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“Screen Kids” — A Generation Raised by Electronics?

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A British think-tank has sounded a warning about a generation of “screen kids” who are being raised by “electronic babysitters.” The report also warns that these children, largely parented by digital devices, are spending more and more time in their bedrooms — alone with their electronic entertainments.

The report is entitled “Watching, Wanting, and Wellbeing,” and it was released by Britain’s National Consumer Council. As The Guardian [London] reports:

NCC chief executive Ed Mayo said: “Today’s children are now ‘screen kids’. In some streets, every bedroom has a television for children and many have a computer.

“With many children watching or surfing when they wake up, at breakfast, after school, during dinner and in bed before sleep, we need to ask whether the electronic screen has now become the electronic babysitter.”

One very interesting pattern found in the British study indicated that children in poorer neighborhoods were *more* likely to have televisions in their bedrooms than children from more wealthy neighborhoods. As the paper reports, “nearly half the children from better-off families surveyed had televisions in their bedrooms, compared with 97% of the nine- to 13-year-olds from less well-off areas.”

More:

Children from poorer areas were also six times more likely to watch TV during the evening meal. And around a quarter of youngsters in this group admitted that they regularly watched the television at lunchtime on Sundays, compared with one in 30 children in better-off neighbourhoods. The NCC’s report links increased TV viewing hours with greater exposure to marketing and higher levels of materialism.

The authors, Agnes Nairn, Jo Ormrod and Paul Bottomley, also found that materialistic children were more likely than others to argue with their family, have a lower opinion of their parents and suffer from low self-esteem.

In one sense, the data and the conclusions seem tightly linked. Nevertheless, higher levels of materialism would also be driven by the culture at large. We are constantly swimming in a sea of advertisements and enticements to buy more and more. Peer pressure (for both adults and children) is another major factor.

Still, if digital devices are the only company you have, you had better have the latest.

More troubling is the finding that children who spend so much time alone with these electronic companions have a lower opinion of their parents. In some sense, this too is understandable. If parents allow these kids to cocoon themselves in their rooms for endless hours away from the family, away from family meals and family engagement, in what sense are these parents actually functioning as parents?

Back in 1999, MicroSoft founder Bill Gates identified the generation of children born from 1994 on as “Generation I” — the digital information generation. He suggested that this generation would look at the world in a quite differently way.

Speaking at the New York Institute of Technology, Mr. Gates said this:

Certainly the kids being born today, from 1994 on, they're a new generation, and nobody has really labeled this generation, so I would propose today that we think about this as calling this "Generation I." Of course, "I" for Internet. You know, these are kids who will always wonder why we talk about having records. To them, music will just be something you can get on your computer, and organized exactly the way you want and carry around with you however you want. To them, the idea that all the rich information should be easy to search and find, and that you should be able to find other kids in another country and speak to them about what their thinking is about that topic. They'll simply take that for granted. They'll think of buying as something where you can go out and get the best prices, or get the product reviews across the Internet. And so, they will think about the Internet in a far more profound way than most of us who grew up without it being an ever-present tool. And, in some ways, this is very, very exciting. These kids will be agents of change as they move out into their jobs. These kids include my own children. I've got a three-year-old and a four-month-old who are definitely going to be leading members of Generation I, and they have their high speed Internet connection from the very beginning.

More:

These kids won't think about the phone and the PC as being two different worlds. Whenever you're using the PC and you go to a Web site, you'll be able to click and talk to people, and likewise the phone that you carry around more and more will have a pretty good screen on it. And so, calling up things about the weather or new messages, all of that will be available from the phone as well as the PC. Likewise, the TV will let you connect up, not just playing great games, or getting any video you want, but also navigating the world of information. So, we'll have one set of standards around the Internet, and all of these devices connecting up to that common network.

Those words were spoken in 1999, and that future is here now. As Gates predicted:

So, it will be a world where everything is online, and that's simply taken for granted. And these kids will, in a creative way, build the Web sites that will make the Web sites we have today look like really nothing, sort of in the same way that you look at the early TV shows, early radio shows, and realize that the medium was not being fully exploited, there was so much more that could be done by people who really grew up with it and thought about it as central to their life.

For most kids today, these digital wonders are “central to their life.” As Gates foresaw, “Having all these devices makes it a lifestyle activity.” That is now clear — as is the cost of that lifestyle.

The British study is yet another warning that family life and parental authority are being undermined by cultural trends. But we cannot blame the digital demons. The problem lies with parents who let their children sit for hours on end in front of a television or computer screen — or spend their time in endless instant messaging, text messaging, cell phone calls, and the like.

This is not a call for a new generation of Luddites crusading to bash machines and go back to a pre-digital age. That is not going to happen — nor should it. We need a generation of parents who will exercise their authority to teach their children how to use these technologies responsibly. This means no digital babysitters and no screen kids. This would mean family dinners with no digital noise, just the rare sound of parents and children talking to each other. This would mean balancing “screen time” with “paper time” — that activity previously known as reading books.

This would mean parents refusing to surrender to the seduction of the digital babysitters.

