

From promposals to Snaps, smartphones are crashing the prom party

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Smartphones have forever changed our lives. They also have forever changed the experience of the all-important high school ritual of going to the prom.

And it doesn't stop with those epic promposals.

There is the flurry of texts to organize dinner. Perhaps calling an Uber. A FaceTime chat with the parents (who are probably tracking their prom-goer's location by GPS). And then, of course, the social media: Instagram stories, Facebook updates, Snaps, tweets.

In this era, documenting the prom has perhaps become as important for teens as the prom itself. But being buried in your [smartphone](#) instead of rocking out on the dance floor—is it becoming too much? Are high schoolers so focused on what to post on Snapchat they're not enjoying the moment?

With events like prom, the intense focus on the phone can mean missing chances to socialize in person. Michael Krefft, a 17-year-old senior who attends [high school](#) in Chicago, said while at prom, he noticed students focused more on getting Snaps or other pictures instead of soaking up the scene.

"I think we're more worried about getting it on our Snapchat and having others see what we're doing for the simple fact of not necessarily showing off, but showing that 'Hey I'm here doing fun things and I want

to kind of brag about it," said Krefft.

At St. Francis High School in Mountain View, Calif., smartphones are a no-no at school dances. The one exception is prom. At the school's junior prom last weekend, students were allowed to use their smartphones to take pictures —but any students spotted sitting down using their smartphones were asked to put them away.

"We explain to the kids that socializing is a big deal," said Margaret Miller, dean of students at St. Francis. "We want you to socialize, but we want you to be present to each other."

Ana Homayoun, a school consultant and author of the book *Social Media Wellness: Helping Tweens and Teens Thrive in an Unbalanced Digital World*, said in many social situations, teens' smartphones can act as a shield.

"They pull it out when they're waiting rather than having that uncomfortable silence or that moment of anticipation before somebody starts a conversation or they think of something to say," said Homayoun.

There's no argument that smartphone has changed how today's teens interact. With [social media](#), hanging with friends goes beyond school grounds, extending to nearly all hours of the day and night.

As a result, critics have raised concerns whether smartphones are ultimately good for teens' mental health. Last year, researchers from San Diego State and Florida State universities found nearly half of teens who spent five or more hours in front of screens daily experienced thoughts of suicide or prolonged periods of hopelessness or sadness.

Kaia Opalinski, a 17-year-old junior from Delaware, said she spent her prom having fun with friends, only using her phone to take pictures or

talk with family. "There is a certain place and time to use a phone," said Opalinski. "When I'm in the company of others, especially my friends, I tend to stay off and enjoy what's going on."

Nic Nash, an 18-year-old senior who attends high school in Little Rock, Ark., feels the same way about using his phone. He said he'll answer a text or take a Snap, but would rather spend time hanging out with friends during prom.

"When I'm with people, I like to interact with them, build memories with them," said Nash. "Nothing is more valuable than personal connections."

Prom can become a high-anxiety experience for teens, said Homayoun, and parents should have more compassion for teens having new experiences with the layer of documenting it online. "We haven't really given them the guidance and tools they need to start reflecting and making good, intentional, behavioral choices," said Homayoun.

Homayoun also advises teens to "figure out your why" when deciding whether it's worth using your smartphone. "There is a difference between capturing a moment versus just spending the entire time taking different poses because it prevents you from actually interacting."

At the same time, smartphones and online technology are a key way teens communicate. "If we didn't have our phones, we wouldn't have been able to capture the moment in the way that our generation does," said Nash.

For Opalinski, smartphone use is all about balance. "It's okay to pull it out sometimes but not consistently."

Meanwhile, as [prom season](#) heats up, brace yourselves for the parade of selfies from the big dance.

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