

## ARTICLES

## Hi-tech no substitute for family communication

Personal gadgets can be valuable communication tools if used judiciously

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Here's an easy challenge.

Next time you're in a public place — the bus stop, a grocery store, at the ball game or even inside a Church building — count the number of people focusing their attention on some form of personal technology. Include any gadget — cell phones,

MP3 players, Blackberries, PDAs or laptops.



*Illustration by John Clark*

Now modify your count. Tabulate all the people who are, say, text messaging, talking into cell phones or pounding out e-mails while their spouse/parent/child/friend sits nearby. The companions may be utilizing a gadget of their own. Or perhaps they sit alone — a few inches away, attention-miles apart.

Here are three recently-witnessed episodes of techno-segregation:

- A soft-spoken, 15-year-old LDS girl spends a Saturday afternoon at the family computer chatting online with friends on one of

the popular social networking sites. Most of her cyber-pals are the same girls she

sees at school everyday. She could get together with her friends, face-to-face. But she prefers interacting in a virtual world.

- A small car carrying a family of three pulls onto the highway following an out-of-town youth sports tournament. The drive home will take several hours. Plenty of time for uninterrupted talk. Instead, each family member — mother, brother and sister — pulls out an MP3 player, inserts earbuds and selects a digital playlist that will accompany them home.

- A young couple finds a booth at a family diner. The husband interrupts his cell phone call long enough to place his order. He keeps yapping as the food arrives and while they eat. The couple finish their meals and walk to the parking lot before exchanging their first words.



Personal technology has changed the way we live and interact. The portability and affordability of gadgets such as cell phones and laptop computers have made the world smaller. People are communicating and entertaining themselves with technology that would have been considered science fiction fodder a generation ago.

Indeed, communication is now mobile and immediate — and that's generally a good thing for LDS families. Even a blessing. Parents are always a cell phone call away from their children scattering for basketball practice or Mutual

activities. No longer must missionaries wait, cross-fingered, for the arrival of a distant letter from Mom or Dad. Instead, e-mails are often swapped seconds apart on preparation days. Meanwhile, Church-approved advice on everything from storing pinto beans to talking to young people about drugs can be found with a few clicks at [lds.org](http://lds.org).

But like almost any powerful tool, today's personal technology can harm if used improperly or recklessly.

Countless families have heeded the warnings of Church leaders and others concerning Internet pornography. Still more are becoming savvy to the potential dangers lurking in online chat rooms and Internet dating sites. Meanwhile, news reports educate Luddites to techno-terms such as "cyber-bullying," clever text messaging acronyms such as "POS" (parents over shoulder), and the dangers of driving while utilizing cell phones.

More than five years ago, Elder Neal A. Maxwell, then of the Quorum of the Twelve, raised another red flag: "We have unprecedented mass entertainment and mass communications, but so many lonely crowds. The togetherness of technology is no substitute for the family."

Gadgets designed to communicate can, ironically, undermine communication and growth even in well-meaning families in the Church.

Someone coined the term "family communication" long before the advent of the Blackberry. And LDS parents have long searched for the most effective ways to speak with their teenage children. But finding ways to talk and be together can prove even tougher if Dad's responding to e-mail while Mom's fumbling for her ringing cell phone even as the kids are punching out another text message.

Personal technology may evolve, but the 24-hour day remains the same. Parents and children must choose how they use their time.

In the October 2007 general conference, Elder Dallin H. Oaks of the Quorum of the Twelve said families should be careful not to exhaust their available time on things that are merely good, leaving little time "for that which is better or best."

"Consider how we use our time in the choices we make in viewing television, playing video games, surfing the Internet, or reading books or magazines." Elder Oaks said. "Of course it is good to view wholesome entertainment or to obtain interesting information. But not everything of that sort is worth the portion of our life we give to obtain it.

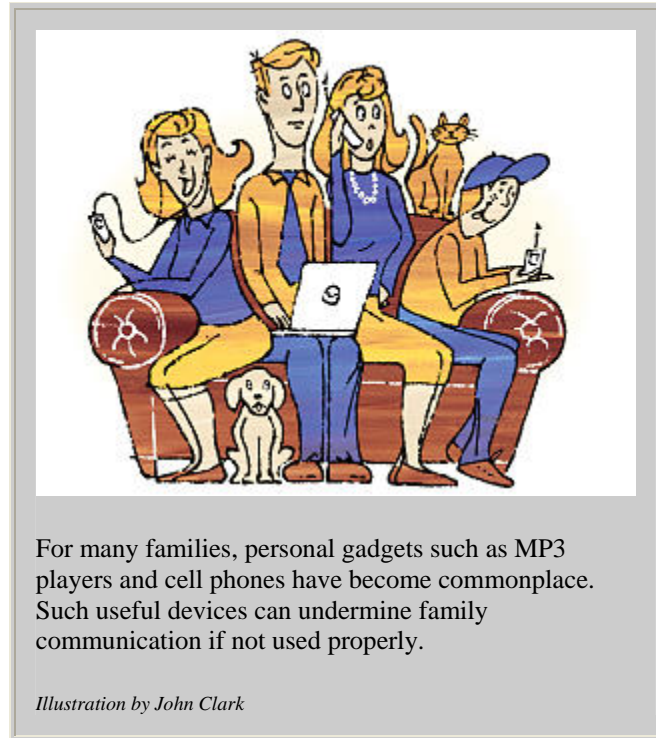
"Some things are better, and others are best."

Recently a bishop in South Jordan, Utah, challenged the youth in his ward to cut back on their text messaging. Recognize the precious time exacted sending thousands of frivolous text messages each month, he said — then find something "better" to fill that time.

The bishop then advised the young people in his ward to read one scripture passage for every text message they send.

Jonathan Munoz, a priest in the Christina Lake Ward, Lakeland Florida Stake, fell into the habit of sending several thousand text messages a month as an alternative to burning costly phone minutes.

"When you're texting (regularly), you don't realize just how much you're doing



For many families, personal gadgets such as MP3 players and cell phones have become commonplace. Such useful devices can undermine family communication if not used properly.

*Illustration by John Clark*

it," said Jonathan, who has tamed his texting habit in recent months.

A recent *Church News* story reported on the diminishing number of families who sit together regularly for family dinner. Eating meals together, the report said, is "the strongest predictor of children's academic and psychological adjustment." Everyone enjoys a good meal. But the value of family dinner is perhaps best measured by the dedicated time families spend together without the outside distractions.

"What your children really want for dinner is you," Elder Oaks said in his recent conference address, citing a Sept. 8 *Church News* article titled, "Family dinner."

Today's personal gadgets are a jealous lot. How many chats between a mother and daughter or a father and son are cut short to satisfy a cell phone's melodic ring tone? And the familiar announcement "You've got mail" can double as an order to drop whatever you're doing and engage your e-mail box.

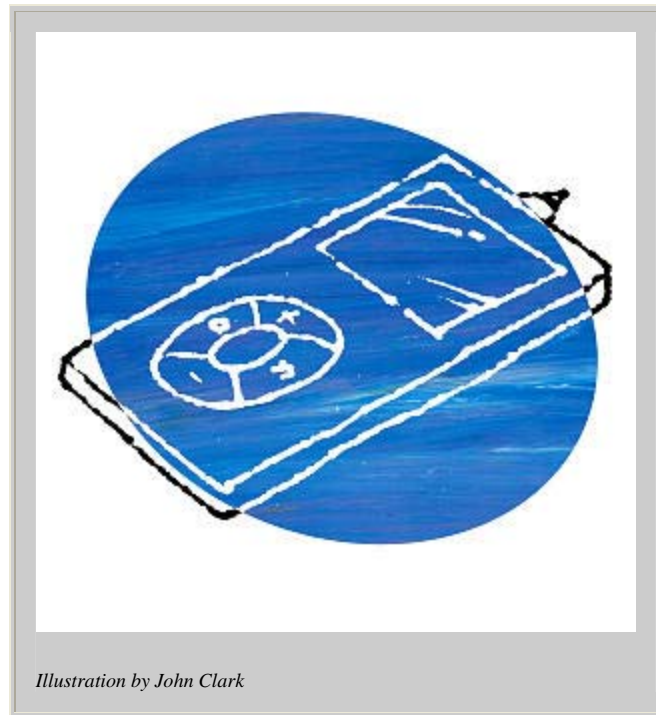
In a 2001 general conference address, Elder Oaks said families reveal their priorities by how they use their time together.

"Time together is necessary but not sufficient," he said. "Priorities should govern us in the precious time we give to our family relationships. Compare the impact of time spent merely in the same room as spectators for television viewing with the significance of time spent communicating with one another individually and as a family."

Communication, of course, stretches beyond families. Many LDS youth have successfully assimilated personal technology into their lives. Those abilities may serve them well at school and in the workplace. But old-fashioned, face-to-face conversation remains a timeless, essential skill.

A 2006 article in *USA Today* reported on the growing number of young people who text message exhaustively, then posed a sobering question: This generation may be technologically savvy than their bosses, but will they be able to have a professional discussion?

Much has been said in recent years about "raising the bar" for prospective missionaries. During the October 2007 general conference, Elder L. Tom Perry of the Quorum of the Twelve said the high standards required for missionary service

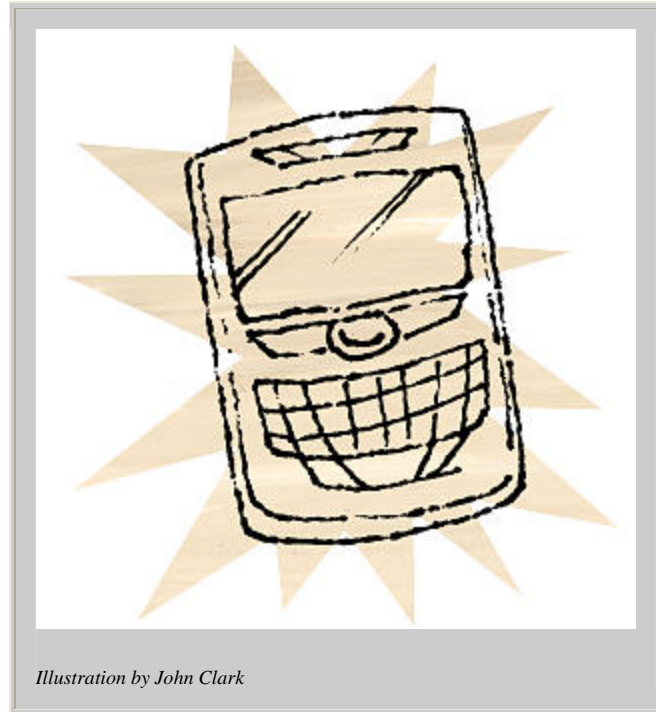


*Illustration by John Clark*

reach beyond spiritual, emotional and physical preparation. Prospective missionaries must also prepare to be communicators.

"More and more, young people are isolating themselves from others by playing video games; wearing headphones; and interacting through cell phones, e-mail, text messaging, and so on instead of in person," said Elder Perry. "Much of missionary work involves relating face-to-face with people, and unless you set the bar higher in the development of your social skills, you will find yourself underprepared."

Elder Perry offered a suggestion to young people hoping to clear the "social skills" bar: get a job that involves interacting with people.



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