

## Text Messaging Dangers: Do yur kds snd msgz lik DIS 1?

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Today, text messaging language, “text-speak” or “texting” has become a common and acceptable way to communicate in the United States when one is using a cell phone or portable electronic communication device—and the term “text messaging” is used primarily in the United States. Outside of the United States, however, individuals refer to these little cell phones messages as Short Message Service, or they simply call it “SMS.”

### History

Short Message Service was first used by consumers only outside of the United States. It was an accidental success with consumers that took nearly everyone in the portable electronic communication industry by surprise. In fact, SMS was developed as a novelty, add-on item rather than as a serious option for cell phone users. Because of this, very few people in the portable communication industry predicted that the use of their SMS service would become popular. When the SMS service was first offered to consumers there was little mention of SMS by the various cell phone network operators. It was only after SMS became a commercial success with the public that it was strongly advertised.



Today text messaging or SMS has become a triumph for the younger generation who live in an age where the brief and simple is highly prized. Every generation needs a “glitzy” language that it can adopt as its own. In 2000, the younger generation worldwide took up text messaging. Ironically, it was only because the early SMS service was so very difficult to use that young people said that they were going to overcome the cell phone push button interface and master the service. The very fact that the knowledge barriers of the text messaging were high was also an advantage because it meant that parents, teachers, and other adult authority figures were unlikely, unable, or unwilling to use the service—much less decipher the heavily abbreviated language. As a result, now young people can easily sit at the table with their parents and surreptitiously “talk trash” with a friend by using text messaging in conjunction with a cell phone or some other portable electronic communication device.

Today the abbreviated text messaging language has become extremely popular worldwide. In fact, when I was in New Zealand teaching for INTERPOL I learned that the New Zealand Qualifications Authority had taken the controversial step of allowing its students to use the text-speak language in order to answer questions on all national exams.

Unfortunately some adults are unfamiliar with text messaging or have never used a cell phone to send someone a text message. A text message sent on a portable communication device can only be up to 160 characters of text or spaces in length. Those 160 characters and spaces can comprise words, numbers or an alphanumeric combination of both. Even though composing the text messages with a cell phone keypad requires great finger dexterity, most young people are capable of composing a text message without even looking at the digital plate on their phone. Regrettably, law enforcement has found that the use of this service has caused a significant unexpected problem as evidenced by the large number of traffic accidents that are caused by individual’s typing or reading text messages while driving a car.

Text messaging popularity has caused a whole new alphabet or language to emerge only because a text message physically takes a long time to enter onto a communication device. People initially attempted to say as much as possible in the text message with as few cell phone keystrokes as possible. Text messaging abbreviations such as “C U L8er” which is short for “see you later” have sprung up not only for timesaving, but also coolness. As a result, simple three-letter

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abbreviations in a text message can now express an opinion much more assertively than spelling out the words. Another popular text messaging tool is for children and teens to use “smileys” or emoticons, both of which represent stylized facial expressions, in order to reduce the abruptness of the text message or to help indicate the mood of the person in a way that was previously difficult by using only letters.

### **Dangers for Children**

When parents purchase a cell phone or electronic communication device for their child or teen, most do it for safety reasons. Unfortunately, young people today only see these devices as a direct link to their social lives. With a cell phone young people can send text messages to friends and acquaintances, thus quickly reaching out to even more friends.

The cell phone has created a new way for kids to interact through the use of text messaging. Unfortunately it has also opened up a whole new world of possible ways that people can abuse a new system of interaction. Text messages can provide a bully complete anonymity. When a bully uses text messaging, the taunting words or the threats can sometimes be so powerful that they may be more painful than actual physical violence.

The child molester also enjoys the same complete anonymity with text messaging. A molester can easily contact a child or teen by the cell phone number that is posted on a child or teen’s social networking page. Law enforcement has found that it is very easy to pretend that you’re someone other than who you are, when only communicating by typing words back and forth in text messages.

Caring adults should also be aware that incessant text messaging by a child or teen can easily result in huge phone bills on the family’s wireless plan. Most wireless plans have a restriction on the amount of text messaging such as only offering 100 free text messages a month. After that it may go up to 15 cents for each new text message. Some parents have been shocked when they receive a monthly wireless bill in the thousands because of text messaging overuse by a younger family member. As a result some parents have been forced to switch to wireless plans that allow unlimited text messaging for the family.

### **Conclusion**

Communication technology and electronic devices are frequently evolving. Adults need to be aware of new technology and understand the features that are available on the devices. Unfortunately, gaining such knowledge will require time and effort. Prior to any parent or caring adult purchasing any type of electronic communication device for a child or teen there should be a frank discussion of the many unseen dangers and issues involved with today’s text messaging electronic communication.

In order to show how “hip” you are next time you have a discipline issue at home, you might consider texting this message back to your child or teen: **U r like so grounded 4ever cya.**

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## **News from the Virtus<sup>®</sup> Programs**

### **—Fourth Annual Conference for VIRTUS Program Coordinators—**

National Catholic Services, LLC, hosted the *Fourth Annual Conference for VIRTUS<sup>®</sup> Program Coordinators* on September 6th and 7th, 2007, at the Radisson Hotel and Suites in Chicago. We had 35 dioceses and 65 participants in attendance.

This conference is a great way for coordinators to meet, discuss common problems and solutions, learn the latest news regarding improvements to the program, and learn how to achieve an overall safe environment in parishes, schools and the many ministries engaged in by the Church.



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## Conference topics included:

- A presentation on how to maximize the continued use and value of the VIRTUS *Online*™ system.
- An update on the development outlook of the programs, including a preview of new resources.
- A discussion on compliance with the *Charter* and *Norms*, the next round of USCCB audits, establishing a physically safe environment, and care giving in crisis.
- Finally, an interactive discussion.

Paul Ashton, VIRTUS consultant and trainer, spoke on the ability to care for the needs of others. He explained that we must first be aware of our own limitations, needs, and abilities before we rush to meet the needs of others. Looking to the teachings of Saint Bernard of Clairvaux about the methods of the Holy Spirit—Infusion and Effusion—Dr. Ashton taught us how we will see the power of Grace working in our own lives, and through self examination we can turn ourselves from canals into reservoirs of God's Love and Grace.

We also had the pleasure of introducing Dawn Lemke, Church Mutual Insurance Group, and Amanda Moeller, Gallagher Bassett Services, Inc. Dawn and Amanda share a personal and professional commitment to the safety of children. Although the challenge of preventing child sexual abuse is perhaps the most formidable, attendees learned that there are many other related and even unrelated exposures that we can address to keep kids safe. Such exposures to harm include: vehicle and transportation safety issues; premise defects that may cause trips and falls, overturn of equipment or furniture upon a child; premise security and monitoring issues that expose children to uninvited and unwanted persons in a building or playground; fire or chemical hazards that could lead to serious injury or even death; and many more such concerns. Dawn and Amanda taught attendees many strategies for eliminating or mitigating these threats to children.

Teresa Kettelkamp and Sheila Kelly with the USCCB Office of Child and Youth Protection shed light on the upcoming audits as well as the overall commitment of the Office. Teresa and Sheila always add great insight to the conference.

We are already preparing for the Fifth Annual VIRTUS Conference, which will be held at the Embassy Suites Downtown Chicago Lakefront.

## —Protecting All Children—

The Church is now better able to promote the safety of children in all faith communities and even secular environments through the development of the secular version of the Protecting God's Children for Adults program. This new adaptation is entitled the Protecting All Children™ program, which provides a great opportunity to be able to take this program to other denominations and schools. This also will be helpful to dioceses when addressing Article 16 of the Charter:

**Article 16.** *Given the extent of the problem of the sexual abuse of minors in our society, we are willing to cooperate with other churches and ecclesial communities, other religious bodies, institutions of learning, and other interested organizations in conducting research in this area.*

The Protecting All Children program will further establish the Church's leading role in the prevention of child sexual abuse in all its forms, wherever and however it threatens the innocence or emotional and psychological well being of children. In this fashion also, the VIRTUS Programs will continue to fulfill their mission of outreach to assist all people in all communities throughout the United States.

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—PNAC, Rome—

We are honored to have been invited to present the VIRTUS Programs to the staff, administration, and seminarians of the Pontifical North American College in Rome on October 19 and 20, 2007. After providing a general introduction to The National Catholic Risk Retention Group and the VIRTUS Programs, we will present the full VIRTUS® Protecting God's Children for Adults™ training program, as well as information regarding and a demonstration of, several new program enhancements (e.g., bullying/violence prevention, technology safety and security, substance abuse prevention, and crisis management).



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