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The Digital Generation Goes Back to School

Friday, August 18, 2006



The signs are all around us — school buses back on the streets, school supplies on display, families back in town — the new school year is starting all over America. And as the school supplies — we’ve come a long way from loose-leaf paper, number 2 pencils, and class folders.

Indeed, *The New York Times* reports that increasing numbers of parents are sending their kids back to elementary school armed with cell phones and flash drives, even as college students now “must” have laptop computers. In “[Back to School With Cellphone and Laptop](#),” Jeffrey Selingo reports:

It used to be that getting ready for another school year meant buying a few new No. 2 pencils, spiral notebooks and a lunchbox. Not anymore. Young children and teenagers, as well as college students, are going to school with more electronic gadgets than ever.

“Tech-based products are so much less expensive that the price point now allows kids to nag their parents to buy a particular product or buy one themselves,” said Peter Grunwald, president of Grunwald Associates, a consulting firm in Bethesda, Md., focusing on school technology.

As a result, the back-to-school season is one of the busiest for electronic retailers like Circuit City or Best Buy, rivaling only Christmas. “Purchases are more necessity-based at this time of year,” said Stephanie Gooch, product process manager for Best Buy. At Christmas, purchases “tend to be more gaming, entertainment-based,” she said.

Another change is that the newest tech devices are not aimed at just older students anymore. While laptops are still most useful for those going off to college, Mr. Grunwald says that as prices drop on a wide variety of products once meant for an older crowd, younger students start using them as well. “Kids are aging up,” he said.

That last point seems really important. What does it mean that “kids are aging up?” I am no Luddite (just ask anyone who knows how many digital items I carry in my briefcase — like an airport screener, for example) but I wonder what we are doing to our kids by “aging them up” so fast on technology. Is this replacing the experience of reading a book, climbing a tree, finding a frog, or just watching the clouds? Can they operate *without* digital assistance? Is the experience of childhood becoming a digital experience?

This kind of article makes me think about these questions. There is also the consumerism issue here, as a market economy turns the young into consumers of products, driven by an artificial sense of need. Note this emphasis in Selingo’s article.



Think about these questions as you see the school busses passing by, filled with kids carrying cell phones and flash drives. I’ll be thinking about all this as I also try to find a 13-year-old expert who can tell me how to use my new digital camera.

