

Social Networking: Friend or Foe  
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I recently attended a committee meeting at one of the local school systems and one topic of discussion was the possible use of social media and networking, namely Facebook and texting as a way to communicate with parents and students. As the discussion took place the direction it took was not whether it is a positive or negative, but more about the necessity due to the overwhelming use of texting and social media in our society. It has become increasingly apparent that social networking and text messaging have become an integral part of all facets of our daily lives. Technology has left us with the opportunity to communicate with people in a much easier way. Many feel that if not embraced, they, their family or their workplace could be left behind. Six years ago the Facebook frenzy was created in a dorm room at Harvard University, and it has become a worldwide phenomenon that has woven its way into American life and changed the way we communicate. The question is how will social networking change the quality of our personal relationships? For good or bad, many now find it impossible to live without social networking. Most of my teenage clients cannot imagine life without their connection to social media. Today's society is based on technology and internet use is at an all time high. Making it necessary for one of the rules in my office to be that all communication devices, cellphones and iPods, must be off and put away before our sessions begin. Some teens have become so adept at texting that they can send a text with their cell phone in their pockets. Others report that they sleep with their phone in hand, in case someone needs them during the night. Teenagers feel they cannot last a day without Facebook, Twitter and cell phones for fear they might experience withdrawal. Consequently, that is what happened to a group of University of Maryland students who gave up online media as part of a new study. When asked how they felt during the brief disconnection, students' descriptions of frantic cravings, anxiety and jitters mirrored those typical of people going through withdrawal from drugs or alcohol.

According to *Procon.org*, a website devoted to presenting facts and studies on the impact social networking has on our society, the popularity of social networking sites has quadrupled since 2005 and some of the points made on the site are included below. Posting on Facebook, MySpace and other social networks is a favorite pastime for teens and a way for families to keep in touch. Most individuals argue that these online communities promote increased communication with friends and family and allow contact with people from around the world. The argument for social networking is based on the fact these sites provide free messaging, blogging, event invitations, and many other services to anyone with access the Internet. Social networking sites bring people with common interests together and offer exposure to new ideas from around the world. Individuals who have difficulty communicating in person might be more comfortable interacting through the Internet. Some teachers say that using these sites helps students improve their reading, writing, learn to express themselves more clearly, and meet new and different kinds of students from around the world. Many schools now use Facebook or MySpace postings to maintain contact with parents and provide important information to the public. Another advantage to using social networking is that currently deployed service members can communicate through email, IM, and video messaging.

Some of the major concerns with social networking sites are exposure of children to predators, cyber bullying, increased vulnerability to computer viruses, lowered worker productivity, and shortening of attention spans. Teens growing up with these sites may not be aware that the information they post is public and that photos and text can be retrieved even after deleted. The hours spent socializing have declined as the use of social media has increased. Those who use these sites frequently are prone to social isolation. Parents spend less time with their children and couples spend less time together even when they live in the same house. There are families that text each other from different rooms in the same house. In fact at Columbia University, there is so little interpersonal face time between students that a group of dorm advisers developed a plan to pay students to actually talk to one another. The experiment requires students to speak to numerous individuals throughout the day in order to collect passwords and win a cash prize.

Whether you are a “friend” of the social networking phenomenon or not it would seem as though this is the way of our society. Embrace it or tolerate it, as the case may be, but like many trends in our lifetime it will change or even disappear in the future.