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Text Generation Gap: U R 2 Old (JK)

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Andrew M. Daddio for The New York Times

Savannah Pence and her father, John, at home in Portland, Ore. Savannah likes to send text messages. Mr. Pence is trying to catch up with the technology.

By LAURA M. HOLSON Published: March 9, 2008

AS president of the Walt Disney Company's children's book and magazine publishing unit, Russell Hampton knows a thing or two about teenagers. Or he thought as much until he was driving his 14-year-old daughter, Katie, and two friends to a play last year in Los Angeles.

Multimedia

All Thumbs? Text messaging has become an array of colorful digital pictures, all loaded into galleries and downloaded. Of course, now that these cellphones have been identified, they may become obsolete.

All Thumbs?

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"Katie and her friends were sitting in the back seat talking to each other about some movie star; I think it was Orlando Bloom," recalled Mr. Hampton, whose company produced the "Pirates of the Caribbean" movies, in which the actor starred. "I made some comment about him, I don't remember exactly what, but I got the typical teenager guttural sigh and Katie rolled her eyes at me as if to say, 'Oh Dad, you are so out of it.'"

After that, the back-seat chattering stopped. When Mr. Hampton looked into his rearview mirror he saw his daughter sending a text message on her cellphone. "Katie, you shouldn't be texting all the time," Mr. Hampton recalled telling her. "Your friends are there. It's rude." Katie rolled her eyes again.

"But, Dad, we're texting each other," she replied with a harrumph. "I don't want you to hear what I'm saying."

Chastened, Mr. Hampton turned his attention back to the freeway. It's a common scene these days, one playing out in cars, kitchens and bedrooms across the country.

Children increasingly rely on personal technological devices like

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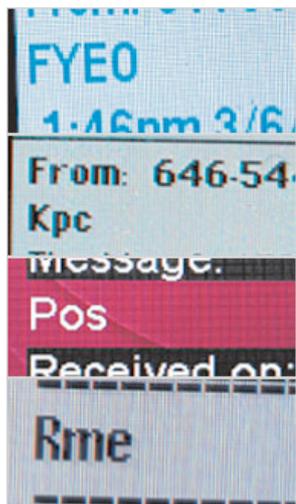
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Sylvia Kapuscinski for The New York Times
Brandon Gallick with his mother, Marie, in Raritan, N.J. She says text messaging makes it easier for them to stay in touch.



cellphones to define themselves and create social circles apart from their families, changing the way they communicate with their parents.

Innovation, of course, has always spurred broad societal changes. As telephones became ubiquitous in the last century, users — adults and teenagers alike — found a form of privacy and easy communication unknown to Alexander Graham Bell or his daughters.

The automobile ultimately shuttled in an era when teenagers could go on dates far from watchful chaperones. And the computer, along with the Internet, has given even very young children virtual lives distinctly separate from those of their parents and siblings.

Business analysts and other researchers expect the popularity of the cellphone — along with the mobility and intimacy it affords — to further exploit and accelerate these trends. By 2010, 81 percent of Americans ages 5 to 24 will own a cellphone, up from 53 percent in 2005, according to IDC, a research company in Framingham, Mass., that tracks technology and consumer research.

Social psychologists like Sherry Turkle, a professor at the [Massachusetts Institute of Technology](#) who has studied the social impact of mobile communications, say these trends are likely to continue as cellphones morph into mini hand-held computers,

social networking devices and pint-size movie screens.

“For kids it has become an identity-shaping and psyche-changing object,” Ms. Turkle said. “No one creates a new technology really understanding how it will be used or how it can change a society.”

Marketers and cellphone makers are only too happy to fill the newest generation gap. Last fall, Firefly Mobile introduced the glowPhone for the preschool set; it has a small keypad with two speed-dial buttons depicting an image of a mother and a father. [AT&T](#) promotes its wireless service with television commercials poking fun at a mom who doesn't understand her daughter's cellphone vernacular. Indeed, IDC says revenue from services and products sold to young consumers or their parents is expected to grow to \$29 billion in 2010, up from \$21 billion in 2005.

So far, parents' ability to reach their children whenever they want affords families more pluses than minuses. Mr. Hampton, who is divorced, says it is easy to reach Katie even though they live in different time zones. And college students who are pressed for time, like Ben Blanton, a freshman who plays baseball at [Vanderbilt University](#) in Nashville, can text their parents when it suits them, asking them to run errands or just saying hello.

“Texting is in between calling and sending and e-mail,” he explained while taking a break from study hall. Now he won't even consider writing a letter to his mother, Jan. “It's too time consuming,” he said. “You have to go to the post office. Instead, I can sit and watch television and send a text, which is the same thing.”

But as with any cultural shift involving parents and children — the birth of rock 'n' roll or the sexual revolution of the 1960s, for example — various gulfs emerge. Baby boomers who warned decades ago that their out-of-touch parents couldn't be trusted now sometimes find themselves raising children who — thanks to the Internet and the cellphone — consider Mom and Dad to be clueless, too.

Cellphones, instant messaging, e-mail and the like have encouraged younger users to create their own inventive, quirky and very private written language. That has given them the opportunity to essentially hide in plain sight. They are more connected than ever, but also far more independent.

In some cases, they may even become more alienated from those closest to them, said Anita Gurian, a clinical psychologist and executive editor of [AboutOurKids.org](#), a Web site of the Child Study Center at [New York University](#).

“Cellphones demand parental involvement of a different kind,” she said. “Kids can do a lot of things in front of their parents without them knowing.”

TO be sure, parents have always been concerned about their children's well-being, independence and comportment — and the rise of the cellphone offers just the latest twist in that dynamic. However it all unfolds, it has helped prompt communications companies to educate parents about how better to be in touch with their children.

In a survey released 18 months ago, AT&T found that among 1,175 parents the company interviewed, nearly half learned how to text-message from their children. More than 60 percent of parents agreed

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that it helped them communicate, but that sometimes children didn't want to hear their voice at all. When asked if their children wanted a call or a text message requesting that they be home by curfew, for instance, 58 percent of parents said their children preferred a text.

"Just because you can reach them doesn't mean they have to answer," said Amanda Lenhart, a senior research specialist at the Pew Internet & American Life Project, which is studying the impact of technology on adolescents. "Cellphones give teens more of a private life. Their parents aren't privy to all of their conversations."

Text messaging, in particular, has perhaps become this generation's version of pig Latin. For dumbfounded parents, AT&T now offers a tutorial that decodes acronyms meant to keep parents at bay. "Teens may use text language to keep parents in the dark about their conversations by making their comments indecipherable," the tutorial states. Some acronyms meant to alert children to prying eyes are POS ("parent over shoulder"), PRW ("parents are watching") and KPC ("keeping parents clueless").

SAVANNAH PENCE, 15, says she wants to be in touch with her parents — but also wants to keep them at arm's length. She says her father, John, made sure that she and her 19-year-old brother, Alex, waited until high school before they got cellphones, unlike friends who had them by fifth grade. And while Savannah described her relationship with her parents as close, she still prefers her space.

"I don't text that much in front of my parents because they read them," she said. And when her parents ask who is on the phone? "I just say, 'People.' They don't ask anymore."

At first, John Pence, who owns a restaurant in Portland, Ore., was unsure about how to relate to his daughter. "I didn't know how to communicate with her," Mr. Pence said. "I had to learn." So he took a crash course in text messaging — from Savannah. But so far he knows how to quickly type only a few words or phrases: Where are you? Why haven't you called me? When are you coming home?

When his daughter asks a question, he typically has one response. " 'OK' is the answer to everything," he said. "And I haven't used a question mark yet." He said he had to learn how to text because his daughter did not return his calls. "I don't leave a message," he said, "because she knows it's me."

Savannah said she sends a text message to her father at least two or three times a day. "I can't ask him questions because he is too slow," she said. "He uses simple words." On the other hand, her mother, Caprial, is more proficient at texting and will ask how her day was at school or how her friends are doing. (Her mom owed her more facile texting skills to being an agile typist with small hands.)

Early on, Savannah's parents agreed that they had to set rules. First, they banned cellphone use at the dinner table and, later, when the family watched television together, because Mr. Pence worried about the distraction. "They become unaware of your presence," he said.

Mr. Pence is well aware of how destabilizing cellphones, iPods and hand-held video game players can be to family relations. "I see kids text under the table at the restaurant," he said. "They don't teach them etiquette anymore." Some children, he said, watch videos in restaurants.

"They don't know that's the time to carry on a conversation," he said. "I would like to walk up to some tables and say, 'Kids, put your iPods and your cellphones away and talk to your parents.'"

But even he has found that enforcing rules is harder than might be expected. He now permits Savannah to send text messages while watching TV, after he noticed her using a blanket over her lap to hide that she was sending messages to friends. "I could have them in the same room texting, or I wouldn't let them text and they would leave," said Mr. Pence of his children. "They are good kids, but you want to know what they are up to."

Other families face similar challenges.

In 1999, Marie Gallick got a family plan for her and her three children and found that each of them had a different approach to cellphone use. One of Ms. Gallick's sons likes to talk, she said, while her other son, Brandon, who lives near her home in Raritan, N.J., preferred to text. How much they communicated with her, she said, depended on their mood. And she found she had to be careful about what she said and how.

"There is emotion behind it," she said. Once, one of her sons didn't answer his cellphone when she called, so she sent him a text saying, "NICE OF YOU TO TURN ON YOUR PHONE."

"They thought I was mad," she said. Ms. Gallick did not understand that using capital letters was the same as yelling. (She said she had the same problem when she began using e-mail, which, perhaps, makes her problem as much about adapting to digital shifts as it is about communicating with children.)

Brenda Ng, vice president for consumer insights at T-Mobile, the cellular provider, said her company's studies show that while cellphone use can cause division, it, too, is "the glue" that cements

relationships. “It may seem mundane, but they keep people together,” Ms. Ng said.

Consider this: Brandon Gallick, who is 23, recalled a night last year when he was driving home on a country road near Hillsborough, N.J., and a large donkey ran in front of his car. He couldn’t wait to get home to call his mother. “I had to text my mom right away,” he said, noting he sent text messages to friends, too. “I wanted to tell her about it because it was so funny. We don’t see many donkeys in New Jersey.”

Ms. Gallick appreciated the message. “I like it when he does that,” she said. “It makes me feel special.” But again, the unintended consequence was more miscommunication for her.

“It took five texts before I thought he really meant it,” she said. “What I find is that you have to text each other more to understand each other than if you just picked up the phone. You are constantly asking, ‘What did you mean?’ It is a form of alienation but at the same time it is keeping us in contact.”

In fact, texting appears to be easier than talking for some cellphone users, providing yet another distraction for them inside their cars. Mr. Blanton at Vanderbilt, like many of his peers, texts his mother and friends even when both of his hands should be on the steering wheel.

“I can text without looking at the phone,” he said. “It’s definitely not safe. Sometimes I’ll look up and I don’t remember where I’ve been driving.”

MS. TURKLE, the M.I.T. professor, says cellphones offer another way for the [Facebook](#) generation to share every life experience the second it unfolds.

“There is a slippage from ‘I have a feeling I want to make a call’ to ‘I need to make a call,’ ” she said. “You don’t get to have a feeling before sharing that feeling anymore.”

Ms. Turkle recalled a vacation with her daughter in Paris, where she hoped to immerse her in the local culture and cuisine. “Part of the idea of Paris is being in Paris,” Ms. Turkle said. But during an afternoon stroll, her daughter received several calls and text messages on her cellphone from friends back in Boston. Her daughter, she said, felt compelled to return every one.

When Ms. Turkle asked why she didn’t turn off her cellphone and enjoy the city, she said her daughter replied, “I feel more comfortable talking with my friends.” But her daughter’s friends didn’t even really want to talk. “They just want to know where you are,” Ms. Turkle said. “It’s a new sensibility.”

It is a new sensibility on many fronts. Jan Blanton said her relationship with her son, Ben, is closer because cellphones make reaching out so simple. And that has caused her to reflect on her relationship with her own parents.

In the early 1980s, when she left home to attend college, Ms. Blanton said, her relationship with her parents was frayed. “We didn’t have open communication,” she said. “I wasn’t close to them. Maybe once a week I’d call. My parents were happy when we were out of the house.”

Ms. Blanton wonders if things might have been different if they had text messaging back then. Her son now sends frequent text messages to his grandfather, discussing baseball and fishing. “I can write better than I talk,” said Ms. Blanton, whose relationship with her parents is now close. “I think we would have had a better experience.”

It is likely that in just a few years, younger members of the digerati will consider cellphones like those the Blantons are using to be relics. While many consumers have become fashion-conscious about the latest in technological devices, analysts say that young children and teenagers are particularly so and more likely than their parents to continually gravitate to something new.

Mr. Hampton said his daughter Katie recently asked for a BlackBerry so she could better send e-mail to her friends and have unfettered access to the Internet.

“I said no,” he recalled. “It’s not necessary.”

But then again, Mr. Hampton said, he may change his mind. “No one is teaching kids how to use these things,” he said. “But in fairness, adults don’t know how to use them, either.”

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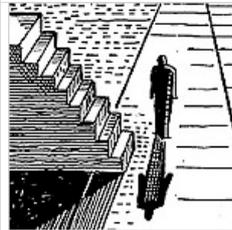
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