UNTANGLED

GUIDING TEENAGE GIRLS
THROUGH THE
SEVEN TRANSITIONS
INTO ADULTHOOD

Lisa Damour, Ph.D.

tioning the texts from the night before. To Lana's relief, an unspoken agreement developed between them. They were still friends, but Lana stopped being the recipient of Cassie's awful feelings.

For the most part, the work of joining a new tribe today looks a lot like it did back when we were teenagers. But Lana and Cassie's relationship reflects the one huge exception to this rule: your daughter will advance along this developmental strand while cultivating her social life on multiple channels. Today's girl must build and maintain her friendships while connecting in both real and virtual ways.

Social (Media) Skills

Most parents are stupefied by how attached girls become to their phones. The best explanation I've heard for this comes from danah boyd,* an activist and scholar who studies the role of technology in teens' social lives. In her words, "Teens aren't addicted to social media. They're addicted to each other." If you think about it, we were also addicted to each other as teenagers, but all we had was the Pliocene-era technology of our times: the Trimline phone. Every night, I turned myself into a one-girl fire hazard by using a ridiculously long phone cord to pull the family phone into my bedroom—strapping doorways closed and blocking the hallway in the process. And what did I do on the phone? Usually, not much. I'm sure I'm not the only one who sometimes held the phone to my ear, hardly talking, while doing homework "with" the person on the other end of the line. I even remember watching television while on the phone with a friend who watched the

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* Note that dr. boyd elects to spell her name in lowercase letters.

same show at her house, sometimes commenting on what we saw, but mostly just quietly enjoying each other's company. For most of us, being on the phone with our friends was a second choice—what we really wanted to do was hang out together. And when we could, we did.

When we compare the experience of today's teenager with our own, two things are starkly different. First, they want to be connected, just as we did, but today's technology allows for the kind of easy, pervasive communication that we could have only dreamed of while dozing off on our corded phones. Second, many of today's teens spend fewer long afternoons hanging out together than we did. Families who wish to give their children every opportunity (and have the resources to do so) often keep their kids tightly booked. Girls who are doing ungodly amounts of homework, playing three sports, developing as a musician, or engaged in some other demanding combination of activities, have little downtime. We already know that too much unsupervised time can lead to trouble for teenagers, but some girls are actually so busy that it's hard to find unstructured time with their friends.

At its best, digital technology gives teens a way to build and maintain their friendships even when they can't be together in person. At its worst, digital technology undermines a teen's capacity to cultivate meaningful in-person connections and actually amplifies the negative aspects of their relationships. New research finds that, when it comes to teens' social lives, what happens online reflects what happens in real life. Girls who enjoy happy, supportive friendships in real life use their digital communications to build those friendships, and girls who are having trouble getting along in person also have trouble getting along online. Put simply, the online environment brings the possibility of tribal activity, good or bad, to every minute of a girl's day.

Even for girls who have supportive on- and off-line relationships, research shows that intense use of digital technology can impair young girls' social skills and interfere with their healthy, face-to-face relationships. Not surprisingly, healthy relationships depend on complex and subtle social skills that are best learned in the context of real, not virtual, interactions. For this reason, I encourage parents to ban technology (including their own) from the places where humans learn and practice social skills. This includes the dinner table, your designated family nights, and perhaps even short car rides. And this is where the many demands on girls' time can be a good thing as girls benefit from participating in activities that suspend phone use while requiring interpersonal interaction.

We all know that digital communication can bring out the worst in how humans relate to one another. Talk with your daughter about unkind online behavior and make it clear that rules for virtual social behavior are the same as the rules for social behavior in the real world: she doesn't have to like everybody, but she should never conduct herself in ways that are less than polite. How much you need to supervise your daughter's social media activity will depend a lot on your daughter. Some girls use social media to stay in touch with good friends and would instinctively avoid conflict if they saw it online. Other girls interact with as many peers as possible online and can easily find themselves caught up in unpleasant social drama.

If your daughter isn't yet texting or interacting online, wait until she *really wants* a phone or social media accounts and make your right to supervise her activity a condition of gaining access to the digital world. Go with the begin-strict-then-loosen-up approach (known by teachers as "Don't smile till December") and start with frequent monitoring. It's always

easier to relax your rules than to create new ones when things already feel out of control. And remember that supervising your daughter's digital activity isn't all about busting bad behavior. You can use what you notice while monitoring to comment on how teens talk to one another and to discuss what should, and shouldn't, be shared digitally. If you know that your daughter is being sarcastic in her texts but aren't sure her friends can tell, gently point that out. Teenagers are learning what it means to be a friend both in person and online. So long as you don't overdo it, you may be able to offer some feedback and guidance.

If your daughter already has a phone and social media accounts, you might implement some rules if you haven't already. To do so, you'll need to say something like, "I know that I've given you total privacy with your phone and social media until now, but I'm thinking that was a mistake. If the whole world can know what you're doing digitally, I should have access too. So I'm going to start checking your phone and social media accounts from time to time." Should your daughter balk (a likely response), there are a couple of routes to consider. If you're paying for her phone, her computer, and her online access, you can stick to your guns and decide that funding her technology use means you can monitor it. Alternately, you can talk with your daughter about who *can* monitor her digital activity. I know of one insightful thirteen-year-old who explained, "It's not that I'm doing anything bad on my phone. We mostly just talk about who has crushes on who. When my friends come over, it's really weird if my mom and dad know all that." She and her parents came up with the solution of having her levelheaded seventeen-year-old cousin keep an eye on her digital activity. The thirteen-year-old didn't care if her cousin knew about the crushes in her tribe.

Most parents get to a point where it stops making sense to keep close tabs on their daughter's phone. If you are there, or when you get there, you can say, "If I hear that you are being unkind or inappropriate online, I'll let you know and we're going to figure out what to do. And remember that deleting information from your accounts doesn't mean it's gone—it's still out there somewhere." So long as you are financing your daughter's technology use, you can make the case to regulate her online activity. That said, we do well to remember that our parents had almost no idea how we acted with our friends. We made mistakes and we learned from them. For better or worse, we are in the first generation of parents who have detailed access to how our teens interact with one another. This means that we have a useful record of interactions that go poorly, but it can also mean that we have too much access to what should be private communications among teenagers.

When parents monitor their daughter's online activities, they often do so in an effort to keep her from making a permanent record of unseemly behavior. This is a valid rationale and one that we'll delve into in chapter 5, "Planning for the Future." As you consider the question of how much to monitor your daughter's social interactions online, it may help to ask yourself, "Am I doing this because I truly worry that she might do terrible things online, or am I doing this simply because I can?"

Joining a New Tribe: When to Worry

There are three conditions regarding your daughter's social life that should cause you to worry: if your daughter has no tribe, if your daughter is a victim of bullying, or if your daughter bullies her peers.

plex chemistry of her tribe and trigger far-reaching chain reactions. This is not to say that boys don't care about what happens with their friends; it is to say that boys seem to be less likely than girls to take on a peer's problem as their own. They're more likely to express the equivalent of, "Sorry to hear that you're struggling, buddy. Let me know how it shakes out."

Lana, from chapter 2, was discreet about Cassie's cutting and didn't talk about it with the other girls in their tribe, who would have also fretted about their friend. Instead, Lana worried about Cassie privately, lost a lot of sleep in the process, and needed help to get out from under the burden of caring for her friend. When your daughter has a close friend who is suffering, there's a good chance your daughter will suffer too, even if the problem isn't as worrisome as Cassie's. If a girl can't focus on her homework because her best friend's parents are splitting up, try, "You're a great friend—and you're upset because Tia is upset. But not getting your homework done doesn't help Tia feel better. What if you push pause on your worries just for tonight and get to bed at a reasonable hour? In the morning, you can come up with some fun ways to pull her attention away from her parents' troubles. Given that there's nothing either of you can do to change what's happening, that would be a really kind thing to do."

Coping by Posting

As a psychologist who began practicing long before digital media invaded our lives, I've been blown away by the power of technology to stunt girls' ability to recognize and manage their own feelings. Unfortunately, the end of latency (and the upsurge in emotions) occurs around the same time that many

young teens become regular users of computers and cell phones. This coincidence can cripple developing emotion-regulation skills if teenagers get into the habit of reaching for their phones or computers at the first whiff of a feeling. Girls who go online instead of sitting with their emotions—even if that emotion is just boredom—don't learn from what they are feeling or develop the skills they need to help themselves feel better.

It's not unusual for me to see girls in my practice who turn to technology when they're upset, but the most compelling example of this was Brooke, a boisterous eighth grader sent to me by a local neurologist. Brooke had stress headaches, and the neurologist was hopeful that psychotherapy would ease them by getting to the bottom of what was causing her stress. In our sessions, Brooke spent a lot of time telling me about the social drama that she and the other members of her tribe stirred up throughout the school day and then continued into the evening over social media. She fought frequently with the boys and girls in her circle and would describe to me—with what seemed to be remarkably *little* stress—the creative insults she delivered online to "even the score" for any meanness that came her way. From what I could tell, the artistry of Brooke's insults gave her a great deal of social power with girls in her group, but the guys weren't afraid to take her down a few pegs.

In the fall of her ninth-grade year, Brooke's boyfriend announced the end of their relationship online and cruelly detailed his complaints about her on a site used by their friends. Proudly, Brooke told me about how she had paid him back by posting screen shots of the affectionate texts he'd sent during their relationship, embellished now, of course, with her special flavor of ridiculing commentary.

Given that I often find myself taking care of teens on the *receiving* end of social cruelty, it was hard to hear Brooke's de-

light in her retaliatory skills and to resist lecturing her about how hurtful her behavior was for everyone else. But my job was to get to the bottom of Brooke's stress, so I worked to remember that her hurtful behavior was evidence that she, too, suffered.

Brooke's distress was well hidden; it lived outside of everyone's awareness, even her own. The instant that Brooke felt any emotional pain—shame, humiliation, rejection, fear—she turned the tables. In the short term, her strategy worked. She no longer felt small when she made someone else feel smaller. She no longer felt frightened of rejection when she proved that she could push others away with an even bigger shove. Of course there are many, far better ways to soothe distress and solve problems, but there have always been people who manage pain by inflicting it on someone else. Unfortunately, digital technology gives new power and potential to this unpleasant human impulse.

There's something to be said for detaching from others. When we are alone and disconnected from technology, we can reflect on our feelings, vent silently to ourselves or our diaries, and imagine what we might say or do while considering the impact of any real action. Everyone who grew up without digital technology recalls having written a letter we're glad we never sent or having a rant we're glad no one heard. Using private time to express and get to know a feeling lets the feeling come down to size, teaches us a great deal about ourselves, and acquaints us with our internal resources for managing distress. Social disconnection also allows time to develop a considered plan about how (or if!) we want to act on hard feelings. In other words, we have time to keep our thoughts and our feelings separate from our actions.

Obviously, digital technology takes away social isolation. Brooke never had to sit, alone, with an uncomfortable feeling.

She never had to reflect on what was happening inside of her or find a way to help herself feel better. The instant Brooke sensed a feeling she didn't like, she grabbed her phone and visited the feeling on someone else. She never even knew that she was in pain. All she knew was that she *needed* her phone.

There's more to how Brooke's system "worked." The far and instantaneous reach of digital technology made it easy for her to stir up a lot of drama, and do so quickly. Brooke didn't have to focus on her painful feelings when she could focus on the social explosions she was setting off. At root, I believe that Brooke was badly hurt when her boyfriend dumped her. Rather than tuning in to her distress about the end of the relationship, she turned her attention to following the social media storm her retaliatory messages inspired. Brooke's well-oiled reflex to go on the offensive created a destructive, self-reinforcing cycle. When she was upset, she attacked. When she attacked, she felt better because she was in the driver's seat, not the one being run over. From there, she could focus on the unfolding social drama, not her own painful feelings. Brooke's attacks provided short-term pain relief while setting the stage for more emotional distress (and, sadly, headaches) to come. She was mistreating her peers and they would soon return the favor. And when they did, she'd attack.

Brooke provides one example of how girls turn to digital technology to manage painful feelings instead of finding ways to ease their own distress or seeking the support of kind, non-virtual relationships. I've seen other girls turn to their phones every time they feel lonely. Rather than wondering about the reasons for their loneliness or making plans to get together with a potential friend, they search online for an instant connection or at least an immediate distraction from their isolation. Or girls start posting when they feel forgotten or marginalized. Instead of losing themselves in a book they

overshare online to pull attention their way. Or girls scan so-cial media when they worry they've done something gossip worthy. Instead of taking stock of their anxiety and what they can learn from it, they eagerly search for evidence that they are being discussed. Girls also turn to digital technology when excited, using it to announce good news or hard-won accomplishments. Even here, the digital world can interfere with a girl's ability to enjoy a good thing. Rather than savoring her happiness or sharing it with nonvirtual friends and family, she may find herself anxiously checking her posts to see if they are being "liked" or commented upon favorably.

As already suggested, hold off on giving your daughter ready access to social media for as long as you can. The longer she goes without knowing the drug-like buzz of connecting to peers digitally, the more internal resources she'll build up for managing hard feelings and solving problems. Next, also as already suggested, set some boundaries around where and when your daughter can access social media. Consider limiting or banning digital activity (for you and your daughter) while out and about together, at meals, and in the hour or so before bedtime—prime times when you might be able to have a meaningful conversation with her about what she's thinking and how she's feeling.

You can also help regulate your daughter's digital technology use by supporting, or, if necessary, requiring, her participation in extracurricular activities. While engaged with sports, plays, volunteering or paid positions, or any of the other amazing things teenage girls do, girls not only build their social skills, they invariably face emotional challenges that they have to manage. With limited access to their phones, they learn to summon their own resources or capitalize on in-person support. Without question, there are dangers to over-

scheduling. Girls who run from one activity to the next can suffer from unnecessary stress and, as we know, become disconnected from their families. But girls with too much time on their hands are more likely to misuse digital technology. As with most things in life, you'll want to help your teenager strike a healthy balance between these two extremes.

Look for opportunities to separate your daughter from technology for extended stretches of time. Demanding jobs, summer camps, and family trips can require—or inspire—long breaks from digital technology. Teenagers can be more willing to go along with no-tech trips if they are allowed to catch up with the digital world at preplanned times. While away from home, some families develop a rule that everyone is allowed to check his or her phone and computer for a half hour each morning and evening but otherwise agree to go off the grid.

Containing the amount of time your daughter spends on digital media—either through daily limits or longer periods of separation—will not, in and of itself, build her capacity to harness her emotions and become a self-sufficient problem solver. But limiting her digital access helps create the conditions that allow her to get to know her feelings. If she can't turn to a digital device every time she's upset, she will find other—probably better—ways to manage.

I wish I could tell you that I was able to help Brooke tune in to her distress and check her impulses to go online. In truth, she was reluctant to trade in her well-worn and surprisingly effective (if costly) tactics for what I was offering: the suggestion that getting to know her emotional pain might help her to make better choices *and* decrease the physical pain of her headaches. To make matters worse, Brooke's mother had long supported Brooke's habit of turning to digital technology when anything went wrong.

plans to do exactly what her mother ordered could not override the urge to rebuff her parent's request.

Your daughter's need to plan for her future presents you with a unique challenge: you want to guide and support her as she moves along this developmental strand, but you don't want your input to cause her to do the very opposite of what you suggest. This chapter will help you channel your daughter's press for independence toward meaningful future plans. We'll start with how you can leverage your daughter's own goals to help manage her online behavior.

Impulses, Meet the Internet

Parents rightfully worry about how teenagers conduct themselves online. With today's technology, a teenager can make, record, and broadly transmit evidence of impulsive misjudgment that can harm her at some point in the future. Anyone who spends time with teenagers knows that they routinely use technology to share things that they would not, ultimately, want a future boss or college admissions officer to see. For example, sexting—the practice of sending or receiving racy texts and pictures—is surprisingly common among teens: roughly 12 to 15 percent of teenagers report having sent sexts, while 15 to 35 percent (depending on the study) say they've received them. Research consistently finds that girls are more likely than boys to be asked (often pressured) to send sexts, though it is not clear that girls actually sext more than boys do. It's easy to vilify any teen who uses her phone to transmit bedroom content, but doing so points our attention in the wrong direction. Teenagers are and always have been impulsive. And really great teenagers sometimes do really dumb things. Un-

fortunately, digital technology makes it possible for teenagers to act on their impulses in ways that are immediate, public, and permanent.

Let's put it another way. If a popular eighth-grade boy had asked me to share a titillating photo when I was in the seventh grade, I probably would have given the request some consideration. Had I decided to go through with it, I would have had to find the family camera, make sure that it had film, take the photo, shoot off the rest of the roll, figure out what to do with the photos already on the roll, make sure I had money to replace the roll and pay to develop the photos, get myself to a one-hour photo developer (for speed and efficiency, of course!), wait for the pictures, and then figure out how to get my picture to the boy. Somewhere along the way I like to think that I would have reconsidered the wisdom of my plan and concluded that I was acting like an idiot. Today's teens exist without the benefit of the many behavioral speed bumps we had when we were teenagers. Not only can they act on their impulses with ease, they can create a sharable record in the process.

From this perspective we see that the issue isn't the impulses that come with adolescence, it's the potential that digital technology gives to them. Adolescent girls have always wondered about their power to draw attention, but they haven't always been able to send sexy photos or connect with strangers from their bedrooms. Teenagers have long experimented with illegal behaviors such as underage drinking, but they haven't always been able to post a photograph of their behavior where almost anyone can see it. Looking back on their own teenage years, most adults feel grateful that there's no easy-to-access document of all the dumb things they did.

It takes time to grow up, and making mistakes comes with the process. We couldn't whitewash adolescence and even if we

could, we wouldn't want to because the vibrancy of adolescence serves some developmental purposes. But still, we should aim to have girls arrive at adulthood without a damaging record of their youthful behavior hanging around their necks. The best way to address your daughter's online behavior will be to frame your concerns in terms of protecting *her own* long-term plans. We must help our daughters appreciate the real implications of a permanently recorded and readily shared adolescence.

Conveniently, the news is replete with stories of how regrettable emails, photos, or posts ultimately cost people their reputations or their jobs, so you'll have plenty of conversation starters on hand when your daughter gains regular access to digital technology. While you're at it, look up the sexting laws in your state. The legislation on this topic is changing rapidly. You and your daughter should be aware of the legal consequences of creating, sending, requesting, or even receiving a sexually explicit image of a minor.

When the time comes, talk with your daughter about the fact that she's about to create a record of her adolescence, sympathize with the unfortunate outcomes made possible by digital technology, and share with her how lucky the generations before her were to have tech-free teenage years. Be clear that you do not expect her to be an angel throughout her adolescence, but you are hoping—for her sake—that she doesn't make a digital record of any of her less-than-angelic impulses. By framing the conversation this way, you put the emphasis where it belongs, namely on your role as her ally in the effort to ensure that none of her regrettable impulses follow her indefinitely.

In addition to talking with your daughter about the importance of keeping her impulses away from the Internet, you'll want to put some digital speed bumps in place. When your

daughter first gets regular access to a phone or computer, you can, as I've already suggested, make her use of digital technology contingent upon your right to monitor her activity and have her passwords. If your daughter balks at this, remind her that you are doing so to reduce the chance that she'll act impulsively online. Let her know that if she'd like privacy, you're glad to leave her alone while she makes phone calls or to give her plenty of space to interact with friends in person.

Some parents think that they can better monitor their daughter's online activity if they do so in secret. Of course it's possible for girls to delete out-of-bounds content if they know you'll be checking their technology, but there are two good reasons why you should be honest about the fact that you are keeping an eye on your daughter's digital activity. First, knowing that you'll be checking not only gives your daughter an important speed bump, it provides her with a convenient excuse for bowing out of some digital naughtiness ("Guys, stop posting that junk on my page—my mom checks my account!"). Second, if you come across troublesome content while secretly monitoring your daughter's use, you're stuck. You can't confront your daughter without owning up to your sly behavior, and you may fear that if you admit to your snooping, you'll miss out on future valuable information. I've seen too many parents struggle with this exact dilemma while their daughter digs herself deeper into a bad situation.

Trustworthy older adolescents who are willing to talk with your daughter about her online persona may be one of the best speed bumps of all. Teenagers are quick to dismiss most adult perspectives on digital technology—they feel that we don't understand their technological world (I'm not sure they're wrong) and that the threats we point to ("You know, someone looking to hire you might check to see what you've been doing online") are too far in the future to be meaningful

to most teens. But young teenagers take very seriously the perspectives shared by older teenagers they respect. High school students occupy a future that seventh graders daydream about, and they can use their influence to shape your daughter's online activity. If you have access to trustworthy older cousins, neighbors, or beloved babysitters, ask them to talk with your daughter about the digital mistakes they regret making and their seasoned policies for technology use.

As your daughter ages, you'll need to renegotiate how, and how often, you supervise her technology use. The path forward depends heavily on how responsibly she's used technology so far. There are few truisms in psychology—humans are too complex to be reduced to one-liners—but here's one: the best predictor of future behavior is always, *always,* past behavior. If you want to know what someone is going to do, look at what she has done. If your daughter has handled technology well and hardly needed your monitoring, you're probably safe to let her proceed into late adolescence with minimal supervision and perhaps a simple warning that you'll revisit your loosened policy if news of any digital naughtiness comes your way. If your daughter's impulses routinely get the best of her online, continue to keep a close eye on her technology use or recruit the help of a trustworthy relative or young adult until she establishes a track record of responsible online behavior.

The Road to the Future: Who Drives?

The most immediate road to your daughter's future runs through her life at school, and by nearly every available measure girls, as a group, do well academically. They get better grades than boys, are less likely than boys to repeat a grade or drop out of school, consistently outperform boys in reading