

# Teen Texting: The Ruin of Romance

By Katie D. Anderson

As the mother of two teenage girls, my cellular fears had been pretty much relegated to the panic over the dreaded texting while driving issue or that one day, one of the girls might think it a good idea to text naked photos of herself to a current crush. But that was about it. Never did it cross my mind that the seemingly normal act of texting an authentic boyfriend might actually warp or ruin a genuine romantic relationship.

Hear me out. I have a theory.

Recently a friend of my daughter's told me that her boyfriend "wanted a break." Since I write young adult novels for a living and aspire to be known as "The Cool Mom," I said, "Sit down, honey. Have an iced tea and tell me what happened."

You see in the case of this particular girl, I was confused. She wasn't one of those needy girls. She was strong and independent. Her boyfriend was too. This pair of lovebirds weren't the stereotypical glued-at-the-hip kind of couple. Both had very active social lives, apart from their relationship, and both admitted to still being very much infatuated. So, if there wasn't another girl in the picture, why the break?

The girl had no idea.

"Is he still texting you?" I asked.

"Yes Ma'am." (We live in the South.)

"Like all the time?"

"Yes Ma'am."

And then I asked the key question -- one I thought I understood, but apparently did not. "Explain this texting thing to me."

"It's like a tennis ball," she replied. "He texts, and then I text back, and it goes on like this all the time. Back and forth. Back and forth."

"Can you elaborate?" Surely she couldn't mean ALL the time. What the heck were they talking about?

She shrugged. "Well, today he said something about his class. And then I sent him a pic from volleyball practice and then he asked me a question about it. And I replied."

"But then it should stop, right? After you answered his question?"

"Well, no. Because then it's his turn."

"But the conversation was over," I pointed out.

"The conversation is *never* over..." she repeated, emphasis on "never."

The problem was becoming clear, and I jumped in with a diagnosis. "I can't even fathom being forced to talk to my husband, my mother, or even my best friend every day like that! No wonder the guy needs a break. He's sick of you."

That might have been a little harsh, I admit. Tears began to fall.

So I concurred that texting is fun and exciting at the start. Heck. Nothing ignites those butterflies better. And Lord knows those first few weeks of texts can turn a girl to mush. Oh, the nights of late night texting marathons where you tell each other everything under the sun. I get it.

"All the same," I added, "I love pecan pie like the rest of the gals, but too much sugar will make you sick."

She winced.

"That poor boy has no space," I explained. "Think about it. You're TOO available. He doesn't have time to miss you or wonder what you're doing or wish he could be with you because he already IS with you. You live in his pocket for Pete's sake. This constant texting has burned out the relationship. Killed the allure. Why would he want to come to your house and watch a movie or hang out after school when he feels like he's 'with you' all the time?"

She got real quiet and I feared more tears, so I offered my prescription. "Look. Texting is an addictive behavior. I've googled it. So I know that you two are addicted to a bad habit. All you need to do is quit texting him for a few days, or even a few hours and he'll be over this break real quick."

Tah dah! I was right. He was at her locker the next day before sixth period.

But since I'm the hen in a house full of chicks, I can only speak about what I see from inside the coop, but I imagine the same is true from a male perspective. I've certainly seen it again and again on this side of the fence -- the ruin of a perfectly good match due to the constant contact generated by texting. Even stranger is when these couples really DO break up but still can't stop texting each other. Not to mention the problem of one or both of the parties preferring to discuss the more serious issues in their relationships via text instead of in person because it's easier.

Another mother told me about her teen whose courtship became almost “textophrenic.” There was the attraction the girl had to the sweet guy she dated in real life and then the not-so-attractive union she had with his snarky, impatient “twin” whose texts were almost brotherly and sometimes crude, an all day let’s-poke-fun-at-each-other kind of bond. Her attempt to manage the two sides of the relationship was confusing, not to mention exhausting.

And while we’re on the subject, let’s discuss Apple’s “Read Receipts.” This is a feature on the iPhone that allows the parties to be able to tell the exact minute their texts have been read. So, for a teenager, if he or she hasn’t received a reply in t-minus two seconds, something must be wrong. As a favor, I once held my daughter’s phone while a series of texts from a friend came in. Being the curious novelist that I am, I read, but didn’t reply because, well, I wasn’t my daughter. But I watched while the friend started to frantically text a string of paranoia that went something like this:

*Hello?!*

*I know you’re reading this.*

*So you’re not gonna answer?*

*Nice. You suck.*

The friend could clearly see that I was reading her texts because my daughter’s phone was sending her “read receipts” telling her that the texts had been seen. But because I wasn’t replying, she thought that my daughter was mad at her. Needless to say I batted down the hatches and instigated an intervention STAT. Numero Uno? NO MORE READ RECEIPTS.

These kids know where everyone is at every moment of the day. Remember when you used to wonder if the cute boy was going to be at the hangout and you got all dolled up and excited in anticipation? That’s a thing of the past. These kids know who’s there before they ever leave their house because they are actively participating in dozens of group conversations at the same time. It’s like standing in the center of seven cocktail parties at once!

Bottom line: Our children need a break. But what should we do? And how do we convince them of the dangers of something that has become so central to their existence? I wasn’t sure. But then fate stepped in to help when I suddenly had cause to punish my eldest.

“I’m taking your phone away,” I declared.

Her face went ashen. “But I’m scared to drive without it. I mean what if I have an accident or run out of gas or something?”

I felt my face warm. She had a point. I’m just as attached to her having the stupid thing as she is to having it.

“You’ll be fine,” I assured her, but I wasn’t convinced.

An hour later, she appeared at the kitchen door slumped in boredom and announced she was going to a neighbor boy’s house. “And after that, I might even go to another one’s.”

I perked up. “Yes! Human interaction. You go, girl! Visit a bunch of the neighbors!”

When she returned, she climbed up into my bed and told me she’d had a good afternoon chilling with her friends and one’s whole family. We decided to swing back by a little later and ended up being invited to stay for dinner.

“I am so thankful you took your daughter’s phone away today!” the mother gushed, her children horrified. “Do you realize that we would have never gotten to hang out or have dinner like this if that sleek little rectangle had remained affixed to her palm?”

We laughed and realized it was true. Had my sweet girl had access to her phone, she wouldn’t have made time to be with this boy that day. And yet, here we all were together, interacting over a shared summer supper.

Wake up, people. This needless incessant phone-to-phone contact is ruining relationships and not just romantic ones. As for the Anderson girls, we are at least talking about it. And that’s a good start. In fact, much to my delight, one of my daughter’s friends proofed this article, then shared a similar story.

“The other day my boyfriend and I texted each other all class period long. But when we saw each other afterwards it was weirdly awkward because we had nothing to say.” She paused. “Like nothing.”

“What if all of this texting stuff develops into some sort of cyber reality?” We chuckled. “Like what if we lose the ability to talk apart from a cell phone?” she suggested.

“Without human interaction life would get very boring,” I later concluded with my daughter. And this time, I knew she understood.

By the way, when her phone was returned a mere 24 hours later, she had missed 306 texts... Lawsy. It’s going to take a village.