

Electronics Dominate Children: What Ever Happened to Personal Interaction with our Youngsters?

Barbara Pierce

You've seen them; they are all around us.

Robot kids, texting on their cell phones or hunched over their computers, oblivious to the world around them.

Though they are physically present, they seem controlled by an outside source.

Even at the dinner table they are clicking away. Even while talking to you, their thumbs and fingers fly over the keys. Even when talking to a therapist, like Greg Kovacs.

Kovacs is concerned about the new phenomenon, very concerned. The licensed marriage and family therapist and executive director of the Samaritan Counseling Center of the Mohawk Valley notices and upsurge in kids and their use of texting and social media networks such as Facebook, MySpace, and Twitter.

"The most advanced cell phones allow access to Facebook from anywhere: school, sports, family, and social activities," he said. "Even in mental health counseling!"

"It's not uncommon for me to redirect a child hurriedly typing into their phone during therapy sessions, no doubt impeding their focus and progress in treatment. It is not uncommon for me to see teenagers skillfully walking down the street on a beautiful sunny day, ignoring social interactions, nature and fast-moving vehicles, because they their eyes glued to their cell phones."

The social lives of many kids depend on logging on to their favorite websites frequently each day. Most every kid has his or her own Facebook or MySpace page. They use Facebook to keep in touch with friends, share photographs and videos and post regular updates of their movements and thoughts. And they have signed up to Twitter, to circulate text messages about themselves.

Numbers Shocking

American kids from 8 to 18 spend an average of six and a half hours a day using some kind of electronic device, researchers found. Much of that time they are online.

That is a huge chunk of their day. Parents feel shut out and many are worried.

Though Facebook requires a child to be 13 years old to sign on, many younger children are lying about their age to get on.

"Because it's a relatively new phenomenon, there are no definite findings of the effects of social networking and Facebook on our children," said Kovacs. However, after working with children and family for many years, I don't need statistical evidence to warn parents about the dangers – and the benefits – of social technology."

Kids are focused on their cell phones much of the time. We laugh when we see teenagers on TV, like Jake in "Two and Half Men," texting to a friend who is right in the room. But it isn't really funny. Focusing that much of time requires a great amount of time and energy, Kovacs cautions. It obstructs their focus on homework, family interaction, face-to-face social interaction, and, most importantly, sleep.

If you're the parent of a teen, you are probably familiar with the warm electronic glow in his room late into the night. Sleep, in fact, is a common difficulty given the fact that computers and cell phones are often on stand-by all night, awakening kids when messages are sent and creating complex and stimulating information processing that makes it difficult to go back to sleep.

"Kids – and adults – can become addicted to technology," says Kovacs. "This impairs their judgment, attention, and focus, as they are obsessed with 'staying connected' to their peers."

Epidemic proportions

A growing number of psychologists and neuroscientists agree with Kovacs that there is much reason for concern. The child's focus on electronic devices may effectively "rewire" his brain. The brains of teens continue to develop into the 20s. The connections that he uses will survive and flourish. The connections that are not used will wither and die. So if he is doing music or sports, those are the connections that will be hardwired into his brain.

If he is texting, those are the connec-

tions that will survive. His brain is wired by his activities and interests. Short attention spans may be one lasting consequence. Parents and teachers complain that many of their students lack the ability to concentrate away from their screens. And they are deficient in their ability to communicate in face-to-face interactions.

Kovacs recommends that parents monitor their children's use of social networking to minimize problems. "Cell phones and computers should be turned off at bedtime – even an hour or two before. Cell phones should be left home and not used during appointments and meetings where focus is necessary, such as therapy, medical appointments, family time, sports, church, and most importantly, school."

"Parents should be aware that Facebook and cell phones offer sexual perpetrators and ill-intentioned adults access to our children. Parents, you have a responsibility to monitor cell phone and Internet usage. Even if they don't like it, you must monitor anyway – and continue to control when and where they access cell phone and Internet services. It's not worth the risk."

And as kids do not understand the risk, you must teach them not to share their password, to be skeptical of what they see, or to accept a "friend request" from someone they do not know.

And talk with your kids about their time online. Be open-minded; don't be judgmental or criticize.

The website www.commonsense-media.org has good information for parents. ■

Barbara Pierce is a licensed clinical social worker who writes a monthly column in Mohawk Valley in Good Health. She resides in Florida. This column is reprinted with permission from In Good Health-Mohawk Valleys Healthcare Newspaper, Utica, NY, Sept. 2011.

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