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Jessica Grose On Parenting

Why I'm Nostalgic for Landlines

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You're reading the Jessica Grose On Parenting newsletter, for Times subscribers only. A journalist and novelist explores what it means to be a parent today, analyzing the health, economics and culture of the American family. [Get it in your inbox.](#)

D.J. Tanner's lip phone has been a topic of frequent conversation in my house this summer.

For those of you who haven't been forced to watch approximately 10,000 hours of the 1987-95 sitcom "Full House" (and its reboot, "Fuller House"), D.J., the Tanner family's oldest daughter, wanted her own phone line and had a receiver shaped like a pair of bright red lips.

My girls are hooked on wholesome throwback TV. When I was a kid, I was obsessed with getting my own phone, and my parents absolutely refused to pony up for me to get my own line. But when I was around 10, inspired by D.J., I begged for and received my very own red lip phone in my bedroom. My

daughters were mildly impressed and vaguely mystified when I told them about what it was like to grow up with a phone that was *connected to the house*, calling to mind the comedian Iliza Shlesinger's biting line from "Elder Millennial": "Gather 'round the Snapchat, children, I'll tell you the tale ... of the landline."

I explained that in my day, when we would call someone, we had to talk to whoever answered on the other end, meaning we had to chat, at least briefly, with our friends' parents and siblings. I also told them about how one of my closest high school friends called so often that my dad kept a sticky note that read "Zach called" on hand, and he would just post it over and over again until it stopped sticking. Then he'd write another one.

I've been thinking about D.J.'s lip phone and that landline life because my older daughter, who is about to start fifth grade, has begun texting her friends. She doesn't have her own phone. She uses email and the tablet she shares with her sister, and this allows her direct access to her pals. My youngest, who'll be starting first grade, isn't all that interested in digital communication yet, except for FaceTiming her best friend who moved away.

My oldest has also been lobbying for a smartwatch, and her most persuasive argument so far is that she'd be able to manage her own social calendar without my involvement. (Of course, she'll still have to ask for permission to go places.)

And my reaction is, on one hand: Hallelujah. I won't miss labored texts with moms and dads I barely know, asking to see if we can meet up at a local playground and make halfhearted conversation on the sidelines. I look forward, eventually, to giving my daughter the freedom to make plans with friends

after school on the fly, and texting to keep me posted.

On the other hand, I'm nostalgic for the landline as the locus of inter-household communication. Because my daughters' friends are not forced to exchange grudging pleasantries on the phone with me to gain access to them, I don't think I know my children's friends quite as well as my parents knew mine.

This isn't just the landline; part of this is circumstantial: I grew up in a suburban village, where my public high school graduating class was around 80 kids, and many of us had been together since kindergarten. My parents knew most of their parents without much effort, from time logged on the A.Y.S.O. fields and at yearly concerts and back-to-school functions. Since we lived in the 'burbs, there was frequent car-pooling.

My kids are being raised in New York City, and their public elementary is much bigger, with more kids moving in and out of their classes. Our default modes of transportation are walking and the subway. The pandemic has also been a factor. My kids — your kids — were isolated from their peers. At our school, parents were only allowed back in the building for activities this spring.

Still, I wonder if something has been lost without increasingly rare landlines. I'm far from the first person to feel wistful. For example, in *The Wall Street Journal* in 2016, Sue Shellenbarger quoted experts who wondered if kids were missing out on learning essential conversation skills because they no longer had as much practice talking to grown-ups. In *The Atlantic* in 2019, Julia Cho lamented “the loss of the shared social space of the family landline,” writing:

For those of us who grew up with a shared family phone, calling friends usually meant first speaking with their parents, and answering calls meant speaking with any number of our parents' acquaintances on a regular basis. With practice, I was capable of addressing everyone from a telemarketer to my mother's boss to my older brother's friend — not to mention any relative who happened to call. Beyond developing conversational skills, the family phone asked its users to be patient and participate in one another's lives.

I'm not worried about my kids' ability to speak to adults. In some ways, my oldest is an old soul. Her friends' parents tell me that when she comes for a playdate, she often spends time gabbing with the grown-ups at the kitchen counter. It doesn't take long to teach a child basic phone skills and politeness. And in terms of comfort talking on the phone with people you don't know, I didn't grow up with cellphones or texting, and I still get nervous every time I have to call a new person — though that may be more of a personality thing than a home training problem.

But I do feel Cho's argument about patience and connection; many of our kids have an expectation of being able to reach anyone directly and immediately, and that pulls them out of the family bureaucracy in ways we can't fully control or predict. Part of that is simply the process of growing up — as they get older, their socializing will take place independent of us more and more. But the landline really was a lovely household touch point that has become something of a relic.

Even so, I think my daughter starting to text with friends is a net positive development. Most modern communication is digital, and learning to navigate

digital communication is also a skill that children need to build. I love the idea of her having more independence, though I have not yet committed to getting her that smartwatch. I'm a ways away from getting her a cellphone (and when I do, years from now, at first it will probably be one without internet capabilities — I want her off social media for as long as possible). I'll have to find other ways to compel her peer group into awkward small talk, and I'm fairly confident I can make it happen.

Want More?

- Speaking of increased freedom for kids, in April, I wrote about the Japanese reality TV show “Old Enough!,” which depicts small children going on their first solo errands.
 - If you deeply miss the physical feeling of a landline, in *The New Yorker*, Rachel Syme describes connecting a vintage handset to her mobile phone number and reliving “the beauty of chatting away the afternoon on a princess phone.”
 - According to a new survey from Pew Research, 95 percent of teenagers have access to smartphones, and 97 percent say they use the internet daily. YouTube, TikTok and Instagram are their top three social media sites, according to the survey.
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Tiny Victories

Parenting can be a grind. Let's celebrate the tiny victories.

We encourage our potty-training 2.5 year-old to use the potty by asking her to show us where it is. “Let me show you around,” she gestures grandly. “Ta-da!”

— Megan Smithling, Seattle

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