

# advice for non-teens about to get into trouble dealing with troubled teens | Casey J. Bye

Here's some advice: don't give your phone number to fifteen-year-old girls. Just don't. I mean, unless you're a fifteen-year-old boy, then by all means. But if, during a particularly sad point in your life after college while you're working at a teen center part-time in your old neighborhood and some girl tells you that her older brother is George (that kid you used to be pretty good friends with in high school) and you should give her your number so he can call you? Yeah, don't fall for that.

All of a sudden it's midnight on a Tuesday, and you're getting calls from not only George's sister, but George's sister's friends, who you've also met briefly at the teen center. Sometimes they call in groups, and you can't make out what's being said between all the giggling and whispering debate over what they should ask you until you finally tell them just how annoying speakerphone is. They take you off speakerphone. And they get all quiet. Because you called them annoying, and you've hurt their feelings.

They're probably all huddled up on one of their beds, shoulder to shoulder, every one of them trying to snag some ear space on the phone receiver. Maybe they made some prank calls before getting around to dialing you. Maybe ate a gallon of ice-cream. Because that's what you assume fifteen-year-old girls do: have sleepovers with loads of ice cream and prank calls. You don't know any better.

You really have nothing better to do, so you try to make them comfortable again. You make some reference to *Napoleon Dynamite*. It's a massive success. And it's not long before the "Well-if-you-were-our-age-would-you-be-interested-in-girls-like-us?" questions start pouring out. And how are you gonna deal with that? I mean, this is George's sister and her friends—they're how you two were in high school. They're not the popular crowd. They're anxious and neurotic outsiders with nervous smoking habits and eight dollar haircuts.

You can't say, "No, girls like you are unattractive and not

worthy of my time." Nope. Now you're trapped. You have to say something like "Well, you girls aren't my age, so I can't really even fathom how to answer that question, because it's simply not in my capabilities to think of you in that way." Yeah, they know that's bullshit. They're insecure, not stupid. Actually, as you should know from experience, the insecure ones are usually the brainy ones with the good grades—that's why people don't like them, hence the insecurity.

And you can't just hang up, because, again, they're rejected. And you're just making them more and more insecure. And that's just plain cruel. So you say something like, "Well if I really had to, was forced to consider you girls in that way, I guess I could picture me at fifteen thinking that you would be fun people to hang out with." You didn't even say "I would be attracted to you," or "Interested in dating you." But it doesn't matter. Because that's what they hear.

And from there on out, every night you work at the teen center, they're coming in, hanging all over you, going wherever you're going, bringing you a can of Mr. Pibb whenever they come back from the concession stand, making you mix tapes with titles like "What the Inside of My Heart Sounds Like" on a weekly basis, and going on eBay to buy you expensive, wall-sized art prints of Woody Allen's giant face for Christmas because you once mentioned that you thought *Bananas* was pretty funny.

And the other teen center workers, mostly women in their fifties—teachers, bored mothers whose kids have flown the coop, and the one grizzled ex-cop who'd make you nervous even if you didn't have an underage girl entourage—they're not idiots either. They catch on. I mean, they don't know that the girls have your number and are calling you several times a week, but Christ, if they ever found out . . . Either way, they start teasing you when you're locking up the center, asking how "your girlfriends" were that night. And they're kidding. But they're kidding to make sure you get the point. And you're not making matters any better trying to hide that giant rolled up Woody Allen poster behind your back.