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SCHOOL



Why limit electronics?

Media & Waldorf Education

by Maya Muir



PHOTOS BY JESSE MICHENER

“How curious will a child be, how mentally agile, creative and persistent in seeking answers to their questions if, from a young age, they learn to Google first, and ask questions later (or not at all)?”

Kim John Payne, *Simplicity Parenting*

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Cell phones and smart phones, TVs, tablets, computers, video games... They are everywhere in our lives. As parents of preschoolers, preteens, and even teens, we ask ourselves what's appropriate, and when?

TV is an easy babysitter for a harried parent; who hasn't faced that temptation? People tell you that if you limit electronics at home, your child will just be exposed elsewhere. Or that if you keep her away from computers, you're handicapping her. If she doesn't know the latest TV/pop culture references, maybe you worry you're making her into a social misfit. We all know the reasons, the pressures. Let's face it: resisting them is work. So why would you?

It depends on what kind of childhood you want for your child, and how you want to best prepare them for life.

It's worth it, if you care that your child grows up sharing your values.

And it's worth it if you want your child:

- To be an active, creative problem solver
- To have healthy social skills and self-concept
- To have the imagination and concentration for intellectual endeavor as an adult

Passive or Active

One way to approach this question is to ask: what would your child be doing if she was not watching TV/playing a video game/chatting on line/texting/checking for messages on Facebook?

Remember all those things most of us spent a fair portion of our childhood doing before we had electronic distractions? Running around with capes and swords or making up stories about dolls, biking around the neighborhood, reading, shooting hoops, climbing trees when our mothers weren't looking, digging holes (when our mothers weren't looking), generally moving and exploring. Being active.

Through this kind of open-ended play, children learn

to take initiative, to ask questions, to create, improvise, and solve their own problems, creating pathways and

“Researchers who have tracked children’s creativity for 50 years are seeing a significant decrease in creativity among children for the first time, especially younger children from kindergarten through sixth grade. This decline in creativity is thought to be due at least in part to the decline in play.”

*Nancy Carlsson-Paige,
Professor Emerita of Education,
Lesley University*

connections in the brain that are the foundations for later academic learning. Through being active, they are learning to learn.

And they are developing the all-important skills that later develop into what is called “executive function”: the processes, involving mental control and self-regulation, to do with managing oneself and one’s resources to achieve a goal.

All electronics contribute to physical passivity. Video

games are the most active of these activities (pastimes might be a better word!) but they involve only from 2 to 10 fingers. Are we training a nation of couch potatoes? Fast food and giant portion sizes are not the only contributors to the current epidemic of childhood obesity.

TV watching is physically passive, but more importantly, mentally passive. Compare watching TV to reading, where the reader must exercise the muscle of imagination with every page: what do Sticky Washington and Ledroptha Curtain of the Benedict Society books look like? How did it feel to walk down the street of Dickens’ London? TV feeds us a finished product; there’s no room for the growing mind to intervene, question, or create. In this sense, video games equally train in passivity and acceptance; neither provide training in skills that lead to an energetic engagement with the world, certainly not in critical thinking. In contrast, the Waldorf curriculum for the young child is play-based to encourage the naturally curious mind of the very young to explore and imagine.

Actual vs. Virtual

In a 2014 article from *The Washington Post*, a mother describes driving a carpool of middle schoolers by a river so they can see it. Every morning she points out how beautiful it is. She laments, “No one in the car looks up. They are all looking down at their phones, playing games with each other, texting a friend or watching a YouTube video.” Not an unusual experience.



What does it mean for children not just to be bent over their electronics, but to miss the real rivers passing by? Children are increasingly more familiar with our physical world through “nature shows” on TV than from the actual experience of digging in the dirt. One is not a substitute for the other. Such a growth of mediated rather than real experience has led some experts to talk seriously about “nature deficit disorder.” How much harder for children to grow up into responsible stewards of our planet when they have such little experience of it! At Portland Waldorf School, respect for and learning about nature is incorporated in multiple ways from kindergarten through high school, from gardening projects and numerous field trips to backpacking and wilderness experience in the later years.

Values & Self-Concept

Meanwhile, what values does your child absorb from these media? Do they align with your values? As adults, we can filter out messages we don’t want, but children, especially the very young, are absorbent, curious, and uncritical.

The ads that accompany TV shows or pop up on the Internet are fashioned by extremely clever minds, designed to be irresistible, and many are aimed

specifically at children. To take just one example, in the past decades, an estimated \$15 million has been spent pitching fast food and junk food just to children. Then there's the media-wide cult of the perfect body; much has been written about the effect of that on girls in particular.

"The emphasis on unattainable body image damages the health and self-image of girls and young women, and can lead to eating disorders, anxiety and depression."

Tommi-Ann Roberts, PhD, from an American Psychiatric Association Task Force report

And as cultural critic Neil Postman has noted in his book *The Disappearance of Childhood*, with the advent of electronic

media, children are exposed to adult ideas much earlier, narrowing the gap between childhood and adulthood. Is that what you want for your child?

Social & Emotional Life Through Electronics

We've all probably observed a parent react to their distressed child by offering her an electronic distraction. Understandable: it's hard to watch your child suffer, and you want to assuage her pain. Yet pain is part of life. The better lesson is to allow your child to feel what she feels, and then discover she can surmount it. "Today there are almost endless opportunities to quiet our kids with entertaining games, apps, and screen time," says Professor Nancy Carlsson-Paige. "But when we do that, are they missing out on the chance to feel, to argue, to sit in silence, to listen, to be?"

For older children, social media becomes the issue. When you "friend" someone on Facebook, you know the limits of that relationship. But does your child? Is she learning the oh-so-important skills of negotiation, sharing, give and take that come with real friendship?

Or is she learning something else? What is the social culture of the Internet? Periodically stories surface about children cyber-bullying; is that an accident? Web visionary and pioneer Jaron Lanier doesn't think

so. He posits that “the unfettered and anonymous ability to comment results in cynical mob behavior, the shouting-down of reasoned argument, and the devaluation of individual accomplishment.” This is the same culture in which some children persuade themselves that sexting is a cool thing to do.



A 2011 study by the National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University found further disturbing implications. In a study of 2,000 teens, the 70% who used Facebook and MySpace were 5 times more likely to buy tobacco, 3 times more likely to consume alcohol, and 2 times more likely to smoke marijuana.

Not all kids will be drawn into this behavior, but how many ten year olds, if allowed, will be glued to their cell phone at every spare minute discussing every shift in their mood or of the social dynamics around them? Does this enhance real connection?

This is not a realm that promotes healthy self-esteem based on real relationships and real accomplishments. Nor does it promote curiosity about the larger world. The immediacy and weird intimacy of social networking focuses children’s attention on themselves and their friends in a way that is startlingly narcissistic. And it is a world that is notoriously hard for parents to monitor.

At a Waldorf school, we work to consciously foster deep relationships between students, teachers, and parents. The care of our early childhood faculty and the consistency of our grades teachers traveling with their classes from 1st through 8th Grade give our students the space and security to grow real, healthy relationships modeled by the adults around them.

Violence

As adults, we become inured to violence, and we understand what is real and what is not, but the young haven't acquired our filters, our experience. They learn by observation and imitation, and at young ages especially, they do so uncritically.

The American Academy of Pediatrics has become very concerned about this issue. They report that by the time the average young person turns 18 years old, she will have viewed 200,000 acts of violence on TV alone. Much of it, they point out, is portrayed as entertainment, or glamorized. And, unbelievably, the highest proportion of violence is found on children's shows.

Moreover, the Academy reports that titillating violence in sexual and other encounters are particularly dangerous as they associate positive feelings with hurting others. One study of 3,200 teens in 8 countries found TV watching heavily associated with acts of bullying. And there is a more subtle lesson children can learn from this violence, too: these shows reinforce the perception that ours is a mean and violent world. Not surprisingly, watching violence can lead to anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, nightmares, and social isolation.

Of course, as parents we can strive to limit the amount of violence our children watch, but the Academy points

out that children and adolescents easily access media deemed inappropriate by ratings and/or their parents. How much better to stress, as Waldorf schools do, the beauty and wonder of the world with young children, which allows them to learn trust and courage, invaluable tools for facing all that is difficult in our world.



Video Games

We hear a lot about the content of video games, and it's worth thinking about what is being endorsed: *Grand Theft Auto*? *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare 3*? *Call of Duty: Black Ops*? And once a child (usually a boy) gets started with video games, have you ever tried to limit time so spent?

A 2011 Harris Interactive poll found 23% of young people aged 8 to 18 say they have “felt addicted to video games;” these children estimated that 44% of their friends were addicted. Not surprising: estimates are that 90% of kids aged 8 to 16 play 13 hours a week, more for boys.

More subtle, but more important even than the content of the games are the changes they cause in the brain.

Yes, vision and movement are stimulated, but gaming leaves untouched the frontal lobe, that crucial area associated with learning, memory and emotion, and, thus, of modulating behavior, an area which doesn't



mature until the age of about 20. On the other hand, solving simple math problems or reading aloud thicken the fibers of the frontal lobe, and help children mature emotionally. Children who spend hours at even Nintendo are retarding the process of brain development that builds the ability to control anti-social behavior.

Fast vs. Deep or How to Foster Intelligence

It's important to remember, too, that we don't yet know the full effects of our brave new electronic universe on developing brains. The range of necessary studies has only begun. Still, anecdotal evidence is gathering, and much is obvious.

Take speed. We've gone from typewriters and letters in one generation to email to Twitter. We've gone from the

leisurely pacing of *Father Knows Best* to *Sons of Anarchy*. We accept that the medium is the message—but we don't always remember what that means for the malleable brains of the young.

Twitter messages aim for 160 characters. What we watch and what we do with electronic media trains us to be short and snappy, to move fast so we can get on to the next thing. In other words, it trains us to have a short attention span, to deal in the superficial, and to be impatient.

“What the (Inter)net diminishes is... the ability to know, in depth, a subject for ourselves, to construct within our own minds the rich and idiosyncratic set of connections that give rise to a singular intelligence.”

Nicholas Carr, The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains

And as Norman Doidge, MD, author of *The Brain That Changes Itself*, says, “If we stop exercising our mental skills, we do not just forget them: the brain map space for those skills is turned over to the skills we practice instead.

As a Waldorf School, this is an enormous concern for us. We work consciously at every grade level to cultivate children's natural creativity, to provide conditions that allow them to concentrate on challenging tasks that help them grow, and to lay the basis for a life of intellectual inquiry. We ask parents to minimize electronic media so that they don't undercut the very education they are otherwise committed to. “Our new strengths in visual-spatial intelligence (from use of on-screen technologies) goes hand in hand with a weakening of our capacities for the kind of deep processing that underpins mindful knowledge acquisition, inductive analysis, critical thinking, imagination, and reflection,” says developmental psychologist and UCLA instructor Patricia Greenfield in an article in *Science* in 2009.

Duke professor Katherine Hayles says, “I can't get my students to read whole books anymore,” and she is a professor of literature!

Computers

Okay, you say. You get it about TV, video games, cell phones... but what about computer games, activities, and educational programs?

They are not much better for young children, says Nancy Carlsson-Paige, Professor Emerita of Education at Lesley University. “The activity itself and how to do it is already prescribed by a programmer. What the child does is play according to someone else’s rules and design. This is profoundly different from a child having an original idea to make or do something.”

But for older children aren’t they a necessary research tool? Won’t I stunt my child for the 21st century if I don’t allow her access to the Internet?

Of course when children reach a certain age, using the Internet for research is appropriate and necessary. But it is also an avalanche of information at the touch of a key, with very little filter. As adults we can discern, we can more easily tell true from false. Children are still learning this skill. The older sources of information (encyclopedias, libraries, books) are typically vetted. They also take more work to access—and isn’t that kind of search the kind of activity we want them to be able to undertake? A new laziness is emerging from the ease of access. High school teachers report a rise in easily detectable plagiarism from Wikipedia.

And again, consider how difficult it is to control what a child sees on the Internet!

At PWS we don’t start use of computers for research until 8th grade (and then with supervision), and we use them extensively, with instruction and supervision, in the High School. We are happy to report that students have no trouble figuring out how to use computers at those advanced ages!



So What Do We Suggest?

We suggest holding off on electronics with young children. Period.

Let early childhood be a time of intense exploration of this wonderful world. Let children play and imagine, which will strengthen their ability to develop abstract thought later. And above all, let this be a time of innocence, joy and discovery—which will carry over into all later learning.

Above all, what we suggest is conscious, thoughtful parenting. You must choose what makes sense and when for your children given your particular values, the demands of your life, your family situation, etc. But here are a few thoughts:

Think not only about the content of what you expose your child to, but the method of delivery. What is the message of the form? What are the values promoted subtly, as well as overtly?

Make sure that electronics don't take over time that should be devoted to other activity.

If you want to give your child a cell phone for communication between you, know that she can now communicate with anyone else with a phone any time, as well as use any of the other capabilities the phone has.

If your child has TV access, use the V chip (viewer control chip) to regulate content—but don't assume your responsibility ends there.

Avoid buying electronic toys and apps for your children, and encourage family and friends to do the same when buying for your children.

Know that it is easier to say no and limit access up front than to curtail a habit once begun.

And, though it is an almost impossible task, know what your children are watching, playing, doing.

Further Suggested Reading

365 TV-Free Activities You Can Do With Your Child, S. Bennett, 1996.

A is For Ox: The Collapse of Literacy and the Rise of Violence in an Electronic Age, Barry Sanders, 1994.

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Failure to Connect: How Computers Affect Our Children's Minds--For Better and Worse, J. M Healy, 1998.

Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television, Jerry Mander, 2002.

Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It, Thomas de Zengotita, 2005.

Parenting for the Digital Age: The Truth Behind Media's Effect on Children and What to Do About It, Bill Ratner, 2014.

Raising Generation Tech: Preparing Your Children for a Media-Fueled World, by Jim Taylor, 2005.

Taking Back Childhood: A Proven Roadmap for Raising Confident, Creative, Compassionate Kids, by Nancy Carlsson-Paige, 2009.

The Children of Cyclops: The Influences of Television Viewing on the Developing Human Brain, K. Buzzell, AWSNA, 1998.

The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains, Nicholas Carr, 2011.

You are Not a Gadget, Jaron Lanier, 2010.

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