R.E.A.L.® Discussion

Let's Talk About It:

Teaching Face-to-Face Communication Skills as Preventative Care for Teens' Mental Health

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Have you noticed that kids today aren't talking to each other?

They're *connecting* with each other, certainly. They're spending hours interacting with one another from behind the comfort (and, at times, the agony) of their screens. Yet when kids are off-screen, together, they struggle to talk – and listen.

Teenagers today type intuitively, write code, take portait-mode photos with a single click – but they don't have the foundational human skill of face-to-face conversation. Conversation is how humans are biologically wired to connect with each other – it's how we feel seen, heard, trusted, and loved. Today's headlines document a stunning sense of disconnectedness: increased sadness, hopelessness, alienation, and violence among youth, especially among adolescents who identify as girls and LGBTQ. Elsewhere, research on men and boys also documents increased alienation and decreasing pro-social behaviors. The Surgeon General's three recent reports to the nation declare an "Epidemic of Loneliness and Isolation" (2023) and a Youth Mental Health Crisis (2021). It is well-established that positive social relationships are essential for individual wellbeing, and every relationship begins – and over time deepens – with conversation.

But thanks to heightened screen time, the prevalence of social media, prolonged isolation due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and societal and cultural shifts, today's teens have lost a critical part of childhood and adolescence: navigating regular interactions – sometimes uncomfortable ones – that happen in-person. At R.E.A.L.®, we're finding growing discomfort with face-to-face conversation, which once seemed a basic skill. We're seeing that without the perceived protection of a screen, teens don't really know how to communicate.

"[The benefits of technology] come at a cost," declares the Surgeon General's 2023 report. "Technology can also distract us and occupy our mental bandwidth, make us feel worse about ourselves or our relationships, and diminish our ability to connect deeply with others." Teens hooked on tech are both afraid to speak for fear of being bullied or "canceled" and unsure of how to truly listen.

It begs the question: is one cause of today's mental health crisis another crisis entirely? We believe it is. We believe today's teens are grappling with a *communication* crisis, which is heightening their feelings of isolation, disconnect, anxiety, and depression. We believe that in-person communication is broken, and its loss is not just a disappointing byproduct of a digital world, but truly dangerous.

If this is the case, how can adults intervene? How can they repair these broken communication channels in order to restore trust with and among a generation of children who don't know how to speak and listen? How can adults reach children upstream, *before* the onslaught of hormones and screen time leaves adolescents feeling anxious and alone? Before typical sparks of teen emotions burn out of control, and appropriate feelings of depression and sadness turn tragic?

In this paper, we'll:
- ›› Explore Gen Z's current communication habits and examine how they relate to wellbeing
- ›› Examine the mental state of today's teens
- ›› Consider how explicitly teaching in-person communication skills in schools could help today's students
- ›› Discuss the role – **and power!** – teachers can have in reversing this teen "Communication Crisis"

How Today's Teens Communicate

It's unsurprising that in-person communication is challenging for today's teens; the majority of their waking hours are spent in front of screens.

According to the CDC, kids aged 11-14 spend nearly 9 hours per day in front of a screen for entertainment. Older teens aged 15-18 are only slightly behind, clocking in at 7.5 hours per day. A December 2022 Morning Consult survey found that 54% of Gen-Zers spend four or more hours on social media every day, and 38% spend even more time than that.

Social media and messaging apps have emerged as digital meeting places, which have largely replaced in-person arenas for conversation and connection. In 2018, *Time* reported on a Common Sense Media survey finding that 35% of teens named texting as their favorite method of communication, and fewer than one third of respondents said they preferred face-to-face conversation. This stands in stark comparison to a 2012 survey, in which a plurality of teens reported preferring to communicate with friends in-person.

According to the report, "about one-third of respondents said that they never, or hardly ever, put their phones away when visiting family, doing homework, or having a meal with someone.

An even higher proportion (55%) say that their phones are almost always out when they're spending time with friends."

Teens are spending a huge volume of time alone with their screens – and even when they are *not* alone, their phones remain close by. Then, they serve as comforting crutches that can transport them to familiar digital spaces – even while teens are aware that the sites they frequent may not positively impact their mental health. Indeed, a 2017 study by the Royal Society for Public Health found that "young users had, on net, negative opinions of the effects that highly social apps like Instagram and Snapchat were having on their mental well-being."

While some teens do express concern and even discomfort regarding the amount of time they spend on screens and, specifically, using social media, they also report feelings of relief that accompany their time online.

Several teens who participated in a *New York Times* focus group shared this sentiment. "Online feels more peaceful and calming. You don't have to talk with anybody in person or do anything in person. You're just sitting on your bed or chair, watching or doing something," said 14-year-old Nate.

"Discussion skills are useful for when I have to talk to humans; it's not as scary," reported one student.

"Now after R.E.A.L.®, I can go into a store and not stand there with my head down when somebody is talking to me," said another.

In our own work, we've witnessed a similar phenomenon: students say they are afraid to interact with real people, in real time.

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As is the case with so much of adolescence, teens' use of screens is complicated. In their book *Behind Their Screens: What Teens Are Facing (And Adults Are Missing)*, Harvard Project Zero researchers Emily Weinstein and Carrie James discuss the push-and-pull of phone usage among teenagers, particularly in the context of human connection. "Teens describe how friendships are on the line. Disconnecting means being out of the loop socially, risking being seen as rude or, worse, being unavailable for a struggling friend."

Today's teens are caught in an uncomfortable paradox. The relative anonymity and control of online life prompts them to retreat further from in-person interactions, which in turn become stressful because of their live nature: in-person interactions require authenticity – no filters, no time to wait and see how others respond before you do, no immediate "likes" from your nine best friends, no space to cry and fix your mascara before posting your response.

According to author, speaker, and professor Brene Brown, "trust is choosing to make something important to you vulnerable to the actions of someone else." Digital interactions allow teens to sidestep this all-important vulnerability.

Today's teens exist in curated, controlled digital environments, where they're both hyper-present and where their authentic selves may be completely invisible. They're often navigating these spaces alone – and adults can't see them.

How Screen Time Affects Life Off-Screen

How does all this time spent online affect kids offline? The short answer is: *we don't really know*. A 2018 study by Jacqueline Nesi, Sophia Choukas-Bradley, and Mitchell Prinstein developed an entirely new framework to attempt to understand peer relations in a social media context. A 2020 systematic literature review examined the offline interpersonal outcomes of social media on today's youth, hunting for evidence of either a positive or negative correlation between constant online activity and offline "interpersonal competence" capabilities, including conversational and relationship skills, the ability to provide emotional support, and the expression of honest opinions while managing conflicts.

This review found, overwhelmingly, mixed results. Social media use *can* have positive offline implications for teens – but it can also lead to challenges including "alienation from peers, family, and school, relational aggression, relationship quality with parents, and perceived isolation." There are multiple theories as to why these challenges arise. For example:

"Putnam (1995) proposed the *time displacement hypothesis* in that media use may distract from social activities and interpersonal interaction opportunities in which social and communication skills need to be practiced. Such time displacement has been linked to adverse impacts on social development in young people (Dreier et al., 2013)."

These adverse impacts on social development are troubling – not just from a "feel good" standpoint, but

form a public health perspective. The Harvard Study of Development, a multi-generational study in which researchers tracked participants and their families over multiple decades, found that interpersonal competence is closely correlated to physical health and longevity. In their book *The Good Life: Lessons from the World's Longest Scientific Study of Happiness*, study co-directors Robert Waldinger and Marc Shulz write:

> **"To say human beings require warm relationships is no touchy feely idea; it is a hard fact. Scientific studies have told us again and again: human beings need nutrition, we need exercise, we need purpose, and we need each other [...] after eighty four years of study and hundreds of research papers there is one simple message: positive relationships are essential to human well-being".**
>
> –Robert Waldinger and Marc Shulz

If positive relationships are essential to human well-being, and – at best – we can't be sure whether the pervasive use of social media can damage teens' ability to form such relationships, then we as adults need a Plan B. Adolescents need preventative care for what we know is a mixed bag of the effects of growing up in a digital world. Helping students develop authentic communication skills offline can help build a much-needed safety net, so we can intervene before routine negative adolescent emotions reach crisis levels.

Why Today's Teens are in a Communication Crisis

As the CDC reported in February, today's teens are grappling with unprecedented levels of depression. Girls are especially vulnerable to mental health challenges, with 30% reporting that they seriously considered attempting suicide in 2021. This represents a 60% increase over the past decade.

"These data show our kids need far more support to cope, hope, and thrive," noted Debra Houry, M.D., M.P.H., the CDC's Chief Medical Officer and Deputy Director for Program and Science. In May, the Surgeon General's office underscored the concern, noting that Americans in general are experiencing unprecedented levels of social isolation, which is often exacerbated by the pervasive use of technology.

In an NBC News article analyzing the CDC's report, Julie Cerel, the director of the Suicide Prevention & Exposure Lab at the University of Kentucky, said normalizing conversations about mental health was critical in preventing related crises. She stressed the importance of a "universal safety planning" strategy predicated on relationships, which recommends identifying trusted adults and keeping their phone numbers accessible, as well as asking teens whom they would call if they felt overwhelmed.

That strategy, however, assumes that teenagers would make a call at *all* in times of duress.

It assumes teenagers would know *how* to have an important but challenging conversation. It assumes they would have enough confidence communicating live to know what to say and how to say it.

That may, in fact, be a broad assumption. Lisa Damour, a psychologist and the author of *The Emotional Lives of Teenagers*, shared one anecdote to exemplify the anxiety teens may quietly harbor about in-person interactions:

> "As the event approaches, whether it's a get-together with a friend or going to a game, he becomes very very tense and very very anxious about going. So the closer it gets, the more likely he becomes to say ok never mind, I'm just not going to go.
>
> When he does that…two things happen at once. First, he instantly feels better. It actually *does* relieve his anxiety to decide not to go. As soon as he avoids, he feels instantly better. And we call that a reinforcing experience…The other problem is that whatever he imagined about how frightening that social activity was going to be goes completely unchallenged."
>
> –Dr. Lisa Damour, *The Emotional Lives of Teenagers*

Damour goes on to explain that it's not the responsibility of adults to shield teenagers from any negative emotions at all. Rather, it's their job "to help [teenagers] have adaptive and effective ways to handle upsetting feelings when they invariably arise."

How, though, can adults reach teens before their natural, age- and situation-appropriate emotions spiral out of control and lead to crisis? How can they help children arrive at a productive, strategic conversation if teens are too overwhelmed or anxious to engage in such a conversation in the first place?

If today's teens don't have the basic conversation skills they need to first establish trust with an adult and second communicate duress to that adult when it arises, how can adults adequately plan for their safety?

> There is good news: these skills can – and *must* – be taught.

Teaching Face-to-Face Communication Skills as Preventative Care

The macro factors contributing to teenagers' unhappiness – i.e., post-pandemic isolation and anxiety, the prevalence of social media, heightened screen time, etc. – are unlikely to fade any time soon. That means adults need to find a form of preventative care for screen-bound, conversation-resistant teens.
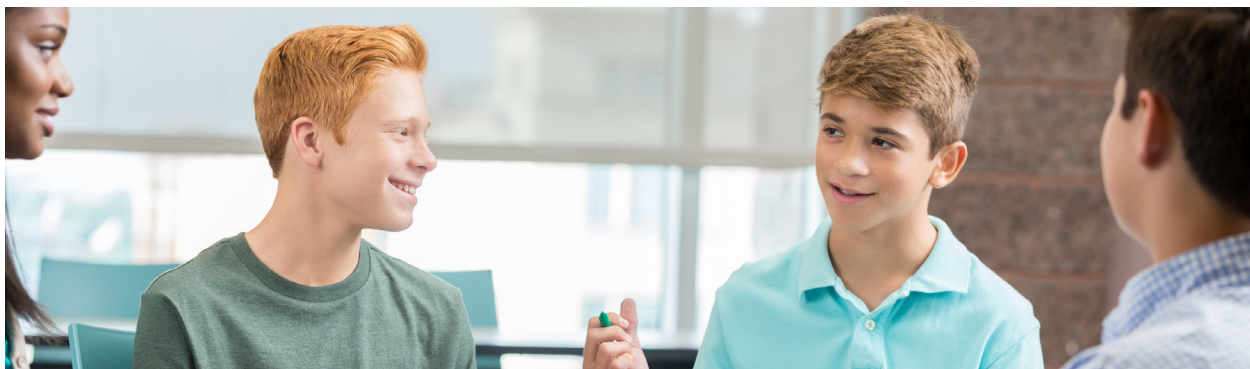
Schools can be incubators of foundational, relational skill development if they arm teachers with the tools they need to instruct students in how and why to have comprehensive, compassionate, respectful, and dynamic face-to-face conversations.

According to Authentic Connections co-founder Nina Kumar, "resilience (or doing well despite stress) rests on relationships, so if we want kids to learn well, we need to make sure that they feel supported."

Teachers have a unique opportunity to support their students with face-to-face interactions and conversations that happen every day. What's more, when they're given the tools they need, they have the ability to teach students the communications skills they need to strengthen relationships and develop resilience in other areas of their lives.

> "The thing that we hear most often is that in schools, aspects of relationships that are negative have a stronger impact than the positive ones. Feeling embarrassed, for example, has a bigger impact than hearing positive things, even though many teachers and schools work so hard on giving kids emotional support."
>
> –Nina Kumar, Authentic Connections

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At R.E.A.L.®, our foundational belief is that the face-to-face communication skills Gen Z students lack can be taught — and that teaching them can make a difference.
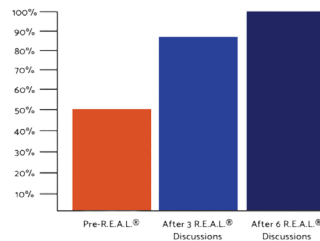
In our work, we have found that face-to-face communication skills are teachable – and students feel relief and confidence in learning them.

At one school, for example, we found that 50% of self-described introverts did not feel comfortable asking a question in class.

After three R.E.A.L.® discussions, 88% of those students had gained that confidence.

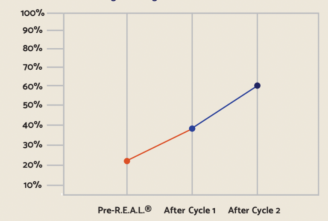After six, 100% of introverts were comfortable asking questions.

Self-Described Introverts' Confidence Asking Questions in Class Discussions

100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%

Pre-R.E.A.L.®   After 3 R.E.A.L.®   After 6 R.E.A.L.®
                 Discussions   Discussions

In another school, we noticed that students felt comfortable speaking up when they agreed with one another ... but found disagreeing frightening.

Over the course of six R.E.A.L.® discussions, we saw a 37 point increase in the number of students who reported that disagreeing in class was not scary.

Over the course of six discussions, we saw a 37 point increase in the number of 9th grade students who report that it is not scary to disagree in a graded class discussion.

100%
90%
80%
70%
60%
50%
40%
30%
20%
10%

Pre-R.E.A.L.®   After Cycle 1   After Cycle 2

"I have social anxiety, but now I can feel safe when I have something to say to my class."
-9th grade student

"I think that having the ability to ask and clarify what people mean is very helpful in real life. Instead of just listening to the person, confused but scared to ask what they mean, you can just ask and then they will explain and it will be very helpful."
-7th grade student

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In our view, training teachers to teach these skills is no longer just about enhancing class discussions. Rather, it's a form of preventative care.

This post-pandemic moment in time presents a unique opportunity to change the way we think about foundational skills like conversation, the role schools play in establishing these skills, and the support teachers need to provide necessary instruction. In his book *From Reopen to Reinvent*, education strategist Michael Horn makes the claim that the traditional educational model doesn't work for today's learners or teachers – and encourages schools to innovate their educational practices with a renewed focus on human relationships.

Schools can implement important tools to help encourage the development of foundational relational skills, like peer counseling programs and policies that discourage or restrict phone usage. They can also offer teachers the tools and frameworks they need to make a difference in students' abilities to converse and communicate in the classroom.

Schools can train teachers in communication skills instruction, so their students can learn *how* to speak up, *how* to disagree respectfully, *how* to gain confidence in their own voices, and *how* to listen. Only once teens know how to do these things can we expect them to use these skills in and outside the classroom – with their friends, their families, and adults whom they trust and to whom they turn for help.

"As educators, perhaps our most important role right now is spending in-person time with a generation in crisis, being human-centered in a tech-centric world," says Garonzik. "How can we make sure that every minute matters? How can we make sure that every child feels seen and heard in every class? That level of care – and emphasis on the power of face-to-face communication – won't solve the mental health crisis, but it can help build the relational skills that are foundational to wellbeing."

"When we look at our entire society, teachers are probably the people who are spending *the* most off-screen time with adolescents of everyone in the population. At a very large scale, what kind of training should they have? In the same way a teacher has to be CPR-certified, shouldn't they have some kind of training in how to help kids develop communication skills they need – for learning and life?"

–Liza Garonzik, R.E.A.L.® Founder

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At R.E.A.L.® Discussion, we provide educators with tools to teach face-to-face communication skills to students who would rather text than talk.

Our methods equip teachers to embed and assess these skills within existing academic curricula – not as a stand-alone SEL program.

Reach out today to learn more.

hello@REALdiscussion.org l www.realdiscussion.org

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