting and driving, 58% waited until they believed it was safe to read a text message, and 47% to reply to text messages (11).

Recently, a survey of young drivers regarding their perception of the risk of texting and driving revealed conflicting results (12). While drivers admitted that texting while driving was a much riskier behavior than only talking on a cellular phone while driving, this identified risk did not change their choice to participate in texting (12). Interestingly, when drivers perceived safer road conditions according to their own standards, then they more frequently engaged in texting (12). These results are alarming considering that it is apparent that teenagers are able to identify the risk, but are not able to modify their behavior accordingly. Atchlet et al. concluded that engaging in texting behavior decreases the perceived risk of such behavior (12).

In response to the growing concern of texting and driving, many cellular phone providers have since begun to target those most likely to engage in this risky behavior. Verizon wireless began its national "Don't text and Drive" campaign in 2009 while cellular phone giant AT&T started their "Texting & Driving... It can Wait" campaign in 2010 (5, 13). With short videos

featuring families with lost loved ones, as well as focus groups, the theme of AT&T's campaign is one that appears to resonate with adolescents: "no text is worth dying over," (13). As with sexting, publicizing the dangers of texting while driving remains an important and effective tool available to promote awareness of the consequences of texting and driving. In the future, new innovative interventions should target adolescents, the most common offenders of texting while driving, to help decrease the injuries and fatalities that are associated with such distracted driving.

BULLYING AND TEXTING

The traditional definition of bullying is "an aggressive intentional act or behavior carried out by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (14). With widespread use of technologies in daily activity as described above, it is not surprising that there are new and innovative ways to bully as well. "Cyberbullying" is a recent term used to describe a form of bullying where victims are harassed with electronic forms of contact (15). This new form of bullying became so quickly popularized amongst adolescents that many adults are still unaware of its existence. One online resource that compiles much of the cyberbullying literature into palatable information for adolescents, adults, and educators is the Cyberbullying Research Center (15). The Cyberbullying Research Center estimates that the prevalence of adolescents affected by cyberbullying may range from 10-40%. A study randomly selected 11-18 year old students in 2010 showed that about 20% of these students are victims of cyberbullying (15). An additional 10% admitted to being both a victim and an offender (15).

It is not surprising that cyberbullying results in emotional distress. Recent research shows that there is a dramatic difference regarding the impact cyberbullying may have when compared to traditional face-to-face bullying (15). According to the Cyberbullying Research Center, there are many major differences to address (15). First, victims may be harassed by an anonymous bully, and may not fully understand why they are being targeted (15). Second, with the easy dissemination of information on the Internet, a bullying incident can quickly and easily become public knowledge and a large number of people can become aware of the incident within the push of a few buttons (15). Third, cyberbullying can be easily initiated from a distance, where the bully maybe unaware of the complete effect on their victim and does not have to face the consequences of their actions (15). Additionally, victims never have respite from their cyberbully, as the Internet is available at all hours of the day, not just during school hours (15). Lastly, there are limited consequences to cyberbullying from the majority of adults, who are largely unaware of cyberbullying and how devastating it can be for adolescents (15).

The effects of cyberbullying are similar to those caused by traditional bullying including anxiety, low self esteem, and even suicidal ideation (15). While all forms of bullying result in a greater incidence of suicidal thoughts, victims of cyberbullying were almost twice as likely to have attempted suicide compared to those who had no experience with cyberbullying (15). In 2010 cyberbullying was brought to national attention when there were several teenage suicides thought to be largely influenced by electronic bullying (16-19).

In the future, schools and parents should continue to patrol cellular phone use, as well as Internet access. With schools keeping a diligent no cellular phone use on campus, and parents keeping track of their child's social media activity at home, some instances of cyberbullying may potentially be averted. Additionally, as with sexting and texting while driving, increasing awareness about cyberbullying is crucial to decreasing the incidents and far-reaching consequences of cyberbullying on adolescents.

CONCLUSION

With the exponentially increasing usage of cellular and Internet communication, new dangers that affect teenagers have arisen including sexting, texting while driving, and cyberbullying. As described above, each activity poses a specific hazard to the emotional well-being and physical safety to teenagers. Given these new challenges, it is important to increase the education and awareness about the potentially devastating consequences of sexting, texting while driving, and cyberbullying to the mainstream public, to parents, to educators, and to healthcare professionals. By these efforts, it would be possible to decrease the sexual exploitation of teenagers through sexting, the injuries and fatalities associated with texting and driving, and the anxiety, low self-esteem, and suicidal ideation, associated with cyberbullying, and improve the overall well-being of adolescents in this technologically advancing era.

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