

Don't Blame Social Media if Your Teen Is Unsocial. It's Your Fault

BY CLIVE THOMPSON | 2.26.13

Are teenagers losing their social skills? Parents and pundits seem to think so. Teens spend so much time online, we're told, that they're no longer able to handle the messy, intimate task of hanging out face-to-face. "After school, my son is on Facebook with his friends. If it isn't online, it isn't real to him," one mother recently told me in a panic. "Everything is virtual!"

Now, I'm not convinced this trend is real. I've read the evidence about the "narcissism epidemic" and the apparent decline in empathy in young people, and while it's intriguing, it's provisional. Lots of work offers the opposite conclusion, such as Pew surveys finding that kids who text the most also socialize the most in person. But for the sake of argument, let's agree that we have a crisis. Let's agree that kids aren't spending enough time together mastering social skills. Who's responsible? Has crafty Facebook, with its casino-like structure of algorithmic nudging, hypnotized our youth?

If kids can't socialize, who should parents blame? Simple: They should blame themselves. This is the argument advanced in *It's Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, by Microsoft researcher Danah Boyd. Boyd—full disclosure, a friend of mine—has spent a decade interviewing hundreds of teens about their online lives.

What she has found, over and over, is that teenagers would love to socialize face-to-face with their friends. But adult society won't let them. "Teens aren't addicted to social media. They're addicted to each other," Boyd says. "They're not allowed to hang out the way you and I did, so they've moved it online."

It's true. As a teenager in the early '80s I could roam pretty widely with my friends, as long as we were back by dark. But over the next three decades, the media began delivering a metronomic diet of horrifying but rare child-abduction stories, and parents shortened the leash on their kids. Politicians warned of incipient waves of youth wilding and superpredators (neither of which emerged). Municipalities crafted anti-loitering laws and curfews to keep young people from congregating alone. New neighborhoods had fewer public spaces. Crime rates plummeted, but moral panic soared. Meanwhile, increased competition to get into college meant well-off parents began heavily scheduling their kids' after-school lives.

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The result, Boyd discovered, is that today's teens have neither the time nor the freedom to hang out. So their avid migration to social media is a rational response to a crazy situation. They'd rather socialize F2F, so long as it's unstructured and away from grown-ups. "I don't care where," one told Boyd wistfully, "just not home."

Forget the empathy problem—these kids crave seeing friends in person.

In fact, Boyd found that many high school students flock to football games not because they like football but because they can meet in an unstructured context. They spend the game chatting, ignoring the field and their phones. You don't need Snapchat when your friends are right beside you.

So, parents of America: The problem is you; the solution is you.

If you want your kids to learn valuable face-to-face skills, conquer your own irrational fears and give them more freedom. They want the same face-to-face intimacy you grew up with. "Stranger danger" panic is the best gift America ever gave to Facebook.