

Common Sense on Digital Relationships

What's the Issue?

Teens are living out romantic relationships online – flirting, fighting, making up, and breaking up. Online talk can be a healthy and even powerful way for some teens to get closer to others, but sometimes it can go too far. Some couples become “tethered” to one another through their devices. They text when they wake up, all through the day, and right before bed. They essentially form a digital cocoon, removed from the rest of the world, which can become fragile if a breakup occurs.

Why Does It Matter?

Getting close to others online can be comforting when all is good, but what happens when relationships get rocky? Couples might trade public insults through status updates, wall posts, and bulletins. This situation may even worsen when couples break up, especially if the breakup is nasty or done with an impersonal text or email. As a consequence, both parties are left with a backlog of personal communication that can now be forwarded to others and used for revenge, blackmail, or harassment. Even in a less-messy breakup, couples often have to remove photos from their profiles and change their relationships status to “single.” Young love is complicated enough without the added pressure of constant access and public scrutiny. The following tips can help you help your teens navigate these murky waters so they can avoid digital drama for themselves and their friends as much as possible.

common sense says

Don't dismiss digital talk. Don't underestimate the power of texts, IMs, and other digital media to strengthen existing relationships. Teen relationships often move fluidly from online to off.

Coach kids not to sext, or forward sexts. Such behavior will protect both them and the person pictured.

Talk about what's private. Teens may differ with their parents in what they view as private and what's okay to share. But remind them that intimate posts or messages can be copied and shared with thousands of kids in an instant.

Alert them to resources. Whether or not it's currently a problem for your teen, you can still let them know about these helpful resources: MTV's “A Thin Line” campaign (www.athinline.org), That's Not Cool (www.thatsnotcool.com), and the National Teen Dating Abuse Helpline (1-866-331-9474; 1-866-331-8453 TTY).

Let them know you are always there for them. Remind teens that you're always available to talk. While you're at it, put in a plug for the school counselor or a friend's parent. Knowing that they have a trusted adult to talk to will be comforting.