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suns & daughters

By VICTORIA LAMBERT

YOU may be a dab hand at text-speak but few grown-ups send as many messages from their mobile phones as their kids do.

These days it's not unusual for teenagers to text each other all day long – and well into the night too.

Harmless fun? Not necessarily so, says a new report from America.

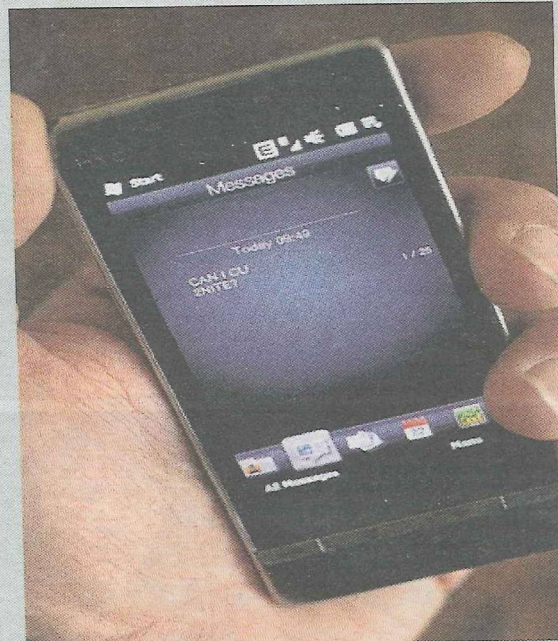
A study by the Case Western Reserve School of Medicine in Cleveland, Ohio, found that hyper-texting – sending more than 120 texts a day – could be a sign your child is more likely to smoke, booze and have sex.

The survey of more than 4,000 American teens found that sending out scores of texts and frantic networking – more than three hours a day on Facebook or Bebo, say – were associated with risky behaviour.

This is the latest in a line of reports warning of the dangers of texting.

Physiotherapists have also cautioned that it can bring on repetitive stress injuries in the wrists and arms.

Teens in the US have been warned about texting while driving or even walking, because it has led to them being involved in serious accidents. And



Docs' fears for text-mad teenagers

research at Monash University in Melbourne, Australia, found kids who texted the most were likely to give faster – but less accurate – answers in IQ tests.

And last year, neuroscientist Baroness Susan Greenfield, a professor at Oxford University, said of texting: "These speedy exchanges may be contributing to a decline in our attention spans and perhaps even towards the rise of attention-deficit disorders."

She fears under-tens are especially at risk, adding: "If the young brain is exposed from the outset to a world of instant action and reaction at the press of a key, such rapid interchanges might accustom the brain to operate over the same timescales."

So should you limit how and where your child texts?

Constant

Dr Richard Graham, a consultant child and adolescent psychiatrist, believes it is very difficult for adults to keep up with the technological world of teenagers – but that we have to learn to.

He says: "I see a lot of young people who are hyper-texting and hyper-networking – they simply can't stop checking their phones or PCs and responding to messages, even if they are unpleasant ones."

"The situation has escalated so much that even mobile phone companies have started limiting the number of free daily messages they make available because clearly some young people were far exceeding the company's expectations."

Dr Graham, who runs the Youth Technology Addiction Service at London's Capio Nightingale Hospital, believes young people find it hard to disengage with their phones when a stream of beeps reminds them that there is a whole social life going on constantly.

He says: "They are terrified of missing out and never switch off in case they feel excluded – and gradually it erodes the boundaries of their lives."

He warns that experts are also concerned that constant messaging is

having a negative impact on the amount and quality of sleep kids get – which then affects their concentration at school or college, and their results.

As for the report which suggests texting is linked to more general risky behaviour, he says: "Hyper-texters may just be more adventurous. Or they may be using their mobiles to arrange parties or meetings where they obtain alcohol or drugs, or meet a partner."

Dr Graham also warns that late-night texting brings its own dangers. He says: "Children may hear upsetting messages at this time – a quarrel with a mate or boyfriend or an experience of bullying and they can't immediately turn to someone for comfort."

So how can you tell if your teen is texting too much?

Dr Graham says: "Look at their physical state. Are they more tired than usual? Is their school work suffering? Are they less engaged with their real friends and focused on online acquaintances?"

"Any change in behaviour should ring alarm bells. But you can also check their mobile bills and see exactly how many texts they are sending daily."

And what should you do?

Dr Graham says: "Make some boundaries about when and where they can use their mobiles for texts – encourage them to send fewer texts every day by setting a target number and reducing it by, say, ten a week."

"Or follow the example of parents who keep a box at the bottom of the stairs and ask their children to drop off their handsets on the way up to bed."

The American Paediatric Association organises a Switch Off Week for mobile phones every year – and Dr Graham suggests you follow suit, perhaps with a 72-hour window when the kids leave their phones off.

It may be difficult, he warns, but you can help the kids by keeping them entertained. Holidaying in a place where the mobile signal is poor may help. He says: "Parents will find their child's mood improves, they join in with the family more and their overall behaviour gets better."