

Busy Hands, Lazy Brains

Have you noticed what is happening today with our children? They are hooked on gadgets. Even those who are just two years old are becoming fixated on having a gadget in their hands at all times. It seems as though courtesy and interpersonal dialogue are gradually being replaced with the swipe and touch of a gadget. Smart phones, iPads, Kindles, etc., have replaced face-to-face emotional bonding between human beings—so it seems. Yes, I am excited how little children and teenagers have become comfortable with the new world of gadgets and have easily included them into their every-day living. They are making “friends” and learning new things. However, there is something wrong, terribly wrong, that is happening with this new trend and I am not sure how it will impact society in the next fifty years.

The use of gadgets for the playing of games, texting, messaging and social media, seem to be so mesmerizing that it is literally replacing common courtesies and time needed for face-to-face dialogue. Teenagers are more comfortable texting each other even when they are sitting in the same room or even side by side. I have had the privilege of traveling as a guest speaker to several Caribbean islands, the United States of America and Europe and I have seen the same behavior displayed by little children and teenagers. It seems to be universal.

I’ve been told about five-year-old children while being taken to school by their parents would be walking from the house to the car playing with a gadget. All the way to school in the car they continue playing, never once looking up to enjoy the beauty of nature and the ride. Then, when they reach school, they do not look up and observe what is happening around them. Instead, they continue to play the game from the car door to the classroom, and will continue until the class begins (if allowed). I have even seen children walking to their homes from the bus and go directly through the front door of their homes with their heads down busy sliding and swiping their gadgets. They do not even say “good afternoon” or “hi.” Their hands and brains are always busy. There is no down time and that is what’s dangerous. While eating or watching TV they are sliding and swiping. Once again, I am not against the use of these gadgets. I am seriously concerned about the seemingly never-ending use of them. Far too many young children and teenagers would remain on these gadgets from sunrise to sleep time. That is dangerous. It is not healthy for the brain and learning and retention.

In the New York Times online Business Technology section (August 24, 2013), writer Matt Richtel, states that “scientists point to an unanticipated side effect of *this kind of exposure*: when people keep their brains busy with digital input, they are forfeiting downtime that could allow them to better learn and remember information, or come up with new ideas.” This unstop digital feeding of the brain prevents real learning. The brain needs down times to learn. Matt Richtel sites University of California’s research finding that states “Almost certainly, downtime lets the brain go over experiences it had, solidify them and turn them into permanent long-term memories,” said Loren Frank, assistant professor in the department of physiology at the university, where he specializes in learning and memory. He said he believed that when the brain was constantly stimulated, “you prevent this learning process.”

PARENTS ARE GUILTY TOO

Don't think that only little children and teenagers are guilty of this gadget overload. Parents are guilty too. Far too many parents are so glued to their computers, iPads, smart phones, that they cannot even hear the calls from their children. If they do hear, the response would be: "Give me a minute. I am busy." The truth is many minutes would pass leaving the child discouraged.

Note what Sherry Turkle, director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology Initiative on Technology and Self, discovered in her research about the effects of parents choosing gadgets over their children. "She has found that feelings of hurt, jealousy and competition are widespread. . . . Over and over, kids raised the same three examples of feeling hurt and not wanting to show it when their mom or dad would be on their devices instead of paying attention to them: at meals, during pickup after either school or an extracurricular activity, and during sports events."

Parents, you are doing harm to the relationship with your child by allowing gadgets to distract you from spending time with them or listening to them. I would not be surprised if in fifty years psychologists develop a term like "digital alienation syndrome" to describe the emotional and intellectual crises developed due to over use of digital gadgets.

WHAT TO DO?

Here are a few things to help what I call "digital alienation syndrome."

1. Parents, first turn off the gadget and spend time with your children. Pay attention to your child's cry for help.
2. Restrict the times your child will have a gadget with which to play. Remember that your child can learn more from playing outside in the yard for one hour than sitting for hours playing a game on a smart phone.
3. Do not allow your child to have a gadget in his or her hand while talking to adults, in meetings, or while walking to a destination. Require them to turn it off and pay full attention.
4. Select certain hours each week when there will be a down time when no gadget will be used, even the television.
5. Make sure you know and approve what games or activities your child is using on the gadget.

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