

# Compulsive Texting Takes Toll on Teenagers

By

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Photo



Credit Jim Wilson/The New York Times

Does your teenager have a texting problem?

Teenagers use text messaging more than any other mode of communication, so it may be hard to tell. But youngsters who check their phones continually, snap if you interrupt them and are so preoccupied with texting that they skip sleep and don't get their work done may be compulsive texters, a new study says. For girls, compulsive texting is more than just a distraction – it is also associated with lower academic performance.

The study of more than 400 eighth and 11th graders found that many teenage texters had a lot in common with compulsive gamblers, including losing sleep because of texting, problems cutting back on texting and lying to cover up the amount of time they spent texting.

“Compulsivity is more than just the number of texts teens are engaging in,” said Kelly M. Lister-Landman, the paper's lead author and an assistant professor of psychology at Delaware County Community College in Media, Pa. “What is their relationship with phone use? Do they feel

anxious when it's not around them? When they sit down to eat dinner with their family, do they feel a need to check it? Do they feel compelled to look at it at all times, rather than just answering texts they get?

Over all, girls text compulsively at a far higher rate than boys do. And unlike girls, boys in the study who were compulsive texters were not at risk of doing poorly in school.

The study, [published online Oct. 5 in Psychology of Popular Media Culture](#), is not the first to find a link between excessive social media use and lower grades. A [2014 study found](#) that the more time black and Hispanic teenagers spent on Facebook, the lower their math scores were. Other studies have found that [college students who texted while doing homework had lower grades](#), and [students who texted during class took less detailed notes](#) and had poorer recall. An [experiment with college students showed that](#) students who abstained from texting during a lecture retained more information and scored higher on a quiz.

Excessive Internet use has [also been linked to sleep problems](#), because students log on late at night and because it interferes with homework, requiring them to stay up later to finish it. Studies have also linked high numbers of daily texts to sleep problems, possibly because teenagers are awakened by messages.

The new study underscores the correlation between compulsive texting and problems in school but does not explain whether texting is a direct cause of poorer school performance or whether another problem like depression or substance abuse is driving both behaviors.

“I don't think texting is causing academic problems — I think it's an attention-span issue,” said Kimberly Young, a psychologist who founded the [Center for Internet Addiction](#) and has done research on the subject but was not involved in the new study. “If you're constantly checking your phone, how are you going to study for school? I have kids who can't sit through an hourlong lecture without checking their phone.”

Texting has become the dominant mode of communication for teenagers, according to [figures published in 2012 by the Pew Internet & American Life Project](#). That report noted that three-quarters of teenagers own a mobile phone and 63 percent say they text every day, a greater percentage than those who say they talk on the phone, meet face-to-face or email every day. The median number of texts sent by teens is 60 a day, with older girls having a median of 100 text messages a day and boys a median of 50.

The new study on texting looked at several elements of school performance, not just grades, but school engagement or “bonding,” as well as students' perceptions of their own academic competence.

The authors administered a questionnaire to 211 eighth-grade students and 192 high school juniors in a semirural town in the Midwest to assess whether they were compulsive texters. The 14-item questionnaire is one Dr. Young had adapted from a pathological gambling scale to identify compulsive Internet use. The authors of the new study further modified it to identify problematic texting.

Questions included: Do you not do your chores to spend more time texting? Do you text longer than you intended? Do you snap, yell or act annoyed if someone bothers you while you are texting? Other items inquire whether teenagers are losing sleep because of texting, if they have tried but have been unable to cut down on their texting, and if they lie to cover up the amount of time spent texting.

Of the 403 students who participated in the study, 47 said they did not text every day. These “nontexters” were excluded from the analysis.

Among the remaining 356 students, girls were far more likely to be compulsive texters. About 12 percent of the girls — one in eight — were compulsive texters, while only about 3 percent of the boys had the problem. Most of the compulsive texters sent more than 100 messages a day.

Even though the girls in the study were more engaged in school and performed better in school over all, compulsive texting was associated with poor academic adjustment for the girls but not for the boys, the researchers said. When the researchers asked compulsive texters and average texters about their grades, 14 percent of girls who were compulsive texters reported that they were C students, compared with 4 percent of the average texters. Boys who texted excessively said they were B students or better.

Dr. Lister-Landman hypothesized that girls’ texts may focus more on relationships and be more emotionally laden, causing them anxiety. Studies have shown that communicating by cellphone about problems or negative feelings is more common among young women than among men.

That said, the researchers cautioned that the students’ academic performance was self-reported. And over all, they noted, the girls in the study were doing better in school than the boys, compulsive texters or not.

To reduce a student’s texting time, concerned parents may want to insist their children turn off their phones or put them away while doing homework, and create screen-free zones in the house, make dinner time phone-free and establish screen-free bedtime routines.