



BY LAURA ANDERS LEE



FAMILY

# Digital Disconnect

Helping our kids communicate better — and more like humans

By Laura Anders Lee

**I**n Season 6 of “Sex and the City,” Carrie Bradshaw is dumped via a few words scrawled on a Post-it note. “I’m sorry, I can’t, don’t hate me,” wrote her boyfriend, Berger, before slipping out in the middle of the night.

I was 23 when the episode came out, and I shared the same horrified reaction that Carrie and her friends had

over brunch.

More than 20 years later, the Post-it note no longer feels like the low point of modern communication. Technology has made communication easier than ever, but using devices to connect has made our messages much less personal — even less human.

Today, people are dumped on Snapchat, if they’re not outright ghosted. Grown adults get into digital fistfights in the comments section of the school Facebook page. Politicians rage-bait their adversaries. We say things online that we would never say face-to-face, hiding behind our handles as social media replaces face-to-face communication.

As if to match the inhumanity of the medium, we’ve also begun letting software speak for us. Marty Ritter, a Richmond HR consultant and co-owner of the coaching and staffing agency New Best Friend Co., is seeing a shift in communication habits first-hand. “It’s

immediately apparent who’s using AI to write emails and LinkedIn posts, and who isn’t,” she says. “There’s a time and a place to use it, but you don’t want to sound like a robot. Never miss an opportunity to show your unique personality.”

Ritter coaches leaders on improving workplace communication. “Communication breakdowns happen when people avoid addressing problems directly,” she says. “If you’re trying to solve a problem or deescalate a conflict, it’s usually best to do it in person. Address issues before you get frustrated and come from the mindset that you’re trying to help rather than confront. Often, the other person has no idea there’s a problem.”

Ritter also cautions about communicating while angry. “Take time to breathe, or else emails, group chats, comments and conversations can quickly turn toxic.”

A mother of three, Ritter says she sees the same dynamics play out in school friend groups as in professional settings. “I tell my kids: Rather than talk about someone, talk to them in an honest and kind way. Seek first to understand, and don’t assume the worst.”

With the example adults are setting, teaching children to communicate with care becomes even more important. One place still teaching the basics is Junior Assembly Cotillion, a long-running Richmond organization that has helped young people build confidence and social skills since 1920. Today, its lessons extend well beyond table manners to helping young people have engaging conversations while using proper etiquette in the digital age.

“We’re trying to help our young people learn the value [of] caring for others in a

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deeper way, and that all comes back to the way we communicate," says Liz Stanko, owner of Junior Assembly Cotillion.

In an age of constant texting, Stanko emphasizes the importance of face-to-face interaction for kids. "We're meant to be in community with each other," she says. "Being in person helps you build relationships and rapport in a way digital communication just can't."

She also teaches students to recognize when texting stops being helpful. "For simple messages, texting is fine," she explains. "But if it goes back and forth multiple times, it's usually better to pick up the phone."

Without tone, facial expressions or body language, texts can easily be misunderstood. A quick call, she says, allows people to hear warmth, concern and hesitation — all the qualities that make communication feel human.

Stanko also stands by another old-school habit: thank-you notes. "Writing a note shows sincerity and a deeper appreciation," she says. "It doesn't take that much time but means the world to the person who receives it. A handwritten thank-you note just never goes out of style."

Some middle school students now have to be taught how to address and stamp an envelope. Stanko is encouraged, though, that cursive is making a comeback after many states dropped the requirement in 2011.

Even as groups like the Junior Assembly Cotillion have intentionally focused on improving communication for the next generation, getting over our technology-driven impediments at large is easier said than done, Ritter notes.

"Human nature makes it hard to have tough conversations," she concedes, "but it's a muscle we have to develop." ■



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