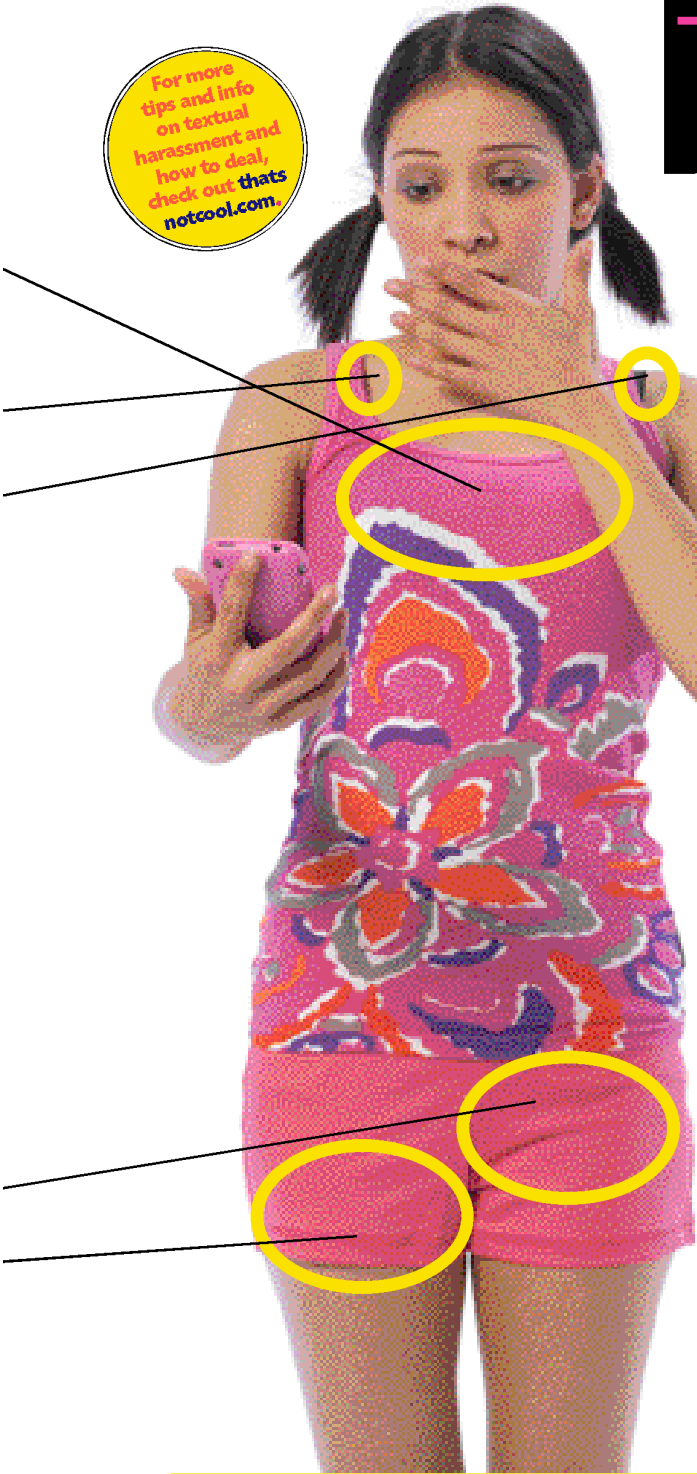


by Lee Erica

tech triage

For more tips and info on textual harassment and how to deal, check out thatnotcool.com.

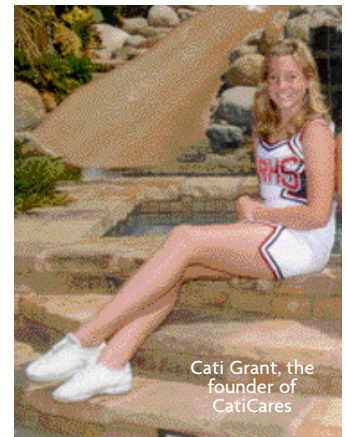


What you need to know about textual harassment, sexting and protecting your online presence

Jenni Lee, a varsity cheerleader at Foothill HS in Pleasanton, CA, used to send thousands of text messages a month. “I was meeting new friends and was very social, so I texted everyone all the time,” she says. She realized how easily texting can get out of hand when a message featuring explicit photos of a female student made the rounds of her 3,000-plus-person school and wound up being sent to Jenni’s younger brother—who was only an eighth-grader at the time. “It was really awkward,” she says. “It even got sent to the girl’s brother. When I heard about it, I thought, I would never want to be put in that situation.” Jenni admits that her own cell phone use was excessive. “I used to feel like my cell phone was taking over my life and replacing conversations I’d typically have with my friends. Now I value actual conversations and spending time with friends instead of sending hundreds of texts a day.”

Texting and social networking are such a huge part of our lives, they’ve become as natural as breathing. Instant access, 24/7, to everything and everyone has its share of bene-

fits, but being “on” all the time means increased vulnerability to being taken advantage of, getting hurt or hurting someone else. Read on for a breakdown of textual harassment and other technological dangers you need to be aware of.



Cati Grant, the founder of CatiCares

TOO MANY TEXTS

Have you ever wished that your friends wouldn’t text you about *everything*? Does your boyfriend constantly text asking where you are or ask to see your phone? “Your cell phone should not feel like a trap,” says Shawn Marie Edgington, author of a guide to texting, *Read Between the Lines*. “If it does, take a break!” Your phone shouldn’t be a burden.

“Girls need to understand that any time a partner or friend tries to mon-

ARE YOU ADDICTED TO YOUR PHONE?
The more addicted you are to your phone, the more trouble it can cause if used improperly. The Pew Internet Project Study showed that students who used their phones out of boredom and who kept them on even when not in use were more likely to participate in sexting. Stanford University asked 200 iPhone-using students to rate their level of addiction: 10 percent believe they’re completely addicted and 34 percent admit to at least mild addiction. Only six percent denied any addiction at all, and a third of those worried it could happen in the future. Many owners treat their phones like pets, admitting to having petted or named theirs, and three percent said they don’t let anyone else touch it.

LEFT: MATTHEW KARAS; RIGHT: COURTESY OF CATI GRANT

*Some last names have been withheld for privacy.

itor where you go and who you're with, you're in the early stages of harassment or very much in the middle of it," says Rachel J. Simmons, a *New York Times*–bestselling author, educator and teen expert who has appeared on "Oprah" and "Today" and whose book *Odd Girl Out* was made into a Lifetime Television movie. Only you can decide how much is too much and communicate clear boundaries. "The first step in this process is often the hardest: You need to acknowledge that you're uncomfortable with the behavior, and then tell an adult," says adolescent development expert Dr. Karen Rayne. If they won't stop, talk to a parent or coach, change your number if necessary and be selective in giving it out in the first place. If you're tempted to keep contacting someone who's harassing you, Dr. Rayne suggests sending a text to a trusted adult or friend instead whenever you feel the urge.

"It's like once someone has your number, you no longer have any say in what happens next!"
—Katie, AC Reader

SEXTING

Sexting, or creating and sharing explicit or suggestive text messages and photos, also falls under textual harassment, and it happens all the time. "You meet someone and you think you can trust them," says AC reader Katie*. "You give them your number so you can stay in contact. They start to bother you with requests like: 'Can I have a nude photo?' 'What are you wearing?' 'Are you a virgin?' It's like once someone has your number, you no longer have any say in what happens next!" According to the Pew Internet Project Study, four percent of teens ages 12 to 17 have sent sexts, and 15 percent have received them; among teens 17 and older, eight percent reported sending sexts and 30 percent received them.

Many teens feel pressured by friends and partners to send sexts and fear rejection for saying no. But once it's sent, there's no going back. "If you value your scholarship and career path, when you start sending photos of yourself, you're playing with fire," says Simmons. A talented young cheerleader was removed from both her college and its top-tier cheer program after racy photos of her went viral last year. "If you're reading

this and thinking in the back of your mind that you have text-privacy with that special someone, get rid of that idea right now, because with today's advanced technology, you don't have privacy with anyone," says Edgington (who also happens to be the mom of a teen cheerleader). Don't send pictures that you wouldn't want your future employer or parents (or little brother!) seeing.

If a racy photo or sext ends up in your inbox, delete it—don't forward it. "Before sending a text, ask yourself, 'How will this make the person feel?' 'How will this come back to haunt me?'" says Dr. Tod Burke, former police officer and criminal justice professor at Radford University in Virginia. "What you think is a joke, what you think is flirting, becomes a form of harassment. You need to take responsibility and accountability for your actions. If you're accountable for picking up a phone and texting, you're accountable for the messages you send."

HATE-RASSMENT

In January 2010, 15-year-old Phoebe Prince of South Hadley, MA, tragically took her own life as a result of months of bullying—including bashing on her Facebook page and via text message. Nine students were charged with criminal acts related to Phoebe's death. Officials say the abuse stemmed from jealousy and rivalry over Phoebe dating popular boys at school.

Feuds can quickly spiral out of control via text and social networks, because the lack of face-to-face contact can embolden anyone. "I was a victim of bullying by text," says AC reader Vanessa*. "Not only did that text say horribly mean things about me, but they also asked people to send it to everyone in their phone's contact list!"

KNOW AND MANAGE YOUR FRIENDS

"Social networks can be used for a variety of purposes. Some of the fun is creating a large pool of friends from many aspects of your life. That doesn't mean all friends are created equal. Use tools to manage the information you share with friends in different groups or even have multiple online pages. If you're trying to create a public persona as a blogger or expert, create an open profile or a 'fan' page that encourages broad participation and limits personal information. Use your personal profile to keep your real friends (the ones you trust) more synched up with your daily life." —Michael Kaiser, executive director, National Cyber Security Alliance (NCSA) staysafeonline.org

So how should you handle text gossip or drama? “The number one thing you need to do when you get fired up about something is to wait before responding” says Simmons. “If you feel like you have to respond to this text and you don’t care what’s going on around you, that’s a sign that you need to put the phone down. A lot of us assume the worst when we read something. For example, if you stop signing texts ‘xoxo’ all of a sudden, most girls will think, ‘She’s mad at me,’ or ‘What did I do?’ It’s not always about us. It’s about not taking things personally. And stay classy! Our mean instincts get triggered because we’re not looking at somebody, we’re just typing, and it’s very easy not to be yourself and to be your *worst* self.” (Check out rachelsimmons.com for teen advice and her video series, *BFF 2.0*.)

A CHEERLEADER MAKING A CHANGE

Cati Grant is a 17-year-old junior and cheerleader at Scripps Ranch HS in San Diego, CA. Cati was nominated as an NCA All-American for her school squad and is a two-time national champion member of the North County Elite All-Stars. She founded Cati Cares (caticares.com), an organization raising awareness about cyber bullying and internet safety, after enduring four years of bullying, including MySpace death threats. Cati has spoken to more than a million people about the dangers of cyber-bullying and has received numerous awards, including a special commendation from the city of San Diego and a certificate of recognition from the California State Senate. “My website is important because it gives me an opportunity to help others and make the world a better, safer place,” Cati says. “Realized sharing my story could help save someone’s life.”

Being tech savvy these days is a given, but that needs to include watching out for potential pitfalls and ensuring your own safety. Think of your tech life as a picture you’re painting over time. Whatever you put on your canvas is how people (family, friends, partners, employers) will see you.

“Social networking is a big part of our lives and it’s here to stay,” says Cati. “Teens need to keep in mind that their social networks are extensions of their identities, so they need to represent and protect themselves appropriately.”

LOOK BEFORE YOU LEAP: GET THE 411 BEFORE JUMPING ON THE NEWEST SOCIAL NETWORKING BANDWAGONS

What it is: **Formspring**

How it works: Sign up for an account, and anyone can send you an anonymous question or comment.

The appeal: Curiosity—*anyone* can ask *anything*.

Potential pitfall: “Formspring can get really nasty,” says Jenni Lee. “It can be hurtful; people say really rude things anonymously. I could see how it could really destroy your self-esteem.” Once you click “submit,” answers are immediately public. “Cyber-bombs like this usually launch the account holder into an extended freak-out about who could have written it,” says Rachel Simmons. “Imagine walking the halls or sitting in class, never knowing who’s saying what on your Formspring.”

What it is: **Chatroulette**

How it works: You’re randomly matched with an anonymous stranger in a video chat. Created by a 17-year-old Russian student, 50,000-plus users have visited the site at least once.

The appeal: Meeting new people, interesting conversations

Potential pitfall: Remember your parents’ advice to never talk to strangers? You could find yourself chatting with *anyone*, and that could get very creepy, really fast!

What it is: **Foursquare**

How it works: Using GPS tracking features on your phone, it allows you to “check in” with other users and sends your location to your friends and social networking sites.

The appeal: Keeping up with friends, finding new places to hang out

Potential pitfall: Risking your personal safety! Still not convinced? The website pleaserobme.com was founded to bring awareness to people who leave their homes vulnerable due to Foursquare.