

COUNSELING THE ADOLESCENT: WHAT CHANGES HAS THE INTERNET (AND TECHNOLOGY) WROUGHT?

Michael F. Shaughnessy^{1*}, Colin Hannaford², Zoey Mahan³

¹Eastern New Mexico University, Portales, New Mexico, **USA**

²Oxford, **ENGLAND**

³Yucca Valley High School, Yucca Valley, California, **USA**

*Corresponding author: Michael.Shaughnessy@enmu.edu

ABSTRACT

The adolescent in the year 2015 is quite unlike the adolescent of 20 years past. Counselors need to be sensitive to the world view of these students, and be aware of the fact that the adolescent may have a totally different perspective on life, liberty and their pursuit of happiness, and perhaps be less capable of coping with emotions, and interpersonal issues and agendas. This paper explores some of these issues and provides some guidance for counselor trainers.

Keywords: *adolescent, counselor, trainers*

INTRODUCTION

The adolescent of today has grown up in a world of technology, computers, the Internet, text messaging and a world constantly bombarded with various cultural messages. The influence of the parents, while still large in certain instances, has often become negligible. The peer group –either the “live” in person peer group, or the “group” with which the adolescent interacts and texts on a daily basis has become a more dominant force in the lives of the typical adolescent.

The counselor who is attempting to help the adolescent with various issues is often dealing with the fact that the adolescent is more apt to listen to the peer group on the Internet, seek help and guidance from those he or she texts with, and to listen to friends, that are often anonymous or have never been met and who may be miles or even states away from the adolescent.

Can the counselor effectively establish a relationship with an adolescent whose main preoccupation is texting a possible girl friend or sexting others or even sending lurid pictures over the cell phone?

Certainly, the establishment of empathy is of importance, but counselors today may have to take into consideration the fact that they may be fighting an uphill battle in certain instances. They may no longer hold that central position of prominence that they once held. They may no longer be a type of “guide on the side” but an adult that the adolescent sees as hopelessly inept.

THE ADOLESCENT PERCEPTION OF COUNSELORS

Relatively little has been published on current adolescent perceptions of counselors. Even in the past, adolescents did not always hold counselors in high regard. Some adolescents went for counseling as required by the courts, or as needed for class schedule changes in the schools. This is obviously an area that needs to be explored. In fact, the adolescent perception of "teachers" as "talking heads" and purveyors of information, (as well as perhaps "a guide on the side") should also be examined. Parents may not have nurtured their children, due to their own stressors, or due to whatever reasons, and the parent- to adolescent relationship may have been or is, strained. Counselors may become involved trying to rectify or re-establish a quality relationship between parent or parents and adolescent, or may simply see the tension and distance as part of the "adolescent" coming of age.

The adolescent's self- perception may have been established more through the Internet, than through any success on the sports field or in the classroom. Their self-esteem may have been formed through computer games, and their participation in Dungeons and Dragons or some other endeavor.

THE INTERNET AND THE ADOLESCENT

Within the last 20 or so years- the Internet has become this pervasive, all encompassing, almost tyrant of a communication device that permeates almost everyone's life. Information has become almost instantaneous, and the impact of the Internet has become a truly existential change in the way we live our lives, do business, and interact with others.

Adolescents have become attached to their ipads, ipods, cell phones and they text message a great deal of the time. Their e-mails and text messages have become their source of communication and their emoticons their way of expressing themselves in the most intimate way that they can. Some adolescents have even indicated to one of the authors that "life would not be worth living" without these gadgets and devices.

Tethered to these devices, the adolescent becomes dependent on an electronic system of communication and linked to other individuals from around the globe to gain their perspective on things and glean their insights on current events-rather than think for themselves.

The very great benefit of the internet is, however, two-fold.

The first is that it has become a now indispensable source of information, of every kind. That this includes the manic and mad, only means that the manic and mad, who once might have remained unchallenged, can be challenged. Blogs exist and if one expresses an opinion that is contrary to the norm, they are besieged by an avalanche of diametrically opposing forces.

This, however produces the internet's second great benefit: that it forces its users to learn the necessity, and then the ability, to discriminate. Finding that many different explanations of the same phenomena or facts are available, they must learn to decide themselves that which is the most useful to their own

understanding. They need to begin to think about the reality of space aliens and other weird phenomenon.

The Enlightenment began in Europe with the publication of the Bible in English and German. This forced the ordinary English and Germans to learn to read. The internet is having a very similar effect. The Internet is akin to the Gutenberg Bible in that it has made knowledge, information, opinions and other trivia available to a very wide mass audience.

THE IMPORTANCE OF INTIMACY IN ADOLESCENT DEVELOPMENT

Adolescents that are about to engage in sexual intercourse need to learn about emotional intimacy before engaging in sexual intimacy. For many adolescents, their first sexual experience can be a most moving inter-personal experience. However, if both of the parties, turn to their cell phones to communicate to the world or to simply check their messages, I am not sure how much meaning is attributed to the experience or "first time". Further, if pictures are taken of that momentous moment, prying eyes can see and a record of the event is now available for others to examine.

Often, inter-personal relationships are formed first in Second Life or "Chat Rooms". When one finally encounters the other person in real life, there is often disappointment.

Shakesby and Shaughnessy (1992) have written about the development of adolescent sexual and emotional intimacy- indicating that for some adolescents, sexual intimacy precedes emotional intimacy and interpersonal intimacy. Shaughnessy (1986) has written about self-disclosure as an important part of emotional intimacy and the lack of true self-disclosure. Shaughnessy (1995) has further developed these issues relative to human growth and development. Shaughnessy, Cordova, Strickland, Smith, & Eisenman (1995) have discussed the emotional sensitivity that many adolescents have. This is a major problem for counselors in that small slights are often seen as major rejections, and major rejections can lead to self-harm and possibly suicide. Siegel and Shaughnessy (1995) have indicated that adolescence is a time of many first- first job, first date, first romance, first sexual experience, and as such these experiences hold much meaning for teenagers and adolescents. However these experiences are now couched in a realm of the Internet where details and data can be shared and teenagers can either receive accolades or criticism or negative feedback.

Meaningful interpersonal relationships can begin in an internet chat room, or they can begin in study hall or cafeteria or on the basketball court. Social skills can be developed in "real time" in real relationships or they can develop artificially via some chat room.

Shaughnessy and Eisenman (1995) have examined cursorily both the positive and negative aspects of adolescents being on the internet and spending an enormous amount of time playing games, surfing and learning a lot of useless trivia and nonsense.

THE REALM OF EMOTIONS AND EMOTICONS

Adolescents are at a stage where they begin to clarify their feelings and emotions, and hopefully begin to label them correctly and utilize their expressive language to communicate with peers and significant others. For some adolescents, they have been using gross emoticons to convey perhaps complex emotions. Counselors may need to look at their clients and ascertain how available they are in terms of their emotions, and how much they are able to express and feel their own emotions and how much they are in touch with their different emotional states. While it is all well and good to send a "smiley face"- there are various degrees of happiness- and there is varying degree of sadness. And there are various states of anxiety, turmoil, stress, distress, anger, frustration, exasperation, and there are often fine lines between these states that need to be clarified. Often, adolescents have a difficult time indicating their emotional state and communicating their emotional state to others. They may have good communication skills via e-mail and texting, but they may have difficulty communicating the bewildering array of emotions that they encounter during their adolescent years of "sturm und drang" or storm and stress.

In order to ascertain the perceptions and feelings of an adolescent regarding the Internet and texting, the first author sought out a distant niece and asked this person to provide some thoughts from a typical adolescent point of view. While this is simply a one case study sample, it does provide some insight into the inner workings and machinations of an average teenager.

FROM AN AVERAGE TEENAGER'S PERSPECTIVE:

Over the years I've been using the internet I have learned a lot about myself that I may have never known and formed opinions I may never have had. There are many appreciable reason the internet is useful. Having access to the internet is quite like having most knowledge at your fingertips. Easy and convenient. In this generation it seems more and more kids are abusing drugs and alcohol simply because they are bored. The internet creates fun and creative hobbies whether it's a blog or editing videos and even writing or reading fan fictions. Kids that experience or go through an affliction with the way they feel such as depression are too often afraid or feel uncomfortable to speak out with the way they feel. Through the internet they have the choice to reach out and ask for help anonymously.

Most adults with a job and a family don't have the time to attend college again to get a higher education, having access to the internet has allowed many families to attend college online for a higher education. The internet also gives us an opportunity to reach out to distant family members that could be in a different country without cost.

TEXTING

My opinion on texting is indifferent. There are many positives and negatives with texting.

Without texting it would be hard to keep in contact with deaf family and friends. Texting also helps with reminders. Kids that take medicine may forget throughout the day to take their medicine. With a text reminder it's easier to remember to take their medication. In special emergencies such as a hostage situation you would not be able to contact an emergency number, now, you can text an emergency number the location and situation to get help.

Texting is great when you need to send a quick reminder or a quick "have a good day" text. But where I become at odds with texting is when people start to use texting as a reason not to have an actual conversation with someone. It can distract us from seeing the things around us and enjoy the people we are with in person and the little things that they do. Texting can often block us off on what is going on and soon forget how to interact with other people verbally and physically."

In the above anecdote from one case study, the time saving features and realistic aspects of both the Internet and texting are noted. However, the writer clearly indicates the down sides to texting in terms of "interacting with other people verbally and physically".

Should the Counselor Be Directive or Non Directive in this Age of the Internet?

The typical counselor is faced with somewhat of a dilemma. Knowing the impact of the Internet, and texting, and cell phones- is the counselor to comment on how these things detract from the experience of being human. Should the counselor reflect on what Carl Rogers might say to a student who was texting away during a counseling session.

Should the counselor think internally about the student or client meeting their needs as per Abraham Maslow in the counseling session as the pupil or adolescent types away? Or should the counselor attempt to rectify and remediate any irrational or illogical beliefs in an Albert Ellis manner?

The counselor does have some ethical obligations to a student that is using, abusing, drugs, alcohol, LSD, etc. What are the ethical issues and obligations regarding cell phone use and abuse, and when is this behavior a form of addiction? Parents will complain about their children being addicted to the computer and computer games, and some have sought help. The adolescent may not see their computer or cell phone use as a problem. However, it may interfere with their optimal functioning, and school work.

SOME ISSUES; SOME AGENDAS

In this age of sexting, texting, and often promiscuous behavior, it would do counselors well, on behalf of their clients to discuss perhaps how much they are involved in releasing their private information and whether or not they are sharing intimate information or to put it bluntly sharing pictures of their private parts on

the Internet or on a phone line. While the client may be in a very one to one relationship, often relationships sour and couples break up and while one may trust another during a relationship- this does not mean that a certain person might have a vindictive nature, or think it humorous to share provocative pictures with friends that could conceivably get around the school or community.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

What changes then, has the Internet, texting, sexting and technology had on the way in which counselors approach, work with and counsel adolescents. There has been little empirical evidence of the impact of the Internet, but we can assume that a good deal of time is spent surfing the Net, and forming relationships on the cell phone and many relationships are maintained in this manner.

Suggestions for Counselors in this Age of the Internet.

- 1) Counselors may want to keenly evaluate the social and interpersonal skills of their clients. While their presenting problems may be some other issue, often at best, those issues could be related to a social skill deficit or an inter-personal deficit or some idealized view of humanity stemming from the Internet.
- 2) Counselors need to be aware of the culture and zeitgeist in which their client has grown up in. Some clients may come from a single parent home, in which their external contact has been with "friends" on the Internet. Clients also need to be aware of predators out there who may seek out naive adolescents for manipulation or exploitation.
- 3) Counselors should caution clients about the danger of the Internet. One cannot assume that the parent or parents or the school has done this. While some schools do have programs that alert students as to predators, that information may have only been cursorily absorbed by the client.
- 4) Counselors may want to employ a heavy dose of Glasser's Reality Therapy. There is a reality out there that needs to be met and confronted. College tuition, books, and room and board are not free and parents may not have saved any money and grants and loans and scholarships may not be available.
- 5) Counselors need to keep in mind both short term and long term issues- not all adolescents have the executive functioning to develop long term plans for their future. This should be part of their overall treatment plan.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

This paper has cursorily reviewed some of the issues in terms of counseling in this age of the Internet and text messaging. Some concerns that need to be addressed were elaborated upon and some suggestions and guidance were forthcoming.

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