

Article 1: Parents, Children and Managing Technology's Toys

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There are children today who are not old enough to remember a time when there were no internet web sites or cell phones or chat rooms. In fact, even as old as I am, I have trouble remembering the time before they invaded our lives. I'm not saying these techno-toys are without merit, but I do feel like they have their collective downside, not to mention dark side, and it is high time we have broader discussions about that topic. Of course, we're talking about the internet and cell phones.

I believe these new technologies should be handled in a way similar to how pioneer parents taught their children wilderness skills regarding the use of fire or handling horses. Fire had its place, as did the horses – and both had to be handled with care.

Those parents likely taught their children that fire could warm them, and protect them from the bitter cold. They probably pointed out that fire could keep dangerous animals away from their camp, not to mention cook their food and sanitize their cutting blades. But they also taught their children that when fire was managed carelessly, it could burn their fields and houses down, burn the clothes off their backs, or even the skin from their bones.

Horses were also central parts of everyday life in those days. No doubt pioneer parents taught their children how to care for those animals, as well as how to ride them or harness them to a wagon. But in that teaching, there had to be time spent on being careful around horses, and children had to learn the inherent dangers of a horse treated improperly.

I'm concerned that too many parents perceive today's technological wonders as innocent avenues to games or sports information or communication with friends, and disregard the more troublesome side of these new toys. Doing that, in this author's humble opinion, would be tantamount to giving a four-year-old boy a pocketful of matches and turning him loose in a paper factory.

We'll start with the internet. Internet chat rooms, social networking web sites like My Space, and other web locations aimed at young people establish new paths for youths to be exposed to the outside world. These paths were advertised to the public as "time savers" or "cool" ways for teens to communicate with their current friends, and to make new friends from around the world.

The internet was billed as the great open door to the world so young people could learn more information about more varied topics, and learn them faster than any previous generation in history. It was billed as safe and appeared to be a great way for young people to better enjoy their time at home. It is billed as something that provides a common bond for families to enjoy. The reality of these promises appears to fall a short of the mark in some ways.

First of all, parents, too often, don't think to ask about parental controls that are possible and tend to work off the premise of surface buzz – as opposed to looking at a new techno-toy with a critical eye. A child using the internet to explore new and wonderful things, or to do research for school work are nice concepts, but children spending more hours at night watching *YouTube* videos than they spend attending school is something entirely different. If that child is staying up until 2:00 a.m., losing sleep, and struggling to get up in the morning to go to school – it's worse still. And it can get far worse than that if parents fail to monitor what their children are doing on the internet. Some of the most prolific, most visited web sites on the internet, year after year, have proven to be those that feature pornography and/or questionable “social networking.” At KAP, we see young children exposed to such things on a regular basis, through an older sibling or an extended family member.

There are increasing numbers of social networking sites where young people can meet strangers. New ones pop up regularly. And where pedophiles once had to operate in the open to find victims, such as around their neighborhoods or with organized youth groups, the internet and the various social web sites offer them a way to prowl anonymously in order to prey on teens who are too naïve to grasp that they are being manipulated by an online predator.

Young teens like to think that the “friends” they connect with “online” are just that. Friends. People who really care about them and simply like “chatting” with them online about their lives and the things they are doing. They rarely understand that what is shared online can be very different from the truth. And when we meet someone online as opposed to in person, we don't have the personal cues and signals that could tell a teen to be on guard. The twenty-something gangbanger with a tattooed forehead or the balding, forty-something pedophile can't easily lie about who they are in person. Online, it's easy.

It's even easier if the teenager lacks emotional closeness or a sense of strong family bond, and thinks this person online “understands” them and really “listens” to them. This becomes a perfect setting for a pedophile or even a human trafficker to take advantage of an inexperienced, naïve teenager loaded with a trusting spirit but lacking the wisdom of experience and age.

Teens today, in surprising numbers, decide to “meet” people they only know online. They will decide to meet them in spite of the fact that they have no clue how truthful this other person has been, and they have no way to find out, until it is too late.

At Kids’ Advocacy Place, we have interviewed young people who admitted to first meeting online and then sneaking out of their house to discover their “new friend” was older than expected. Sometimes the men would drive nearby their home and pick them up, and sometimes the teen would walk to the man’s house after midnight. Usually, nobody knew where they were. Others met the older guys through a civic organization and started sharing private emails, unbeknownst to parents, and ultimately ended in secret meetings. Could there be a more dangerous way for a lonely teen to socialize?

The best defense against this sort of internet initiated danger is a close, bonded relationship between parent and child. This goes a long way toward decreasing the chances that a teenager would attempt such meetings. Paying close attention to the web sites your teenager visits helps to keep you informed, and being prepared for the inevitable screams of privacy invasion is invaluable. It’s all part of being a good parent.

Now we can look at the role played by cell phones. In the good old days (my youth), calls into the home could easily be monitored and parents actually had rules about no calls into the children after 9:00 pm., or no calls when the child was grounded. And when a call came in, everyone knew it because it rang throughout the house.

Today, a 13-year-old teenage girl can be texting and calling a 39-year-old pedophile at 2:00 am. on a school night while making plans to sneak out of the house to meet – all without the parents ever knowing anything is happening. Most of these scenarios involve cell phones, and in fact, the most common ways these meetings are organized is via cell phone calls or text messages.

There is no way to know exactly how many situations involving teens would have been avoided had it not been for the internet or a cell phone. But it’s safe to say that many would never have happened, had these technologies not opened the doors.

Simple parental rules controlling use of internet and cell phones could make their use far safer than they currently are in many households. Internet use can be limited to times when parents are around, and the computer can be placed in the main room as opposed to a back bedroom. Parents can learn how to check web site histories or set up password barriers to the computer. Setting up ways to check your teen’s cell phone call histories can go a long ways toward securing its use. As for “chat rooms” and other social networking sites like My Space, where children place

profile information about themselves for others to share could be avoided altogether. For one thing, children already have email from friends and cell phone calls and text messages. Besides, it is fairly well established that placing personal information on the internet is not the smartest thing to do.

This article does not recommend any parenting approach to be done “behind the teen’s back.” As a counselor for many years, I always encouraged parents to be straight forward with their children. Again, if the cell phone or computer access is an earned luxury rather than an entitlement, the parent has every right to monitor its use. Not unlike the way a parent might monitor the use of a car. The parent is paying for it, and has every right to control its use.

More liberal minded people might argue that this approach to controlling cell phones and internet use is crazy, because most things teens get into harbor dangers. They learn to drive cars – that’s dangerous. They eventually reach a certain age and can drink or smoke if they choose. Those harbor dangers. Playing sports is dangerous. Crossing the street is dangerous. Lots of teens experience “first love” and most parents worry about the sexual component dangers of such relationships. But the folks that lump these dangers in with the dangers associated with technology fail to take into account major differences.

We have laws that force us to wait until a certain age and then we must TRAIN young people to drive automobiles. They have to pass a test. We teach children at an early age to be careful about crossing streets or walking through parking lots. We pass laws and most parents force their children to wait until they are of legal age to drink alcohol or smoke – which at least allows them time to get a little older and hopefully make informed decisions about such things. It is true that teenage romances have historically created fears in the hearts of parents, however, sexual curiosity has never been so widely exploited for such a wide audience of young people, and it has never been so easy for those young people to hide it from parents – since we entered the age of the internet and the cell phone.

Common sense parental rules like no dates without meeting the new beau, no overnight visits without knowing the parents and the host child, knowing your teen’s friends, and monitoring visitations in your home seem reasonable. Collecting cell phones at bed time and returning them to your children in the morning isn’t radical. I realize some young people will bark about such rules, but good parents know how to handle that, too.

If one combines the troubling factors of techno-toys with decreasing numbers of stable families, decreasing numbers of parents who feel really competent about their parenting, and an increasing number of young people who are disenchanted about their lives or their prospects for the

future – the end result is an increasing number of youths turning to people outside their home and outside their own personal circles for emotional bonds and support. Utilizing techno-toys creates a perfect setting for those looking to exploit disconnected youths, and we see indicators of this at KAP every week.

This article isn't written to encourage parents to stop access to these technologies. It is designed to encourage parents to establish a management system to make access safer for their children.

If you're interested in exploring these notions, some good places to start are the following related web sites:

www.NetSmartz.org

www.NetSmartzKids

<http://ezinearticles.com/?Foiling-Online-Predators-by-Teaching-your-Children-Internet-Safeguards&id=708887>

www.cyberfence.com

www.business.com

www.nsteens.org