

# kids these days...

By Dr. David Rideout, CEO  
North Central Alberta Child & Family Services Authority

## RU IMing?

I was a little surprised earlier this year to hear that kids these days are starting to give up on e-mail.

Apparently it's too slow and takes too long to wait for a response! So they've moved to text messaging on their cell phones, which is much faster in getting a reply.

There's no doubt we live in an incredibly fast-paced communications world, filled with new media applications such as Twitter, LinkedIn, Facebook and YouTube. Information is immediately available and anyone can be an author of postings or blogs no matter what the subject.

The power of these opportunities is tremendous, with the potential of creating messages that can reach people around the world within moments. It's hard to believe that some of this technology has only been around for less than a decade, but yet has rapidly become part of everyday life for young people.

In the world of Children and Youth Services, our staff members have started to use some of the new media as a tool to work with children and youth in care. For example, social workers sometimes send a quick text message to youth to keep in touch and ensure things are going well with them. Some of these applications are also helpful when staff members are trying to keep in touch with coworkers, especially in places that may be more remote. At a management level, the technology also helps us to accomplish work in a timely manner.

While these applications can be invaluable tools, sometimes there are unintended or even negative consequences for youth. Instant messaging can scar a person when used by bullies to tarnish someone's reputation, character or looks. It can also leave a damaging mark on

individuals who post something in anger or in haste, which they may later regret but are unable to take it back. If you thought home movies were embarrassing, take a look at some of the YouTube footage of people.

More recently, we have been hearing of the "sexting" phenomenon, when young people send explicit messages or photos of themselves or others through instant messaging technology. These messages may end up being viewed by people from around the world.

From an academic point of view, any person's opinion can be sent out over the Internet and interpreted by viewers as factual. No matter the validity of the source, it is out there without verification of sources or corroboration of facts. Even the English language is suffering a blow; there is an entire new language of acronyms that is specific to online activity. No longer do we have to worry about verb conjugation or spelling.

Whether we like it or not, those new media are here to stay - and there will be many other new ones in place over the next decade. The key is to shape those tools into something that helps humanity and not something that is used as a weapon against our children and youth. Parents and policy makers, together with youth themselves, have an important role in that task.

Those new technologies can be wonderful tools for good, if we figure out how to best use them!

---

Any feedback or comments are welcome and can be sent via email to [david.rideout@gov.ab.ca](mailto:david.rideout@gov.ab.ca)