

As you are driving back from your summer holidays you hear the irritating ‘tinny’ beat from your teenagers iPod in the back seat as she simultaneously texts her friends on her mobile, tells her brother to move over in the seat, takes phone calls, and reads the book perched on her lap. It is a scene played out in hundreds of cars travelling past you as you drive.

The world of the modern day adolescent is one of 'hypertexting', multitasking, and discretionary attention to parents! iPods can selectively exclude present company, texting can include preferred company, and mobile phones can be the entryway into whatever soap opera that the teenager prefers.

Many neuroscientists and educators are speculating that computers and the Internet have rewired the brains of millions of people, especially the younger generation. in ways that affect how they think and relate to others. The digital revolution seems to have affected teenager’s concentration and rewired their brains in such a way as to affect the way that they now talk to and deal with their parents. Most mothers and fathers have accepted that they have to compete with their son or daughter’s mobile phone, iPod, and computer, for attention. This all challenges parents to engage with their teenagers differently.

To illustrate, one parent described for me an incident where her teenager daughter sent her a text message in the middle of an argument saying “u r not listening to me!”

While many parents see teenagers as distracted, inattentive, and lacking necessary social and communication skills, that view may be short-sighted. It might be helpful to realise that children now experience communication differently. They multitask, hold simultaneous conversations, and leap from one thing to the next in ways that we at that age never had to contend with. While most of us do not embrace the new communications technology eagerly, it might be helpful to appreciate how different things are and learn new ways of communicating.

I am sure every parent has been frustrated by watching their teenage children checking Bebo, surfing the net, sending emails, and DOIING HOMEWOPRK all at the same time! This seems more the norm than the exception and makes us wonder whether we should fight against it or understand that children are wiring their brains differently to ours. I don’t have the magic answer to that question but it is worth considering. I have not been without, on occasion, texting my daughter to start her homework (with a smiley face attached!) rather than shouting up the stairs in a predictable fashion.

The message for parents should be to not let anxiety and lack of know-how keep you from going digital to help you to communicate with your kids. At times you have to appreciate their language! (Ever think of having your own My Space Page?)

Certainly I have realised that the medium through which teenagers now deal with their world is this technology. It is also the currency in which their domestic privileges need to be traded. If you want to get your teenagers to do certain things by rewarding them, or ‘punish’ them for failing to do the same things, you will find that the things that teenagers are now interested in are:

- Phone Credit for texting and phone calls.
- Access to Bebo or its equivalent
- Pocket Money
- Music Downloads for iPods etc
- DVD's
- Mobile Phones
- And being allowed out later and later.

You will notice that teenagers are less interested in old-fashioned TV, like we used to be, and more interested in the various media for communication. For this reason when parents need to motivate their kids to do things the currency in which rewards or punishments should be administered need to be in these terms. "Ever week that you successfully do your jobs/chores you will get X euro in phone credit" Or "For every day/week that you fail to do your homework computer access will be restricted by X number of hours".

The thing in life that teenagers naturally value is FREEDOM. For that reason, they are motivated by the possibility of getting more freedom. Equally, they are discouraged by the possibility of its being restricted. Therefore, rewards and punishments in this area are always taken seriously by kids.

My mantra for teenagers is this. "With FREEDOM comes RESPONSIBILITY. If you can show that you can be a responsible teenager you will get more freedom. If you cannot assume your responsibilities (like doing your jobs at home, being respectful of others) your freedoms will obviously have to be diminished. As sure as 'B' follows 'A', freedom is a consequence of your growing responsibility. Phones, computers, iPods, and DVD's are all the freedoms and privileges that flow from responsibility!" To which your teen might reply by sending a text: "duz dat mean i'm cn go 2 de prty dis w.e.?"