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# Keeping up with Your Teen's Techno-knowledge

by Lucy Rimalower, M.A.



Keeping up with your teen's techno-knowledge has your head spinning and your teen's eyes rolling. Yet the constantly evolving gadgets and toys are the harbingers of our changed and changing communication. First, it was email, and email quickly became the only way to correspond for work, event planning and social updates, blazing a trail for electronic interactions to become a ubiquitous and preferred means of sharing information and staying connected to friends. And your teens are at the forefront of using and creating this communication technology.

To keep yourself up to speed and aware of your teen's activities, you need a basic understanding of the most popular ways to electronically connect.

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## Instant Message- IM

### What Is It?

Instant messaging or IM'ing is live, back and forth typed chatting, between two or more parties. Webcams, which provide live images of the chatting people, are also sometimes involved. There's iChat, which is Mac's application for instant messaging. iChat needs to be used on a Mac but is compatible with AIM, AOL's version of instant messaging. AIM can be downloaded for free, even if you don't use AOL. Other popular instant message applications include Windows Messenger and Yahoo Messenger, as well as the IM features on social networking sites such as Facebook or Myspace.

### How Does My Teen Use It?

In my practice, I hear a lot about instant messaging. It's how teens stay in touch after school hours. They talk about what happened during the day and even discuss homework assignments with friends and classmates. Don't think telephones have become extinct. Your teens are multitaskers, talking on the phone while they maintain multiple IM conversations.

### Required Devices

IM conversations can happen on a computer, Mac or PC, cell phones and PDAs, such as those made by Blackberry and Palm Pilot.

### Safety Considerations

Although IM conversations may take place in the comfort of a home computer, they can also be an invitation for school conflicts to come home. If you notice your teen spending excessive time online such that he's neglecting homework or activities he usually enjoys, you may need to set firmer limits on time online.

Parental Controls! Investigate the applications your teens are using and check out the parental control options. All IM applications have a parental control option that can limit who can contact your teen and who your teen can contact.

Choose a screen name wisely, so that it does not include identifying information. DodgersFan101 is safer screen name than Encino-Billy15

Just as with email, never open pictures, download files, or click links in messages from strangers. In fact, it's good practice for your teen to ask anyone who sends a file or link via instant message "What is this? Is it safe to open?"

Only communicate with people who are on your buddy lists. Do not add people to your buddy lists that you do not know.

Do not provide sensitive personal information such as passwords or social security numbers in an IM conversation. Just because it's instant doesn't mean it isn't permanent.

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-Gustave Courbet

## Text Messaging

### What Is It?

Text messaging is most often used to send short messages, fewer than 160 characters, between cell phones. Because most cell phones have small keypads rather than full QWERTY keyboards, abbreviations, acronyms and symbols often dominate text communication. You may also hear about MMS, multimedia-messaging service, which allows pictures, videos and other media files to be transferred

### How Does My Teen Use It?

Texting is a great way to exchange brief information while out and about. Teens make plans and get continuous information through text messaging. Don't be surprised if your teen is texting his friends, long after your "lights and computers out" curfew. Make sure your house rules address text messaging hours and limits. Texting can also be an effective way for parents and teens to exchange information. While sometimes you need to hear your teen's voice, a quick text message may be an easy way to touch base about changes to plans or locations. Texting is not a substitute for a sit-down conversation.

The Lingo: You see them texting like bandits, and typing faster than you ever could, but what are they saying? Shorthand has been developed to make texting and instant messaging as fast as possible. For example, BRB (Be Right Back), LOL (Laugh Out Loud), OMG (Oh My God), and TTYL (Talk to You Later). Check out the "Chat Translator" created by Teen Angels (see resources below), an organization that offers safety tips and opportunities for teens to promote online safety within their communities.

### Required Devices

Text messages can be sent from cell phones or computers. Contact your cell phone company for information about text messaging fees on your current plan. Charges can add up quickly if texting isn't included.

### Safety Considerations

Don't text and drive! Not even at redlights. The hands-free law, as of July 1, 2008, prohibits minors from using any handheld or hand-free device because it is a dangerous distraction.

Help your teens keep in mind that while they're texting through a device, they're reaching a real person on the other end. It's easy to forget compassion when you don't have to see the face of the person you're texting. We're still accountable for our behavior even if it's written in shorthand.

Set boundaries and limits. Although it may behoove you to get an unlimited texting plan from a financial point of view, monitoring your phone bill for text use can help you understand your teen's habits and activities, and set rules accordingly. What are texting hours? When is texting an acceptable way to communicate with you?

## MP3 Players

### What Is It?

The MTV generation gave birth to the MP3 generation. Music, movies, videos and other media can be legally downloaded from the internet and uploaded into MP3 players. Portable CD's players and walkmen, which required bulky CD carrying cases or even audiocassettes, are a thing of the past. An MP3 (MPEG Layer-3 Format) is an audio file, popular for downloading and storing music. An MP3 player stores music without clutter and lets its users organize their music to make playlists on a personal jukebox.

### How Does My Teen Use It?

Music can be purchased and legally downloaded onto a computer as MP3 files through thousands of sites such as iTunes or Amazon. MP3s vary in price and some are available for free. In addition to music, many MP3 players can also play audiobooks, podcasts (which are syndicated digital-media files such as radio shows or news programs), and even movies.



### Required Devices

MP3 Player such as iPod, iPod Touch, Zune (Microsoft's version), Archos, and others. A computer to access MP3's online.

### Safety Considerations

- Download Legally and Safely. The use and downloading of online music requires a brief education in copyright law. While there are lots of ways to legally download and enjoy music and other media, there are many websites guilty of copyright infringement and illegal distribution of media. It is incumbent upon parents, who may be held legally responsible for the online activities of their children, to have an understanding of how copyright laws apply to downloading media and then to impart that knowledge to their children. While some content is available for free, help your teen understand the legal ramifications of downloading and uploading illegally - it's shoplifting. See recommended links below for more information on the law from sites such as the Recording Industry Association of America.

## MAC 101

Is your teen all about Mac? You may have seen the Mac vs. PC commercials, which are clearly targeting younger, creative demographics, including your teens. As such, holiday and birthday wish lists might be loaded with things beginning with "i". You should know about the iPhone, a cell phone with internet access, MP3 player and GPS navigation capabilities. You should also know about the iPod Touch, the new cousin of the classic iPod MP3 player, with the addition of 3D graphics and internet access. The iPod Shuffle, which holds up to 500 songs, and the iPod Nano, which holds up to 2000 songs, are also MP3 players.

## Other Important Terms

### Blue-Tooth/WiFi

This technology lets us connect headsets, computers and cell phones without wires.

### Social Networking Sites

Websites that allow users to create profiles and develop networks with other users for communication, socializing and information sharing. Myspace and Facebook are two such sites that are extremely popular with teens.



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**Streaming**

Streaming is a way of viewing video content online without downloading it.

**YouTube**

YouTube is a website where videos can be shared via streaming and allows your teens to post their own content. Talk to your teens about what is appropriate personal content to be sharing online. Perhaps they have to show you what they're posting before they upload it.

**Let Your Teen Be The Techno-Expert**

Your teen's understanding and usage of these technologies will ultimately help him make connections, get jobs and feel part of the ever-expanding global media community. Ask your teen questions about his techno-knowledge. Giving her the opportunity to be the expert on new media devices and communications may be a boost for her self-esteem. Asking questions is also an opportunity for you to connect on your teen's terms, as well as to gauge your teen's knowledge of relevant safety concerns. For extra credit, you can ask your teen about new technology that you're hearing about.

With all this evolving technology, it's easy to lose sight of old-fashioned values, which still apply despite these new ways of communicating. Privacy and respect for self and others remain vital for safety and self-esteem. Even if you can't understand the technology, you can help your teen feel understood.

*Resources*

- [www.wiredsafety.org](http://www.wiredsafety.org) - General information about safe communication in new media
- [www.teenangels.org](http://www.teenangels.org) - "Chat Translator" for text and IM conversations
- [www.musicunited.org](http://www.musicunited.org) - Learn about legal and illegal downloading of music
- [www.riaa.com](http://www.riaa.com) - Check out the Recording Industry Association of America's Guide For Parents & Teachers About Digital Music & Downloading



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