

## Disappearing Social Skills in the Techno Savvy World

Children growing up in this fast paced technology based world are communicating much more, with many more people, than kids their age from 40 years ago, yet they are losing many critical social skills. How is this possible? Children learn social skills in three ways: they observe social interactions, they learn from adults what is right or wrong, and they practice interacting with their social environment (Osit 103). Technology has reduced human contact so that children aren't learning the proper social skills to help them succeed in their adult life. Through human contact, children learn the art of covert messages in their speech and actions. Reduced human contact, leading to weakened social skills, can bring children to be socially awkward which in turn makes them shrink away from social situations.

Children glean many social interacting skills from observing their social environment. They watch the children in their school, their teachers in the classroom, and their siblings and parents at home and can pick up on how nonverbal cues and body language shape a conversation. According to a new study from the Kaiser Family Foundation, children and adolescents ages 8 to 18 spend more than seven and a half hours a day on computers and phones, compared with less than six and a half hours five years ago (Lewin, "If Your Kids Are Awake"). With the phones and computers being a huge means of conversing with others, face to face communication has slowly become an inconvenience. With the loss of face to face communication, has come a loss of social skills. Children do not understand how to use their tone of voice or their body movements to bring about their wanted response. Children resort to yelling or having tantrums, which gets them nowhere. Children need to understand how tones of voice and body language can change a message, for without this understanding, even texting a friend can become difficult. If a child sends a message to a friend reading "It was so much fun,"

and in their head they are saying it in a sarcastic tone, but their friend reads it in a happy tone, the entire meaning of the text changes. This can get children into trouble or into very awkward situations with friends and family. By having a child observe different social exchanges, a parent can stop harmful behavior from affecting their child.

Adults have a huge impact on a child's social skills' development, through explaining when a behavior is improper or when praising a good action. With the technology today, children can communicate without their parents seeing, so the parents cannot fix a bad behavior. Children can text and email inappropriately without parental supervision, landing them in trouble. With the addition of social networking sites, children communicate with hundreds of people without knowing to whom they are speaking. Being naïve, many children post their personal information on these sites, not understanding that someone can prey on them, whether online or in person (Osit 193). With the development of new technology each day, adults have to understand that children may be acting inappropriately through these machines and are doing so since they have no adult supervision to tell them otherwise.

A study done by Eryn Grant, a PhD student in Queensland University of Technology's School of Humanities, brought results that showed how social interactions are enhanced rather than diminished by online interfaces ("Second Life"). She claims that "if you can't communicate with someone in real life, you won't be able to do it online" ("Second Life"). I think that although some people are able to communicate well over the internet, a lot of people are not. Some people, because they are sitting in front of a computer screen, are able to communicate properly since they can evaluate what they are going to say and type it on a screen. They don't have the pressure of someone watching them as they are thinking. This doesn't help them when they are facing a person, having a conversation. Other people are unable to communicate

properly over a computer and are unknowingly saying inappropriate things. They believe that they are communicating effectively and appropriately but they are not. This is where online social sites can be detrimental to a child's social skills.

In addition to learning valuable social skills from their parents, children also learn many social skills from practicing with their social environment. When children are among their peers, they can act comfortably and let loose a little bit. Here, they interact with their friends and if a certain action brings about a negative response, they realize that it is the wrong way to act. However, with children texting their friends instead of talking to them face to face, they have no idea if what they are saying is appropriate or not, and they have no way of correcting it. Face to face communication is a must for children, for without it, they can be slowly digging a hole that is hard to get out of.

Dr. Michael Osit, in his book *Generation Text*, gives an example of how a teenager would rather call or text his friend across the lunchroom, than walk over there, since “when he approaches the friend... he must establish eye contact, read nonverbal cues in the conversation, and react to body language” (2). This teenager understands that he will have to use social skills when he faces his friend. If he just calls or texts his friends, he will avert having to figure out what the underlying message in his friends body language is, and he just has to interpret the words themselves. Several students at Bethesda-Chevy Chase High admitted that they use texting to avoid confrontations (Ludden, “Teen Texting Soars”). Children and teenagers are using technology to escape confrontations. The only way to get better at meeting people is by practicing and confronting people in real life situations. The more a person averts socially interacting, the more afraid they are to speak to someone directly. It is a downward spiral effect. Technology is not helping; it is just letting children hide behind it.

Avoiding confrontations can have a negative effect on children as they reach adulthood. Nini Halkett, a teacher in the Los Angeles Harvard-Westlake High School, has found that as her students become more and more immersed in their texting, they also become increasingly shy and awkward in person (Ludden, "Teen Texting Soars"). "And that worries me," she says, "in terms of their ability- particularly once they get out in the workplace- to interact with people" (Ludden, "Teen Texting Soars"). In a workplace, a person has to know how to interact and work with their co-workers, and effectively give over information to their employer or boss. Social skills are needed throughout life. Not developing social skills as a child can lead to withdrawal and awkwardness in adulthood.

Social skills are crucial tools to functioning in the social world. With the increase of technology, human contact has become a trivial thing to the children of this generation. Children are no longer learning their social skills from observing social interactions, learning from the adults the rights and wrongs, and practicing interacting with their social environment. They have become shyer and more awkward in social situations. Therefore, it is imperative for children to cut back on technological communication and improve their social skills now, while they are still young and impressionable.

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