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## **Hey! The Social Lives of Teenagers, and the Rise of Social Skills Groups**

By Janie Feldman, PsyD

Teenagers today are growing up in a totally electronic world. The young people growing up right now communicate primarily via the Internet or cell phones; they have no experience calling and getting busy signals, answering the house phone for someone else, or having to actually speak with others to make social plans. We all remember the days when we waited for the house phone to ring (sometimes in vain), or waiting for someone to get off the phone when we needed to make a call, or when we hand wrote notes and letters (gasp!). That was when doing research for a school paper meant actually visiting the library, and going through those tedious alphabetical cards to find where in the building to go to find the data, whereas today's teens know precisely how to navigate the Internet to yield the data they seek. It's all so simple now. We have smart phones and Internet access; we get answers faster than the time it took to drive to the library.

According to research conducted by the Pew Research Center, 92% of teens ages 13 to 17 report going online every day, and over 55% go online several times a day. Just 12% report going online only once per day. Wonder how many teens report "almost constantly" going online? That would be 24%. While online, 71% of these teens visit Facebook, the most frequently used social media platform. Around half use Instagram and almost as many visit Snapchat. That's a lot of online socializing. All together 88% of teens have or have access to cell phones or smart phones, and 90% of those teenagers exchange texts. In fact, the average teen sends or receives 30 text messages a day. There are noteworthy gender differences in social media use. Girls tend to use visually-oriented social media platforms such as Instagram and Snapchat, while boys tend to engage each other in online video games. Even if young people are together sharing a car ride, meal, or just hanging out, today's teens will focus their primary attention on their devices, and engage significantly less in direct, face-to-face communication. And, this is precisely the reason why today's teen's lack social skills.

Before we proceed, let's examine what is normal behavior for teenagers. Think this is funny? Okay, let's skip the idea of anything actually being normal for this frequently tumultuous and often awkward phase of development, and move toward understanding what is common, or typical behavior, for teenagers. Commonly held beliefs maintain that teenagers have raging hormones that drive their erratic, wildly emotional behavior. Recent cognitive science has

revealed, however, that the prefrontal cortex of the brain of adolescents is the last part of the brain to fully develop. This part of the brain is responsible for such important tasks as making plans and controlling impulses. Advanced MRIs called PET scans show that the prefrontal cortex typically does not complete development until the late twenties, for most of us. So, it is not raging hormones that accounts for teenagers' erratic behavior. It is their underdeveloped brain. Daniel Siegel, author of *Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain*, considers adolescence a period of important benefits and challenges. Adolescence is a time of novelty seeking, social engagement, increased emotional intensity and creative exploration. Indeed, there is enormous growth during adolescence: in the maturation of personality, reasoning, and socialization.

Psychologists consider adolescence to be a critical period of development. It separates childhood from adulthood, youth from maturity, and dependence from independence. The major challenge of this phase is exploring the self in order to forge one's own identity. We do this through contemplation, exploration, and experimentation. Adolescent risk-taking results in both triumphs and failures, and all outcomes have significant impact on developing minds. Despite some appearances to the contrary (such as when teens defiantly assert independence), teenagers actually require emotional connections and support from others. Children typically garner such support from parents; teenagers seek support from peers. Those adolescent connections and relationships set the foundation of adult relationships. Hence, socialization during adolescence has great impact in forming adult relationships.

It may be obvious: as we have become adults, we must have survived our teenage years. Strange how difficult it can be, then, for adults to understand teenagers, their moods, behavior, and challenges. How many among us truly understands the teenage mind? In fairness, teenagers today are growing up in an almost entirely different culture than any of ours. It's really such a different world today. There has been a significant shift toward instant gratification. So many objects we utilize on a daily basis are built to be replaced. How old is your cell phone? Your computer? Your television? Everything is disposable. Even commitments are not what they used to be. Long term employment is measured in years, not decades. Just about everything is available, almost all the time. In these times of instant gratification, we can watch programs "on demand," make innumerable inquiries online, and forge friendships around the globe via the Internet. And, just about everything that is available to adults is available to teenagers. Language and society have become more open and transparent; today's youth grow up much more quickly due in large part to their exposure at earlier ages to worldly realities of our entire culture. It also seems teenagers face fewer limits than previous generations. Our culture has a tremendous impact on our youth, perhaps more than ever, due to our increasingly open culture. Teens are growing up in the "everyone wins" generation, in which kids get trophies for showing up. There is an expectation of receiving rewards for far less effort than in the past. The generation gap between today's teens and their parents is larger than it has been in decades, and perhaps not since the 1960s has there been such profound differences in the generations.

We can speculate why, in such a time of opportunity, would any teenager have difficulty building social connections. The roots of socialization begin in early childhood, when the first social relationships begin to form. There are several factors pertaining to changes in social development worth considering: evolving neighborhoods, parental involvement, recognition of social disorders, and reliance on the cell phone. First, we must recognize that our neighborhoods have changed. Children no longer just walk outside to meet neighborhood friends to explore their neighborhoods freely. Parents now schedule playdates and activities. Few young children socialize spontaneously, which brings us to another issue: parental involvement. The level of parent involvement in young children's socialization can make a critical difference regarding with whom and how often children interact. Children whose parents actively schedule regular playdates may have a social advantage over those children who must forge friendships on their own in school. By the time children enter kindergarten, quite a few children have secured best friends and have established friendship circles, making it far more difficult for "outsiders" to make friends with any of the "insiders." This puts some children at a disadvantage, particularly those children who are shy, quiet, or slightly awkward. So, having parents actively promote socializing at a young age gives those children a social advantage.

Second, our society has become increasingly aware of even subtle differences in children and their behavior. Teachers, physicians, and parents look closely at children to recognize challenges in speech, motor coordination, reading, attention, learning, and socialization. The prominent upswing in diagnosis of Autism and the Autistic Spectrum disorders has gained a lot of media and public attention. As a society, we are much more aware of all of the challenges children face, and the difficulties in socializing result in early assessment and treatment. Children on the Autistic Spectrum typically have moderate to severe impairment of social skills, generating greater demand for social skills training for these and other children.

Third and most significantly, the rise of the use of cell phones, the Internet, and social media has been detrimental to the socialization of children and teenagers. Whereas teenagers of the past could converse either face to face or on a corded telephone, teenagers today rely heavily on a device that almost completely obliterates the need or desire for face-to-face interaction. We have all seen teenagers gathered in a circle, gazing intently on their cell phones. It is obvious that these teens focus much more on what they hold in their hands than on the faces and gestures and subtle signals of their friends' that provide invaluable nonverbal cues to the communication between them. Young people today are missing the essential social skill of learning to read nonverbal cues, especially facial expressions. Lost on their personal screens, they miss on social skill development as they miss or misread precious nonverbal cues. Teenagers who come to my office frequently report they have difficult starting conversations, entering existing conversations, speaking up for themselves, arranging plans with others, resolving interpersonal conflicts and, yes, making friends. For students entering high school without a close friend group, it is extraordinarily difficult to make new friends. Many teenagers today just don't have the social skills to make and keep new friends.

Traditional social skills groups provide training to small groups of children of similar ages and needs. Typical participants have long histories of social difficulties that often include exclusion, bullying, harassment, intimidation, or definitively awkward social behavior. Many children attending social skills groups do so because their social functioning has become their family's chief concern. In the groups, participants learn effective and appropriate modes of communication, social rules, and problem solving skills through discussions, role playing, practice, and other group-related activities. The social skills reinforced in traditional groups range from the basic skills such as maintaining eye contact to more involved people skills, such as problem solving. A lot of children and teenagers attend social skills groups because their school programs require or suggest social skills groups to enhance their educational experience. With increasing need and demand for social skills groups, more and more schools are now offering them for their students. The demand for social skills groups is similarly increasing in private practice as well.

Non-traditional social skills groups bring additional skills and insights to the group experience. Some programs, such as Michelle Garcia Winner's Social Thinking Groups, provide very practical background information that educates participants about the purpose of specific behaviors and provides the "why" of social skills. These techniques are quite effective for children on the autistic spectrum, who benefit from the comprehension gleaned from these social learning groups. Rather than simply demonstrating social skills to participants, Social Thinking group leaders help participants understand the rules and their rationale behind the desired social behavior. Another therapeutic avenue to building social skills lies in teen group therapy, a mutually supportive form of therapy where the goal is to focus on the interactions of the participants by developing participants' self esteem, insight into self and others, assertiveness, anxiety management, and more. In group therapy, the relationships and interactions of the participants receive the psychologist's attention. Many social skills will receive strengthening when the group processes relationships among group members. Group therapy is ideal for higher functioning teens who may have anxiety, low self esteem, or who feel isolated. When selecting a social skills experience for their children and teenagers, parents should consider which format would best suit their children's needs and level of functioning.

In our society where social media has become the mainstream platform for communication, today's teenagers lack the opportunity to develop important social skills. These teens already have the disadvantage of limited socialization in a parent-controlled childhood. Cell phone use has overtaken real time, in-person, face-to-face communication. Sometimes the only way young people can learn how to socialize effectively is through some form of social skills group, whether the group occurs in school or in a private setting. Group therapy and social skills groups offer young people the opportunity to build connections while building social skills, insights, coping techniques, and so much more.

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