

Menachem Ellison

"It's absolutely a parenting issue!" rejoins Philip Rosenthal, computer guru and technology expert with a master's in counseling psychology. We're talking about parents enforcing their teens' responsible use of the Internet and cell phones, and what was supposed to be a one-hour crash course, on how to outwit tech-savvy young people on their own turf, turns instead into a conversation on what Rosenthal fiercely asserts is the underlying problem.

Right now, as Rosenthal puts it, the problems linked to Internet and cell phone safety are simply symptoms of the underlying issue: uninformed parenting.

The world inhabited by Philip Rosenthal, a Monsey resident who looks every bit like the former cop and weary, world-wise prevention expert that he is, presents a rather repellent picture. He is like the ER surgeon who tells his teens to drive wisely, as do most parents — but, unlike most parents, can and does also specify the gory results of driving poorly, down to every dismembered detail.

It's bad out there and getting worse, he laments. Rosenthal has seen his share of technology-triggered horror stories: both the forbidden fruits that *frum* teens sample, and the outrageous lengths to which emotionally dysfunctional *frum* adults go, to escape a flotilla of problems.

These days, Rosenthal brandishes a business card, not a badge. Having been encouraged by Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski to pursue a career in technology-related counseling, he now bills himself as a "technology addiction consultant." He travels the nation and world, speaking in Jewish schools and communities about what's really going on out there — and how to avoid it. And this Orthodox Jew's job experience — nearly twenty years in law enforcement, pursuing cyber-criminals first as a civilian consultant, later as a duly sworn, gun-toting officer — puts him at the intersection of the *frum* community, computer and Internet technology, and family education and abuse-prevention.

"I'm the only one doing this," he says, laying claim to a unique niche. On a Thursday night in January, Rosenthal tells **Mishpacha** about his life, his new career — and, most importantly, what parents need to know to keep their kids safe, functional, and healthy in today's online-dependent world.

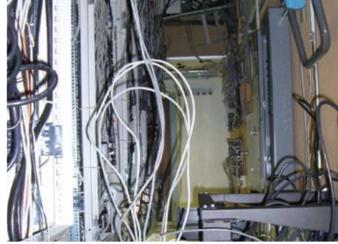
Evolution of an Addiction The Internet problem, according to Rosenthal, really began in 1990 or 1991, though he wasn't in the "anti-Internet-problem industry" then. As far as the Jewish community is concerned, the expert believes, the Internet problem really took root in 1995.

Yet the technology was limited to the computer screen, and as such was more easily controlled. Then along came "texting," the now-pervasive slang term for what is technically known as Short Messaging Service, or SMS. Developed in the early 1990s and a hit in Europe as of 1998, texting (tapping out abbreviated text messages on cell phone dial pads) didn't really take off in the States until 2003 or 2004. Rosenthal adds that texting only reached problematic proportions in 2007.

As for the multifaceted PDAs (personal digital assistants), those slick marvels of technology that put a powerful computer in the palm of your hand, the problem only cropped up when the devices began seamlessly integrating cell phone and Internet access. The first web-enabled PDAs hit the market in late 2004 or early 2005, says Rosenthal. When did *those* become a problem? "The day after," he quips.

But Rosenthal expounds that cutting-edge PDA phones *really* became a problem when they began offering Internet access at broadband speed. "That was in late 2006," he notes.





Wired for action. A typical assignment facing Rosenthal during his police days

Today, the typical cell phone problem in the *frum* community plays out like this. "The kid doesn't have his own phone, so he asks his mother, 'Mom, can I play that game on your cell phone?' He then goes in the bathroom and surfs for a half hour," explains Rosenthal. The clincher: "The mother doesn't even know that the phone *can* access the Internet."

According to the guru, most teenagers won't use their parents' phones to chat online or to text. The simple reason is that they don't have to; their parents have already provided them with their own personal phones, a free pass to the moral netherworld. "Typically, parents will buy their kids what they *think* is a plain phone, but it can also chat or even surf [online] and the parents don't even know," Rosenthal informs **Mishpacha**.

To counteract technological tomfoolery quickly and effectively, Rosenthal urges parents to find one of those still-mushrooming cell phone retail outlets that can be found on every street corner these days. Rosenthal says parents must ask clerks three simple questions: "What *can* this phone do? What *can't* it do? And what *is* it doing?"

A New Generation of Crime From his unique vantage point, Rosenthal has observed the industry evolve over the years, along with its potential for insidious damage.

"More than a lifetime ago, I was a computer programmer," he recounts. "I was building my own computers back in the 1970s." He then got involved in the PC industry, which took him to the front lines in the high-tech revolution brought about by everyone getting PCs on their desks.

First as a computer salesman and then as a consultant, Rosenthal found himself frequenting his local police department;



at the time, everyone was undergoing computerization. A contract with that police force led to regular visits to their facility. "They needed me a lot there," recalls Rosenthal. "I came up with this idea of computer crime, and they said, 'How many computers can a person steal?'" The consultant had to explain that he meant "people using computers to effect crimes." It was 1996.

The police department liked his ideas but couldn't afford a new officer specializing in this new crime-fighting arena. They suggested that a county-wide position at the sheriff's department, whose jurisdiction included the area covered by eleven local police departments, just might work. Rosenthal needed to marshal considerable political intervention to get the position created, but his lobbying paid off. In 1998, he became the Rockland County Sheriff Department's first-ever forensic investigator for computer crimes

"So all of a sudden, I'm investigating computer crime, I'm pretty good at it, I'm going to some training and getting certified," recalls Rosenthal. "And part of my job title, in addition to investigations, was doing public outreach."

Rosenthal thus found himself going to Rotary Clubs, Kiwanis, and Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts meetings, educating people about "the woes of the Internet" on behalf of the sheriff's department.

The computer-programmer-cum-crime-fighter began noticing surprisingly attentive audiences wherever he spoke — even at the notorious Rotary Clubs, who ended their meetings by ringing an imposing bell. Rosenthal remembers "at least three or four times" when Rotary Club members said, "Wait! Don't ring it!" when his presentation time had officially run out — even granting him up to thirty extra minutes of podium time. "I was running around on a weekly basis to different groups, preaching the message of 'Be safe when you use this technology because really bad things can happen." "recalls Rosenthal"

Passing the Twerski Torch A number of years ago — "Don't ask me when, I can't remember, I tried," quips Rosenthal — someone asked him to speak to a Jewish organization. "I think it was in Oueens."

Rosenthal thus found himself on the dais with none other than one Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski. "It was not called 'Internet addiction' yet — just the woes of the Internet," he remembers.

At the time, the observant community was just getting its first taste of the dangers posed by Internet, and there was a host of reactions ranging from naivete and confusion to blasé dismissal of the dangers. Rosenthal made his usual forceful case, explaining just how lethal the technology could be.

After the presentation, the cop found himself in the down elevator with Dr. Twerski himself. "How long have you been doing this?" the good rabbi asked. Ever the joker, Rosenthal offered, "Tonight?"

But Twerski had a serious response. "You have to take this message out to the Jewish world. You have to do this," Rosenthal remembers him saying. "I said, 'I'm just this guy from Rockland County!' He says, 'Look, let me tell you something: I write books, I speak all over the place. Always I'm on a panel. I'm an old man, traveling a lot, so I often take a nap while the other guy is talking. I couldn't close my eyes while you were talking. It just captured me! This is too vital! You have to start doing this.'"

Rosenthal credits the trailblazing *chassidishe* mental-health expert with kickstarting his own career in the field, because shortly after their first encounter, "my phone started ringing and I started getting *really* busy." Since then, he has been all over the world talking to the Jewish community about the issue, including serving on several panels with Dr. Twerski himself.

About three years ago, Dr. Twerski confided to Rosenthal that while he had done books on drug and alcohol abuse, gambling, and domestic abuse, he knew next to nothing about the brave new technology. "I'm passing you the torch! This one's yours!" Rosenthal recalls him saying.

At Dr. Twerski's prodding, Rosenthal found the time to pursue a master's degree in counseling, which he is currently completing

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while working as a practicing counselor under supervision, treating people for addictions to technology.

"Shock and Awe" Philip Rosenthal lectures to two audience types — parents and teens. He never allows them to mix. If youths are spotted at a seminar for parents, he asks them to leave.

The lecturer will begin by distributing his business card. He knows from experience that parents will try to contact him later, even years down the line.

Rosenthal will first introduce himself and his credentials, allowing his resume to speak for itself. He'll then display an iPod, iPhone, BlackBerry, or other such electronic device—and strongly discourage parents from ever buying one for their kids.

At the recent Agudath Israel convention, he raised eyebrows by suggesting that parents who would consider purchasing an iPod Touch for their teenager may as well buy them a gun. "They're likely to do less damage," he grimly stated.

Having equated the new technology with mortal danger, Rosenthal segues into the main categories of trouble — cell phones and Internet access — peppering his descriptions of each with ample real-life horror stories culled from his own career, to make points far more powerful than could ever be made with PowerPoint. He uses no visual aids.

Over the course of his hour-long presentation, he "tries his best to horrify parents." He confesses to a certain self-deprecating humor. "It's a heavy subject. You've

got to keep it light."

Samples from the horror stories in his repertoire reveal why his "shock and awe" presentation needs no fireworks. They also reveal why the *rabbanim*'s ban on Internet for purposes other than work still require savvy parenting in order to be fully effective. "Once I received a call from a mother," he says. "This was a home that had no television, radios, or newspapers. She thought her kids were safely isolated from



PRACTICAL INFORMATION FOR DESPERATE PARENTS

NOTE: Our gedolim have warned against using internet other than for parnassah requirements. The following guidelines do not sanction free Internet usage, but rather serve as a partial solution to an existing problem.

"This is the first time in history that we have a subject matter that our kids know more about than we do," says Rosenthal, noting that few parents are truly tech-savvy enough to be onto their sons and daughters. One such youth, confronted by his mother about texting charges on the phone bill dated to Friday night, simply lied his way out of trouble by confusing her about the time zones involved. "We are easily fooled by our children and we need to get educated about it," he says. Here are several basic tips to help parents keep their kids safe.

Install Internet filtering software on every computer your child uses. Rosenthal highly recommends K9 Web Protection from Blue Coat, Inc. (download free at k9WebProtection. com). Rosenthal also suggests NetNanny (NetNanny.com) and SafeEyes (InternetSafety.com).

Don't fall into a false sense of security. "Those programs can be and will be defeated. Even if your kid is not tech-savvy, a friend is, and will make them a CD that will turn it off, so just take that into consideration."

Install a keylogger. This invisible program lurks unseen on your computer, sending reports of every keystroke, including passwords, to an e-mail of your choice for your review. "You can't defeat it — you don't know it's there," says Rosenthal.

"Get those reports. This software has saved lives."

Be an emotionally functional parent. "If we love and trust our kids the right way, they'll feel comfortable to come back to us. You can never hug and kiss your kids enough. Say, 'I love you unconditionally. I will never judge you. You can share with me anything.'"

Be intellectually honest.

"Don't dare expect to start lecturing kids about Internet standards if you don't keep the same standards."

Don't let kids have their own computer in their room or anywhere you can't look over their shoulder anytime. If they close the screen when you walk by, you have a problem.

Assign time limits for being online.

Get a cell phone plan that includes texting control.

Keep all cell phone chargers in your own bedroom at night.

Know who all your kids' friends are — and speak to *their* parents about *your* Internet safety rules.

No user profiles. Officer Rosenthal knows of too many exploited kids snared by predators reading this useless and dangerous public information post. Dump them: no identifying information like names, home addresses, school names, telephone numbers, e-mail addresses, and photos.

No MySpace, FaceBook, Twitter, or other social networking sites.

Never share passwords with anyone, ever!

Don't get rid of the computer altogether. This will only force kids to go to the library or a friend's house.

No face-to-face meetings with people met online.

Compliment your child's bravery. If he or she is exposed to inappropriate sites, compliment them for doing the right thing and letting you know.

Call the cops if necessary. If inappropriate materials are being deliberately sent via e-mails, shut the computer down and contact the authorities.

No personal photo uploads to people your kids don't know.

Never download pictures from unknown sources.

Never respond to messages or bulletin board postings that are suggestive, obscene, belligerent, or harassing

No Buddy List members that your child doesn't know —have him/her identify every person on the list and delete anyone s/he doesn't know.

No chat rooms.

Be extremely careful about what you post or send out on the Internet. It could come back to haunt you or your family.

"There is no *solution*," concludes Rosenthal, "but there are tips, safety features, and vigilance.... parents need to start opening their eyes and embracing this stuff so that they can understand what the dangers are."

'the outside world.' But then she found a cell phone in her fifteenyear-old daughter's drawer.

"When she examined the text messages that her innocent daughter had been exchanging over the phone, she learned that the teenager had been

communicating with a more modern boy who lived across the street. The relationship was very advanced at that point, and there wasn't much the mother could do to stop it. Her daughter is now married — at age seventeen. Needless to say, this was not the *shidduch* she had envisioned."

Not always is it the parent who intercepts a child's descent into the technological netherworld. One of Rosenthal's most disturbing calls came from a young girl who heard his presentation for teenagers. "Once she woke up in the middle of the night to use the bathroom. Walking down the hall, she saw a light coming from her father's office. As she passed his open door, she witnessed him in the midst of an online discussion, with webcam, with a woman. I assisted her in trying to get her father into counseling," Rosenthal concludes, "to no avail."

During his presentations, he makes an effort to drive home the point that no one is immune to the lures — not even our society's best and brightest.

Questions are deferred until the lecture's conclusion, with parents asked to use the pens and notepads he provides to jot down their questions. A lengthy question-and-answer session typically



follows — ending with a crush of parents descending on the lecturer requesting private consultations.

"The most common question is, 'You're telling us to look over their shoulder. Isn't that an invasion of privacy?" "Rosenthal says. "I always answer, 'There are three billion people on the Internet. If there are three billion people watching your loved one and knowing what he or she is doing, why shouldn't you know?"

Somebody who learned that he should know was Ron Mandelbaum, an active twenty-two-year member of the Minneapolis *frum* community. Walking out of a Rosenthal

presentation this past January, Mandelbaum felt like he had just woken up. "Wow — I better be doing something different for my kids, and for myself, at home and at work," says Mandelbaum of his impression.

Of Impulses and Bans To prevent teen addiction to technology, parents must first understand that technology. But more importantly, parents must understand teens and the lives they live in this era of high technology — and, most importantly of all, how to parent tech-savvy teens in this era of high technology.

Rosenthal likes to remind parents that when he was a teenager, his home had a single phone line with only two extensions, one in the kitchen and one in the master bedroom. "I would talk to my friends for ten minutes," he remembers, "after which my father would go to the bedroom, pick up the phone and say, 'Get off the phone!"

Today, he notes, instant-connection technology has virtually eliminated the separation that once existed between individuals. "In today's times, we don't write letters — we send e-mails. Kids don't talk — they text each other." He also mentions recent studies



On a recent trip to England, Rosenthal delivered his popular seminars. Pictured at left is Rav Chuna Halpern

showing that kids will text the kids sitting next to them, rather than talk to them, on the bus or carpool.

In psychological terms, the urge to call, text, or otherwise use technology to communicate with others is called an *impulse*. The nature of the technology allows that impulse to be instantly satiated. And when it's repeatedly instantly satiated, it can quickly become an unbreakable habit — an addiction.

"It's that impulse control — they don't know how to turn it off," explains Rosenthal. "You're plugging in constantly to all this instant information, instant gratification six days a week. It's hard to go cold turkey Friday afternoon for twenty-five

hours — very difficult to do that!"

That's why, unfortunately, one of the things Rosenthal reports is that many teens are desecrating Shabbos. "They can't go pick up a telephone and call somebody; someone will hear them. They can't get on the computer and start typing because you'll hear clickety-clackety," he informs **Mishpacha**. "But a kid can get up from the Shabbos table and say, 'I'm really tired. I had three tests this week. I'm zonked. I'm going to bed.' They go in the bedroom, close the door, pull out their cell phone, turn it to silent, and they'll lie in bed and text-message a whole Friday night! This is the first time in history that we have a subject matter that our kids know more about than we do."

With regards to computers and the Internet, Rosenthal's message to parents is: get educated, and fast. At each of his speaking engagements, he distributes a list of technology rules for teens. He also recommends not getting rid of the computer altogether, but rather putting it in a public place where you can walk by anytime and see what your son or daughter is doing. He also recommends that parents who must use the Internet utilize the tracking system developed by the Guard Your Eyes organization, on whose advisory committee he serves along with Rabbi Dr. Abraham Twerski.

Most importantly, parents have to understand that teens engaging in inappropriate use of cell phones and/or computers are merely responding to an underlying symptom: emotional pain. "It's absolutely pain relief. It's a drug of choice and it's an escape, especially for troubled teens who are going through all the things that teens go through naturally without any help, and it's an incredible escape for adults as well," points out Rosenthal.

He also points out that part of the dynamic is the fact that until age twelve or thirteen, children never had to make decisions, as everything in their lives from bedtime to friends to clothing was decided by their parents. "Now, all of a sudden, they're confused about their bodies changing, and they say, 'Hey, I don't like

wearing pink shoes! I want to wear black shoes!' And then there's a clash [between parents and children]. And then, along comes all this technology, and they want to be cool and fit in, and parents are afraid."

The issue of *shidduchim* only complicates the picture when Internet or cell phone abuse hits. Rosenthal insists that the number-one reason parents do not reach out for help is fear that their sons or daughters will be stigmatized.

So if the problem is dysfunctional parenting, the solution, obviously, is quality parenting. Rosenthal insists that good old-fashioned parenting staples like hugging and kissing daily and verbally communicating unconditional love are imperatives — as well as not lecturing kids on misusing the technology if you do the same yourself.

"After I presented my seminar to a group of parents and suggested the usual tips, a father called me in panic," he recalls. "This particular family had listened to my tips and implemented my suggestions. As a result, the father had learned that his seventeen-year-old daughter was chatting regularly with a stranger. Not only

that, she had decided that she was totally committed to the boy.

"I calmed down the father and we laid out a plan for an intervention, which thankfully was successful. The relationship was stopped, and more than likely, this girl's life was saved. The 'boy' in question was a total unknown and could have been anyone.

"The best part of this story is that the daughter is now doing great, and is closer than ever to her parents."

That's not the only heartening story proving what vigilant and empathetic parenting can achieve. Rosenthal remembers a father who approached him after one presentation. "He told me that his son was surfing inappropriate websites. He brought the boy to me for counseling. The teenager is now working

on building his strength to fight this *yetzer hara*.

"This whole issue boils down to *parenting*. If we're good parents and do what we're supposed to do, and love our kids the right way, and trust our kids the right way, they'll feel comfortable to come back to us and work with us. But we don't. All we want to do is fit them into these little boxes and control them," asserts Rosenthal.

One of Rosenthal's favorite anecdotes is about a young man who broke out of those boxes, and out of the confines of Judaism, only to find that his "freedom" was in effect an addiction leaving him miserable. "The young man in question, newly married with a child, called me crying. He confessed that his addiction to online sites had severed him from his wife. He was despondent and felt worthless. I suggested that he come to me for counseling, which he did. We worked together for a little over a year. I received a beautiful Haggadah from him. The inscription: 'Thank you for getting me out of my personal Mitzrayim.'"

Ending the interview on a cautiously hopeful note, Rosenthal explains that "the world is a balancing act. Things in moderation can be good; it's when there is obsessive-compulsive use of it that things get bad. Built-in limitations, boundaries, and built-in connections with your kids will build positive adults."



"I'm passing the torch." Rabbi Dr. Abraham J. Twerski, entrusting Rosenthal with a new mission

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