

Innocent (or not) flirting on social media

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Teenage years bring a lot of firsts. For most, it means the first date, first kiss, first job and perhaps first time driving a car. It's the time when schoolyard crushes turn into romantic relationships and, for the teens of today, social media often plays a big role.

Flirting can happen via text, Snapchat, and other platforms. According to a [study](#) by the Pew Research Center, 63% of teens with dating experience have sent flirtatious messages to someone they like, and 14% of teens without dating experience have done so.

Often teens will say things online such as "hey you are cute" and other compliments. Teens tell me that they would not say these things face-to-face but online it is fun. Often a person can tell someone is interested just by whether they send a Snapchat or a direct text (a direct text carries more weight).

Clearly, tweens and teens might not have any interest in discussing flirting with their parents. But I believe that talking about the pressure that can come along with, or masquerade as flirting, is important. Masquerading is when a person is more interested in "hooking up" than they are getting to know someone better and moving toward a relationship. (The term "hooking up" is ambiguous, it includes anything from kissing to sex. Unfortunately, the clearer term "making out" no longer exists).

The Pew study examined the extent to which not all flirting behavior is appreciated or appropriate. Thirty-five percent of teen girls surveyed had blocked or unfriended someone who was flirting in a way that made them uncomfortable, which is double the 16% of boys who had taken that step. And 10% of teens who were in a relationship reported their partner used the internet to pressure them to engage in unwanted sexual activity.

Even though teens may be well-versed in using and communicating via text messaging and social media, they surely have things to contemplate regarding relationships—we all do.

Discussing personal issues with youth (and, yes, their social world does feel very personal to them) can be nerve-racking for parents. This [national survey](#) should give you gusto. It found that kids age 10-15 are ready to talk about tough issues before their parents are, including the issue of being pressured into sexual activity.

Putting on my "curious cap," and gripping it tightly, is my most effective way of approaching topics on relationships with my teens, which includes what is appropriate to do on social media. When I find wanting to chime in with "don't do this" and "do that", I cover my mouth with my imaginary cap because I know such phrases will shut my teens down. When I lead with my "curious cap" on, and ask them questions about what they are seeing, their opinions, etc., often my concerns get raised in a manner that helps my teens come to the conclusions I

hoped for. If in the conversation I am not getting the impression that they know the risks of things like begging for photos, sending them (which I have written about in the past) then, by all means, I tell them the risks.

I am continually reminded of this fact—when we, as parents, as teachers, as mentors wear our “curious caps” rather than our judgmental ones, teens are much more likely to come to us when issues arise. Many teens want to turn to key adults in their lives but they will not reach out if they feel the judgment and punishment will be too severe.

** By the way, I would love your input on upcoming TTTs that I am working on: Do you know of parent groups forming to help prevent excessive screen time? What examples do you know of an adult learning to handle their innate discomfort of saying “no” to children (particularly around excessive screen time)? I have many many more topics up my sleeve, and I always enjoy hearing from you about topics you want to be addressed. So please hit reply and email me.

For this TTT, talk with your kids about how they feel using texting and social media in a relationship. (As always start the conversation on a positive note)

- Do you see any fun flirting happening online?
- Understanding the meaning behind written words can be hard, do you know examples of when two people were communicating online and one person completely misread the intentions of the other person?
- Do you know people whose relationships are almost all done via social media?
- How important is messaging versus spending time together?

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