

Fighting the Internet Invasion of Childhood

By Martin Kutnowski

From inside the fortress of her bedroom, my 10-year-old daughter launches guerrilla warfare. Her weapon: piercing screams. She is angry with me because she has discovered that her iPod cannot get online. Last night I managed to selectively program our wireless modem so that specific devices connect to the Web only one hour a day, compared with the four or five hours that she and her 9-year-old brother had recently been spending online. Now I can finally limit their surfing time without constant personal involvement.

American children need 60 minutes of moderate to intense activity a day, according to a recent report from the Centers for Disease Control. One could only hope to meet that standard. Returning from work every evening, I would find two zombies—the cliché never gets old, because it is accurate—in front of the computer. In a catatonic state, the children would respond to my greeting with an unintelligible mumble. After turning the computer off, I would try to talk them into riding the bicycle or going to the park.

Failing that, I'd make them to do chores or homework, often musing how much easier it would

be to haul an elephant up a mountain. At dinner, if asked what they had learned at school—the kind of conversation I used to have with my parents—my annoyed children would respond “nothing,” absently looking into the distance, longing to tether themselves online as soon as I turned my back.

When I heard my daughter's screams from Web deprivation, I knew I was onto something.

My daughter's screams and sobs are an eye opener, indicating the real extent of their electronic addiction. As a professor in a four-year undergraduate university, I meet young people just as they emerge from the public-school pipeline, and from years of excessive electronic stimulation. Differences among these entering students are profound, in physical health, in skill level, in social and academic engagement, and ultimately in their chances for success. Many of these students have urgent needs: Some don't understand their own nutrition, how to form a coherent and complete sentence, how to focus long enough to read one chapter of a

book, or how to talk and collaborate with one another or with the teacher.

I help as much as I can, and often my students become engaged with their academic and social environment. An earlier intervention—fewer videogames, more activities outdoors and more guided reading, for instance—could have saved those who give up. And no, I don't buy the fantasy that failing students will be “successful” drop-outs like Steve Jobs or Bill Gates. Statistics predict that most people without a postsecondary education will be low-wage earners.

I shudder at the idea of my own children becoming like these vulnerable youth. During my children's childhood, the quality of which is my absolute responsibility, I don't want TV, videogames, Internet, tobacco, alcohol, drugs or any other kind of poison or addiction to wreck their development. When videogames were restricted to PlayStations, Xboxes or the Wii, it was easy: I just didn't purchase any of these. We went once a week to the arcade at the mall.

But as my children grew older, their relationship with the Internet posed a bigger challenge. Before hacking my modem, I considered quitting my job or reducing my hours so that I could be back at home in the afternoon.

That wasn't feasible. Neither was pulling the entire household off the grid forever.

Fade to black and fast forward. It has now been several months since I imposed stiff electronic rations. Like fish returning to a river that had been polluted for decades, my children have radically altered their habits, behaving in ways that seemed extinct. If they get bored, they now find things to do, playing with marbles if necessary. They complain occasionally, but tough luck. They are once again avid readers, and, just as significantly, avid talkers.

When we watch TV shows together as a family—not to fill the day but because the day is done—we discuss what the story taught us. Keeping the parasitic electronic stimulation at bay, for now I have managed to emulate for them the simpler, less invasive environment of my own childhood. I dwell in the temporary truce, knowing that new parental challenges will keep me on my toes. This is a long war that can never be won—only tied perhaps—until they grow up and leave home. Soldier on.

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