



HELLO ...

Hey!

Keep
Texting
from
Taking
Over

BY RUSSELL AND BRAD WILCOX

I am so excited to see my friend again,” one young woman kept telling her parents as she prepared for the special reunion. She had recently returned home after having lived far away. She had looked forward to this moment for a long time.

When the two friends saw each other, they were all smiles. They hugged and laughed as they left together to enjoy becoming re-acquainted. However, the parents were surprised when their daughter returned home much earlier than expected.

“What’s wrong?” they asked.

“I was so excited to talk the way we used to, but she just spent the whole time text messaging her other friends.” Her hurt and disappointment were apparent as she declared, “I wish texting had never been invented.”

Like all communication tools, cell phones with text messaging capabilities can be positive or negative depending on how they are used. Stories can be told of a texted birthday greeting that made someone’s day or a disaster that was avoided because someone was warned quickly and effectively in a text message. Still, not-so-positive stories can also be told of teenagers texting their friends during Sunday School or seminary lessons, of people being hurt by the content of a message received, or, as in the example above, of people avoiding or disregarding those around them in favor of texting someone else.

Like e-mailing, texting can be a wonderful way to communicate and build relationships, but it’s not the relationship itself. If texting is managed and kept in control, it can have positive results. However, if it is allowed to take over, it can be disruptive and even damaging.

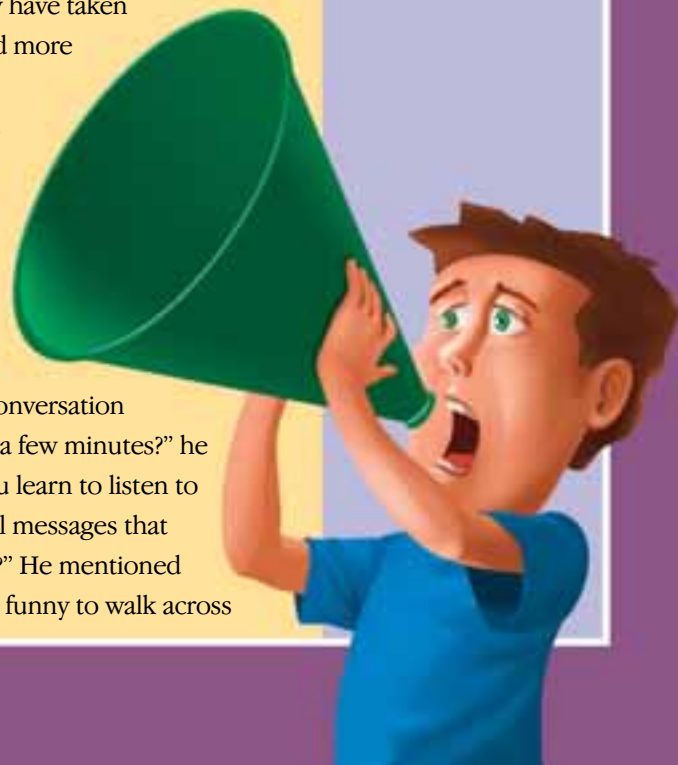
Disturbing Trends

We asked several recently returned missionaries about text messaging. These friends who spent their missions in a “textless” environment commented on some disturbing trends they have noticed upon returning home. They spoke of how text messaging can create a false sense of security and poor communication skills and how it can be a detached and emotionless activity.

“It is pretty easy to feel like you have a protective wall around you when you are texting,” said one. “It is easy to fire off a thoughtless invitation or biting response because you feel safe.” Such a feeling is not always healthy. It is like yelling at another driver from the safety of your own car. The distance makes you feel comfortable in saying things you would never say in a face-to-face encounter. Have you ever had a teacher write some harsh and even cruel comments on an essay or short story on which you have spent hours? From a distance, the teacher felt safe in giving feedback that may not have been uplifting. Had he or she faced you in a one-on-one conversation, the feedback would probably have taken on a much softer and more tactful tone.

Another returned missionary commented that, in his view, texting does not teach good communication skills. “When do you learn to carry on a conversation that lasts more than a few minutes?” he asked. “When do you learn to listen to verbal and nonverbal messages that are being expressed?” He mentioned how it seems almost funny to walk across

Is texting good or bad? It depends on how you use it.



Take opportunities to talk and make new friends. When you reach out in person, you can work on a friendship with more depth and understanding.

a college campus or airport seeing everyone on cell phones communicating with someone “out there” and totally ignoring the people “right here.” The returned missionary said, “It seems as mixed up as the self-absorbed superstar who is consumed with communicating to his or her audience in the movie or on the CD, while mistreating other cast members, helpers, or fans.”

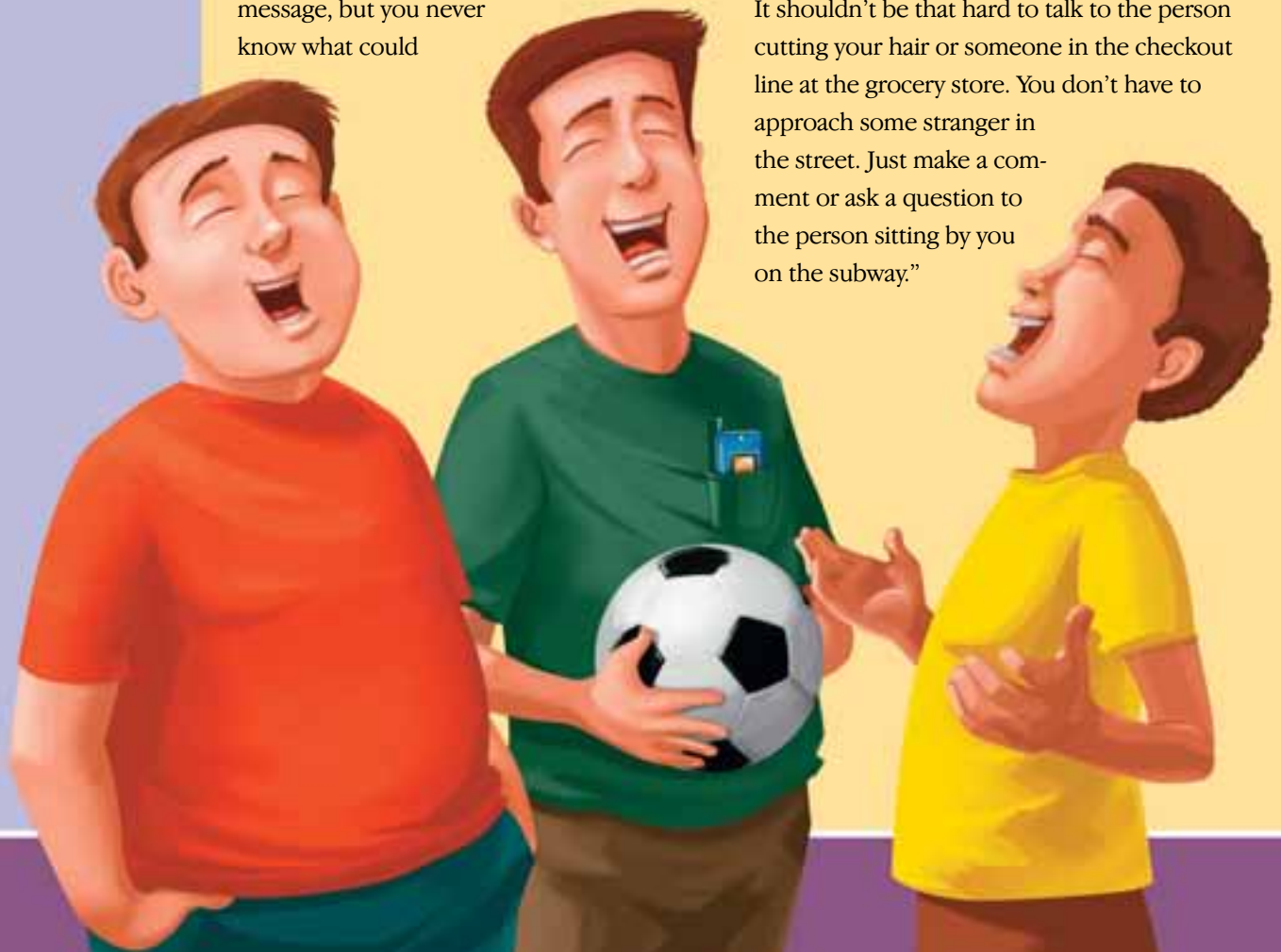
“Perhaps the biggest drawback of texting is that it allows you to remain detached from people,” said another returned missionary. Relationships are like bank accounts: no deposit, no return. If you invest little in your efforts to reach out and interact with others, you get very little back. This former missionary said, “It’s like with investigators. If you withhold your heart and don’t care, you may save yourself a lot of pain if they reject your message, but you never know what could

happen if you had really invested your all.” Texting can easily take the emotion out of the interactions that are so important in our lives. “It is like eating food without any spices. You sure miss a lot.”

Taking Control

How can we avoid the drawbacks and use text messaging appropriately? These returned missionaries offered some excellent advice: text in private, maintain a balance between electronic and nonelectronic forms of communication, and seek a variety of entertainment.

“Talk to people,” one returned missionary said. “Learn how to start a conversation with someone you don’t know. Ask, ‘Where are you from?’ or, ‘Have you always lived around here?’ That is one of the hardest things for new missionaries to do, and it shouldn’t be. It shouldn’t be that hard to talk to the person cutting your hair or someone in the checkout line at the grocery store. You don’t have to approach some stranger in the street. Just make a comment or ask a question to the person sitting by you on the subway.”



Another former missionary says, “Texting, listening to messages, and even taking phone calls can wait. Do it in your private time rather than in front of others.” He said, “My mission president had a cell phone, but he kept it on silent and never answered it in a conference or interview. We always knew we were his priority at the moment.”

Texting can actually be a form of entertainment for many people. “It’s pretty sad if that is as good as it gets for you,” said a returned sister missionary. What are you going to tell your kids one day about what you did for fun in the “good old days”? Do you really want to admit that all your entertainment centered on videos, computer games, and text messages? The sister missionary asked, “What about creative dates, playing games, or just sitting around telling funny stories and laughing till it hurts?”

Russell’s Experience

When Russell got home from his mission he was excited to get a cell phone. He had used one before but without the games, cameras, and text messaging capabilities. On one of the first weekends after his return, he was asked to help out at a neighborhood garage sale. As people wandered among the various items spread out on the lawn, Russell played with his new cell phone and began texting a friend about how much he missed his mission. Suddenly, he noticed a lady who appeared a little confused as she looked at several of the items. He put his cell phone away and approached her. He soon discovered she was new in the area and spoke Spanish but little English. Having served in Spain, he delighted her by speaking Spanish. Before long, he had not only helped her pick out a few items, but he had also taken her name and address with the intent of sending the missionaries.

Russell says, “Here I was texting my friend about how much I missed my mission, and I almost let a missionary opportunity pass me by. When I put the cell phone away, I actually ended up getting a missionary referral. I was happy to have my new cell phone, and texting my friend was fun, but nothing made me happier than getting this referral for the missionaries.”

Is there a place for cell phone text messaging? Of course. We just need to keep it from taking over. ■



Text messaging can also be used as a tool for good. Three students at Skyline High School Seminary in Salt Lake City, Utah, shared these examples of ways they and others have put their thumb muscles to good use.

- Mitch got a text message thanking him for something he did, and it made him feel good. Sending simple, positive messages doesn’t take long, but it can brighten someone’s day.

- Mary-Martha’s Sunday School teacher used text messaging to remind her class about a Church activity.

- Bridger sent his friend a text message asking if he was coming to seminary. You can use texting to invite people to seminary or Mutual activities without putting pressure on them. You can also send a message telling someone that you missed him or her at an activity and inviting him or her to come next time.

- Mitch’s friend downloaded the scriptures onto his cell phone. Sending your favorite scripture in a text message could change someone’s day and touch his or her heart.

- Bridger likes to send his mom and dad a message asking them how their day is going. Instead of isolating you, that kind of text messaging could actually strengthen your relationship with your parents.

It’s up to you to use text messaging wisely. It can be a useful tool, but don’t let it replace face-to-face communication.