

CELL PHONES: Study of teen cellphone use reinforces impression that they're always using them

By [Donna St. George](#)
Washington Post Staff Writer

The cellphone -- that be-all of teen life -- is ever more indispensable to the youngest generation, embraced not just for calling friends and sending a barrage of text messages but also increasingly for playing games, snapping photos, sharing videos, listening to music and going online.

THIS STORY

The connection between American teen and thumb-tapping keypad is so strong that more than four of five adolescents say they have slept with their cellphone in or near their bed, according to a [report released Tuesday by the Pew Internet and American Life Project](#). Some keep it under the pillow, to awaken for late-night texts. Others use the built-in alarm to wake up. "This device has become a communication and often entertainment hub in their lives," says Pew researcher Amanda Lenhart, a coauthor of the report, which showed more than one in four teens now access the Internet by cellphone and 54 percent record video. Six in 10 play music.

As cellphones have become more sophisticated, Lenhart said, teens have been quick to latch on to the new technology. "It has become a tool to help them make sense and process and record their lives," she said.

Kyle Smith, 18, a senior at Sherwood High School in Sandy Spring who has had a phone since he was 12, considers it a crucial part of daily functioning. He calls, texts -- literally hundreds of times a day, he said -- sends e-mail, visits Craigslist and online car forums, takes photos and videos, even checks the time of day. "I don't know what I'd do without it," he said.

Cellphones have arguably also shifted more of teen life off parents' radar. Parents once found it simpler to overhear phone conversations and music, to look on as teens played video games or passed hours at a desktop computer. Now, so much of that happens on a slim electronic device with a very small screen.

"The cellphone is a much more private way of interacting, and I think that's one thing that teens love about it," Lenhart said.

Smith joked that when his mother threatened to read his messages, she gave up because she could not get past the security code.

The Pew study comes at a time of rising concern locally about what teens are doing on cellphones. Just last week police in Montgomery County launched an investigation at [Pyle Middle School, where a student had allegedly shared -- and sold -- provocative images of female students sent by text message](#).

The phenomenon, known as "sexting," was previously examined by Pew and cited in the new study, which points out that nationally [15 percent of teens had received a suggestive or nearly naked image of someone they know by text message](#).

Still, the new study found that parents are monitoring cellphone use, with 64 percent saying they have looked at their child's address book, call log, text messages and pictures. How often was unclear. But 62 percent of parents say they have taken away a cellphone as punishment.

The report noted a correlation between parental limits on text messaging and a lower likelihood of teen sexting and of teens regretting a text message. More study would have to be done to establish cause and effect, Lenhart said, but she added: "I think if parents are extremely concerned, then this is one thing they could potentially take away."

Parents are clearly on the receiving end of the cellphone as well, with their children using the device to stay in touch.

This was how it went the other night at a mall in Bethesda, where Tess Wilkerson and Alex Zimmerman, both 15, had just come from a movie where they had spotted celebrity Mike Tyson among the crowd. Each texted a parent with the news.

"Tk A Pic," Tess's mom texted back.

Indeed, the most vivid change surrounding cellphone use was the rapid increase in text messaging, researchers said. In an 18-month period, the number of teens who text every day rose from 38 percent to 54 percent.

In real numbers: The median daily total that teens send and receive was 50 -- or 1,500 a month. Girls typically send and receive 80 texts a day, and boys come in at 30.

The average adult racks up 10 text messages in a day.

Rich Ling, a professor at IT University of Copenhagen and a report coauthor, said that although Americans once lagged in text messaging, U.S. teens have clearly turned that trend line around. "They have zoomed right past" many other countries, he said.

[The effect of so much texting is still being researched](#), but Scott W. Campbell, a professor at the University of Michigan and study coauthor, said research shows that cellphone use does not take away from quantity of face-to-face time, even if some might argue it affects quality of time. Generally, he said, "it's an added layer of communication."

The Pew study was based on telephone interviews from June to September 2009 with a nationally representative sample of 800 youths ages 12 to 17 and their parents. Focus groups were also conducted in the fall.

Looking forward, Campbell predicted that cellphones will be used more and more for online access as they continue to morph into "a computing platform, like a computer in your hand."

For now, many teens said they do not go online by cellphone because it is too costly. In a finding that surprised researchers, the teens most likely to go online were those with household incomes of less than \$30,000 a year. Only seven of 10 such homes have computers.

In this way, cellphones are helping to bridge the digital divide, Campbell said. "It does offer an opportunity some would not otherwise have," he said.