

Ways & Means Transcripts—S2E4—Concerns About Teens and Phones, Unwrapped

Emily Hanford (EH): From Duke University Sanford School of Public Policy, this is Ways and Means. We spotlight bright ideas for how to improve human society. I'm Emily Hanford.

Carol Jackson (CJ): Where are we going?

Jackson Marcellus (JM): What?

CJ: Where are we going?

JM: No, stop.

CJ: You're gonna get a new phone.

EH: This is Carol. She's one of our producers. She's walking into a Verizon store in North Carolina with her son, Jackson. They're getting Jackson a new phone for his fifteenth birthday. It's not his first phone, of course. It's practically impossible to be an American teenager today without a phone. Kids use their phones for everything and it often stresses out parents like Carol, who worry their kids are spending too much time with their devices. But without a phone, Jackson wouldn't be able to keep in touch with his best friend.

Omar Mohammed (OM): Hello? Yeah, I can hear you. My name is Omar. I live in Rockville, Maryland and I'm fourteen.

EH: Omar and Jackson met at summer camp the year before middle school. Omar lived in North Carolina back then.

JM: It was kind of like, it was spontaneous, we were kinda like-

OM: Yeah, yeah. We were chill.

JM: We would talk to each other at camp and then I would come over every once in a while, and it was like-

OM: Yeah.

JM: Every weekend I'd come over or we would hang out someday. Then, all of the sudden, we were best friends.

OM: Yeah, pretty much.

EH: Omar was born in Egypt, Jackson was born in the United States. There are other differences, too.

OM: Size.

JM: Size, obviously.

OM: Yeah, you're 6', like, 4". I'm 5'2" and a half.

EH: Their friendship just clicked, though, in that way that good friendships do. They both like paintball and pizza, they both hate to swim, and when they're together, things just seem more fun, like the time one of their friends stepped on a beehive.

JM: No, we just got straight chased by bees.

OM: No, no. I got chased by bees. You and everyone else ran away. I walked home.

EH: They don't get a chance to spend much time together these days, though. Omar moved to Maryland when they boys were in seventh grade. Both say being long-distance best friends was tough, at first.

JM: It was, like, really hard, but it was, like- I was really sad. And then, the second year you moved away it got better. Yeah, was it hard on you?

OM: Of course, it was hard. I mean, it was definitely hard. It was one of the hardest things I've probably had to do.

JM: Um, were there times if you wondered that we could keep our friendship going?

OM: No.

JM: No?

OM: Never.

JM: Not once?

OM: Not once.

JM: Never even thought about it?

OM: Well, I thought about it when I was, like, first moving. Like, where I hadn't even moved yet.

JM: I- at your going-away party, I thought about it. But, when you got there and we still talked, I dismissed any thoughts.

EH: Thirty years ago, a friendship like this probably would've died; letters took too long, phone calls were too expensive, but their cellphones keep them connected.

OM: Snapchat, Instagram, messaging-

JM: Yeah, like, Instagram or just FaceTime, you know.

EH: In fact, they recorded this interview from separate states using an app on their phones. 90% of adolescents in the US now either own or can access a mobile phone with the internet, and they do spend a lot of time on their phones. Teens are looking at screens about 8 hours a day- T.V. screens,

computers, game systems- and cellphones are a major part of that. A quarter of teens say they are online almost constantly. Coming up on this episode of Ways and Means, we look at the role mobile devices play in the lives of teenagers. What are they doing on their phones? What are their parents worried about? And, which of those concerns are justified?

Candice Odgers (CO): I recently, you know, kinda told the story about my five-year-old asked for a cellphone and, um, he wanted one so his friends could text him but he can't actually read yet.

EH: This is Candice Odgers. She's the associate director of the Duke Center for Child and Family Policy, and that story about her son makes her chuckle. It shows just how early kids feel peer-pressured to get a phone. Candice has been dealing with kids and phones for a while. Years ago, she realized mobile phones could be a goldmine in terms of collecting data for her research. She studies adolescent development, and one of her ideas was to give teens mobile phones and then contact them throughout the day and ask them to report what they were doing, and how they were thinking and feeling. She didn't want to study kids' relationships to their phones. She wanted to use the phones as a tool to get honest, real time information about their lives. Most studies rely on kids to remember how they felt at a later date, but using the phones meant Candice and her colleagues could get information about what kids were thinking and feeling in the moment and, hopefully, gain powerful insights into young people's lives. They called their study "My Life"; they launched the study, and, then, that same week-

CO: A study came out that said 1 in 5 adolescents have sent or shared a naked picture of themselves or someone else. So, we have devices in the field, we immediately stopped the study, and figured out how to encrypt this information, how to get some stronger controls over this.

EH: They eventually started the study again once they established some additional strict guidelines about how the phones would be used. In the process, Candice talked to a lot of parents, and she kept hearing the same worries about teens and technology. Worries, like these:

CO: How do I know whom my kid is interacting with? How should I limit their exposure? Kids these days don't know how to interact anymore, they're kind of glued to their phone.

EH: So, in addition to using mobile technology as a tool to understand more about adolescent lives, Candice's team decided to take on another research focus, too. Basically, they tried to get to the bottom of the fears they were hearing about from parents. Is there something to be afraid of when it comes to teens and their phones? And, if so, what?

Reporter 1: Investigators in Alamance County have arrested half a dozen students on charges of cyber-bullying.

Reporter 2: They're accused of using Facebook to bully three-

Reporter 3: Scores of students, some of them only in middle school, suspected of trading naked pictures on their phones using secret apps designed to hide it all from their parents and teachers...

EH: Candice and her colleagues looked at media reports like these, and they also reviewed as much scientific data as they could find; peer-reviewed studies, parent surveys, in-depth personal interviews, and case-studies. They wanted to know what existing research says about how mobile technologies may be influencing adolescents, defined as people aged 12 to 20. Based on that review, Candice and one of

her graduate students published a paper detailing seven common fears parents have, and whether those fears are justified. Just to be clear, we're focusing on mobile technologies here- think the smartphone, not the X-box. So, let's look at what they uncovered. We'll start with one concern that's probably been around the longest: that an adolescent will meet a sexual predator online. In other words, good, old-fashioned "stranger danger". For the most part, Candice says, you can lay that concern to rest.

CO: This has evolved quite a bit; the idea of "stranger danger" online was something we initially saw when people started to go online in chat-rooms.

EH: Chat-rooms. They're not much of a thing anymore.

CO: Technology's really evolved. So, it's part of our everyday lives, and when we start to look at who kids are interacting with, they're online and their offline networks look very similar, in fact, almost identical, and there's very few interactions that are really with strangers.

EH: So, adolescents are mostly communicating online with people they know, but that leads to another parent fear: cyber-bullying. That's when people use technology as a tool to harass or shame others. Research shows more than 90% of parents worry about cyber-bullying. The very week we were putting this show together, there was a horrible story on the national news about a teen suicide in response to cyber-bullying. Candice's analysis found that technology has given bullying a new form; but, by and large, young people who are victimized online are the same ones who are at risk of bullying in the real world; and, so, armed with this information, adults can, in the real world, keep an eye on them as vulnerable kids.

CO: And the encouraging part about that is that the interventions that target bullying in general also tend to reduce cyber-bullying; so it's really, you know, for a lot of this the medium is a little bit different, but all of the things that we know about what are risks for kids, what interventions might work for kids, a lot of those lesson translate because kids aren't becoming a completely different person online. It's really just a medium through which they express, you know, their identities, to which they communicate with their friends; you know, they kind of engage in the tasks of daily life.

EH: A third parent fear, in addition to cyber-bullying and "stranger danger" is time; specifically, the amount of time adolescents spend online. If the average adolescent is spending an unprecedented amount of time on screens, and mobile phones are a part of that, are they missing out on real life, and does this interfere with their ability to have meaningful, in-person relationships?

CO: So, the worry often is, and this is something Sherry Turkle, a wonderful professor at MIT has explored a lot- our kids, you know, alone together. When you see a group of kids and they're all staring at their devices, are they being able to practice the kind of communication skills they need, develop the social skills they'll need later in life? And, the immediate reaction from adults who see that is "No,"; you know, "They're losing out on all these opportunities for positive social development". But, when you look at the longitudinal research, what you find is that kids who are socially-skilled early on tend to have more online communication, higher frequency, and that, in turn, predicts better-quality relationships later on.

EH: Candice says there's little evidence that time spent online will lead to social isolation. For the most part, research over the last decade has shown adolescents who are online a lot have higher-quality friendships and an increased feeling of belonging. There's even some evidence that spending time online can help teens who are shy build social skills.

Woman: Starting today there's going to be a one-week ban on all cellphones, texting, IM-ing, video chatting, video-gaming, anything on the internet.

Girl: How am I supposed to do my homework?

Woman: The way I did.

Man: With a chisel on a piece of stone.

Woman: Phil!

Man: Can't unplug my funny bone.

Girl: I have a huge science paper due.

Woman: And we have a great set of encyclopedias... Somewhere.

EH: This clip from the ABC show, "Modern Family", brings us to another concern: are mobile phones creating a digital divide with parents? Candice Odgers finds, "no." While technology use may take away from face-to-face time kids spend with their parents, it doesn't necessarily weaken parent-child relationship. In some cases, it might even strengthen those relationships. Imagine a teen whose parents are divorced. He lives with his mom in one city, while his dad lives in another. Technology can help keep the relationship relevant.

JM: This is, like, my Instagram. This is, like, where I post my pictures and stuff about my life.

EH: This is Jackson again, he's listing the places he shares his personal information on the internet.

JM: A lot of pictures of me and my friends, or me playing basketball or baseball. And then, this is, like, my story, which is stuff that happens on, like, a daily basis. And then, my Snapchat is, like- it's really more I send it out to just my friends. So, like, oh, a Snapchat from George. Snapped him back. Got a Snapchat from Ella, then you send a selfie back. Then, boom.

EH: That raises another question: are teens like Jackson putting too much personal information out there for the world to see? Are they leaving a digital archive that could damage their lives in the future? Researchers don't really know the answers to those questions yet. More research will be needed as the current generation ages to know whether the online archiving of young people's experiences has a cost. But what the research does show, is that teens use technology to do really creative things. This generation may be more creative and innovative than their parents- in part, because of technology. So, those are the things that parents worry about, but maybe shouldn't; but Candice found there are a number of concerns that parents have that are definitely justified. Multi-tasking, for one. Teens, and the rest of us, can be easily-distracted by all the content that's available to us online, splitting our focus, making it hard to concentrate on any one thing for very long. There's been a bunch of research on this in

adults and college students; it shows that digital multi-tasking can lead to increased errors on tasks and poorer grades. It seems likely the same things would be happening to teens; but, in fact, there hasn't been much research yet on teens and digital multi-tasking. There is data that shows the ease with which photos and videos can be created and shared is creating new risks. Estimates vary, but a significant percentage of adolescents participate in sharing naked photos and videos. In other words, sexting. As many as 30% of older teens do it, and some younger teens as well. It's happening, and parents should be alert for it. Finally, 80% of teens who own mobile phones report that, when they go to bed, they bring their phones with them. And the evidence from Candice Odgers's review of the available data is clear—with their phones in the bedroom, adolescents do not get a good night's sleep.

CO: Yeah, this is one of the areas, after I wrote the section on the review, I got all of the devices out of every bedroom in my house. And so, this is actually a place where we have some pretty compelling evidence from randomized controlled trials where you bring people into sleep lab, and you get them to read information on paper versus on a screen and we find just that changing of how you deliver information, there's disruption in the circadian rhythm, there's disruption in sleep in terms of the amount of time in deep sleep. We know with kids, there's some displacement of time sleeping—when you log the time they start sending the majority of their text messages, it's late at night. And then, interestingly, in some follow-up studies that I've looked at, kids having their phone in their bedroom—about 25% of mobile phone-owners sleep with their phone under their pillow not to miss a text or a message at night.

EH: That's right. One in four of us, all of us, not just teens, sleep with our phones under our pillows. Candice says the research is really clear; phones should not be in the bedroom at all. And if your teen, or your spouse, or you say, "Well, the phone's my alarm clock. I have to have it in the bedroom." Guess what? You can purchase an alarm clock, they still make them. Candice published a paper in an academic journal about what she learned when it comes to teens and digital devices. It's called "Seven Fears and the Science of How Mobile Technology May Be Influencing Adolescents in the Digital Age". She's also written several articles and op-eds about her findings. The gist of what she's written, is this: "don't worry so much about these technologies. There are some downsides, yes, but there are many upsides. Mobile technologies are likely a net benefit for kids today." Keeping long-distance friendships alive, for example, as in the case of Jackson and Omar. For the most part, when Candice hears from readers, though, they're still mostly scared and worried about the role of mobile technology in kids' lives.

CO: This is a hard topic for people and when things go wrong in parenting, and things go wrong in kids' life, it's terrifying for parents and technology might be, in some cases, a place to look for the source of the problem; and, you know, we might want to take a moment and think about whether that's really the source.

EH: "Has there ever been a parent who didn't worry about how their teens spend their free time?" Candice asks.

CO: And you saw it with comic books, you saw it with the radio, you saw it with the romance novel, that adults have a tendency to view things that kids are doing or spending a lot of time on as negative towards their development. And, I think, the other thing not to forget is we know a tremendous amount of kids, of what's good for kids, what leads to risky behavior, what leads to negative consequences, and it's not that those rules suddenly don't apply. This isn't an entirely new world, this is a new tool that those same types of stories and things are playing out on.

JM: Um, how long do you think that we will be friends?

EH: This is Jackson and Omar again, our long-distance best friends.

OM: Hmm, can't say.

JM: For life, I hope.

OM: Yeah, hopefully.

JM: If we're still friends now, there's nothing that can change it. Like-

OM: Yeah.

JM: That's a wrap!

OM: Okay.

JM: Alright, I'll see you.

OM: Alright, later.

EH: Ways and Means is produced by Carol Jackson, Alison Jones, and Karen Kemp. Thanks to Jackson Marcellus and Omar Mohammed for giving us a peek at their friendship. Candice Odgers is the professor of public policy, psychology, and neuroscience at Duke University, and the Associate Director for the Center for Child and Family Policy at Duke. The Seven Fears paper we've been talking about was published by the Association for Psychological Science. The link will be on our website waysandmeansshow.org. We'll also like to the latest recommendations for children's media use from the American Academy of Pediatrics. For teens, the Academy suggests families designate media-free times together, such as during dinner or while driving, as well as media-free locations at home, such as bedrooms. The Academy of Pediatrics also offers an interactive planner to help families develop a digital strategy. Our assistant producer is Joel Luther. Katherine Zhou creates our episode art. We get engineering help from Johnny Vince Evans. Until next time, I'm Emily Hanford.

Brady Bunch father: It's amazing how such a simple thing like a phone can become such a big problem. So many other things have come up with the kids and we managed to solve them. But here we are, hung up on the phone.

Brady Bunch father: "Hung up?" Mike.

Brady Bunch father: I wasn't trying to be funny, I'm serious. There's got to be a solution to this. There must be some way to keep those kids from using that phone 24 hours a day.