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Limiting Screen Time is Not the Key to Parenting in the Digital Age

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Limiting Screen Time Is Not the Key to Parenting in the Digital Age

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Popular books and media magnify parents' fear of excessive "screen time" and the supposed dangers children face through the use of television, computers, and cell phones. However, this generalized fear often leads to absolute limits on the use of screen devices. Such an approach places too much emphasis on technological determinism, assuming that simply using computers and other interactive devices, regardless of content or the intended use of given applications, will negatively influence both cognitive and social/emotional development. Can we imagine a better approach to parenting in the digital age than monitoring screen time?

The mainstream media's often neo-Luddite view of technology contributes to the parental concern that leads to these restrictions. Deploying a too-broad definition of the "screen" encourages parents to blame televisions and computers for a host of perceived ills, including a child's potential disconnect from the real world, delays in social development, inferior gross motor skills, and failure to breathe fresh air. For parents, the medium is both the message and the enemy.

I completed a study in fall 2011 on children's virtual worlds that asked parents to quantify restrictions on screen time at home. Reported limits were typically 30–45 minutes per day and as restrictive as a couple of hours per week. Typically, this included all uses of television, computers, and tablets that were not directly related to school. The primary demographic of this particular study was children of academics between the ages of 6 and 11. Academics may be stricter about screen time than the typical population. A study conducted by Common Sense Media of children ages 0–8 suggests that this assumption may be correct, because daily screen time decreased from 3 hours 34 minutes to 2 hours 47 minutes as household income

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increased from under \$30,000 to over \$75,000 (Rideout 2011). A 2009 study of children ages 8–18 suggests they had access (on average) to 4 hours 29 minutes of television, 1 hour 29 minutes of computer time, and 1 hour 13 minutes of video games, with some overlap occurring because of multitasking (Rideout, Foehr, and Roberts 2010). In 2012, these divisions may be harder to define because of media convergence. Neither strict limits nor unfettered access is desirable. This article argues for a more nuanced approach to media use by children.

Screen time limits are popular because they have become the de facto benchmark to judge success in parenting. Setting a limit of thirty minutes to two hours a day (or week) allows mothers and fathers to quantify their skills and feel that they are addressing their anxieties about digital media. This rejection of media is not new. Parents have always been worried about supposedly violent and/or immoral media. Choose the delivery mechanism—comic books, video games, television, or rock and rap music—and children have supposedly needed protection from the harmful effects of questionable media content for a while, although time tends to diminish the concern over specific media. And yet such dangers continue to be touted in mainstream media and more-specialized publications. One magazine, *Parenting*, suggests that a weekend without plugging in will help bring families together (Bean 2011), while in a recent issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, social media is blamed for the failure of college students to assert their independence—because Skype and texting can facilitate multiple opportunities for parental contact each day (Castle 2012).

The primary media of concern has long been television. In *Four Arguments for the Elimination of Television*, Jerry Mander (1978) argues that TV produces a corporate-controlled, mesmerizing stupor. Neil Postman's (1985) *Amusing Ourselves to Death* more accurately suggests that the primary purpose of television is to entertain, which reduces the relevance of popular news programming. (As a counterpoint, the multiple news perspectives available on the Internet lessen reliance on television news.) In contrast, Steven Johnson's (2005) *Everything Bad Is Good for You* develops the definition of the "sleeper curve," offering numerous examples of how specific television programs and video games have become more complex, thereby training our brains to deal with multiple layers of meaning.

But even if arguments like Johnson's attempt to garner greater respect for television, interactive media remains distinct in its effects and influence. In *Cognitive Surplus*, Clay Shirky (2010) delineates television viewing from interactive actions on the Web, discussing ways in which online groups can formally and informally work together for the betterment of society. While such benevolent behaviors may not be typical of preteens (and Shirky may skew to the optimistic), differences in interaction, content, and opportunity do suggest that considering screen time as one homogenous experience does not offer a particularly nuanced picture of media use.

Interactive media also has received criticism similar to that directed at television. The two most common accusations state that the constant flow of options offered by the Web makes individuals less able to focus and that a reliance on online relationships increases loneliness and isolation. These two concerns are covered ad nauseam in mainstream media. Columnist Ruth Marcus (2012) of the *Washington Post* laments the inability of adults to go for long stretches without access to email, Facebook, or texting, while Stephen Marche (2012), writing in *The Atlantic*, appropriately places the responsibility of changing attitudes about friendship on individuals. Nonetheless his article is titled "Is Facebook Making Us Lonely?," resituating the blame on social media for broad social anxieties.

These fears have been magnified in recent years by various book-length discussions. In *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, Nicholas Carr (2010) describes how the brain reconfigures itself when engaging digital media and infers that continual use of social media and the Internet causes neural rewiring that leads us to crave multiple stimuli and lose the ability to focus on one mental task. Jaron Lanier's (2010) *You Are Not a Gadget* begins with a rejection of many of the tenets of social media, focusing instead on the habits of users to observe rather than create and to remix and share old media rather than produce original material. He also rejects the promise of the collective, placing considerably more value on the efforts of the individual over production resulting from mass collaboration (i.e., wikis).

These books and the media discussion generated by their publication instill fear in parents, even as many of the arguments focus on the behaviors of adults. Sherry Turkle (2011) extends the contours of these arguments to children in *Alone Together*,

emphasizing changes in relationships and emotional attachments to robots and other mechanical creatures that are supposedly a consequence of excessive digital dependence. Additionally, she writes of young adults who spend an excessive amount of time playing various massively multiplayer online role-playing games or who feel anxiety about how they are perceived and how they present themselves on social media.

However, preteens use digital technology in ways that such pessimistic tales rarely account for, considering technology as simply another genre of toy that may be used for a few minutes or for long stretches of time. Children determine their selection of activities by the perceived challenge. “Hard fun” motivates children to complete projects when the difficulty of the task leads to enjoyment and engagement. In the process of trying to complete the activity, children learn what they need to know to succeed, frequently exceeding age-level expectations (Papert 2002; Brown 2005; Berry and Wintle 2009). When specific topics (e.g., astronomy) or characters (e.g., *Pokémon*) result in complex media use, the phrase “geeking out” describes the focused use of technology to personalize and interact with the particular concept (Ito et al. 2009). In fact, play centered on a particular subject offers elements of both “intrinsic” and “extrinsic” activities, creating a complex network of virtual, real, solitary, and interpersonal play (Ang, Zaphiris, and Wilson 2010).

While adults may be too easily distracted by all of the options on the Internet (social media, [Wikipedia](#), etc.), children’s play is more varied and transitory regardless of whether it is digital. On the other hand, kids’ virtual worlds like [Club Penguin](#), [Webkinz](#), and [Poptropica](#), as well as various video games, create a consistent interface and may actually help children focus on problem-solving and tasks. Children are often quite focused and immersed in these media. And because most preteens are much less engaged in social media (the text-based interface of these virtual worlds limits their activity), they likely define online socializing merely as a means to find playmates for multiplayer games or to communicate with family members. My own study of children’s use of virtual worlds suggests kids were unconcerned with the identity of online playmates and whether the avatars were real or computer-controlled. They were simply looking for opponents or partners for a specific activity. A few of the older children did meet their real-life

friends online but explained that they did not perceive virtual worlds as places to make “real” friends. Meyers (2009) describes efforts to “tip the iceberg” in *Club Penguin* as an example of the formation of a community of activity (similar to what may form spontaneously on a playground) rather than an opportunity to form friendships, again suggesting that casual play has objectives in both real and virtual spaces distinct from forming interpersonal connections.

Ultimately, many of these concerns arise from too strong an adherence to Marshall McLuhan’s ubiquitous notion that the medium is the message. The media in which content is transmitted does matter—reading a text-based story about a natural disaster offers a significantly different experience from viewing edited news video footage (which also differs from watching unedited amateur video of the event on [YouTube](#)). However, the conclusion does not follow that all uses and experiences with a specific media (let alone a specific screen) lead to the same outcome. The differences between different screen experiences matter greatly.

For this reason, to consider all screen time as equivalent is shortsighted. Kids may watch cartoons on YouTube, or they may watch science documentaries, or they may do both. They can create with painting programs, engage in virtual quests that promote problem-solving skills, use constructivist-learning tools that enrich creative play, or interact with their real-life peers in an online multiplayer game at times when engaging with friends would otherwise be impossible because of transportation logistics.

Parents must consider the benefits of each computer activity: Why is real paint always superior to digital art? They both have advantages and disadvantages. Real painting requires greater fine motor skills and offers sensory stimulus through the feel and mixing of paint, but digital art can offer a greater variety of options and often allows a child to produce more ambitious work, thereby encouraging further practice and experimentation. Despite visceral differences, one is not necessarily more valuable than the other.

Parents do not treat all outside time in the same way. Playing sports, reading in the sun, or gardening are different activities. (They are all good, just different.) Children need to partake in a variety of activities, and parents need to take time to differentiate all of them rather than grouping them into broad and meaningless categories. Using Scratch to build games

and multimedia is more creative, if not as physical, as playing baseball. While the comparison is awkward (and perhaps arguable), various digital activities may also be equally dissimilar. Parents need to learn to distinguish among them and to help their children do the same.

Mobile technologies complicate parental choices even further. Some sort of augmented reality sport likely will be available within a few years: consider the expansion of the Kinect interface to a physical playground or field. At that point, what will a concept like “screen time” mean? Telling our kids to play without this technology will make as much sense as our parents or grandparents scolding us for using a Frisbee because a ball and bat should satisfy.

In the 21st century, digital technologies offer valuable options, but poorly conceived screen restrictions limit their accessibility and benefits. Children need face-to-face companionship, and they need to go outside, but a balance is necessary, and right now the choices made by parents often underestimate the value of certain technologies. Not all screen time should be avoided.

Anthropologist and education scholar Mimi Ito suggests that one should focus on the benefits of technology while also accepting the negatives (New Media Consortium 2010). Accepting these advantages and disadvantages, we should follow Howard Rheingold’s (2012) advice in *Net Smart* and look to develop mindfulness about our use of technologies while promoting education about how to use them most effectively. The younger we start teaching our children to evaluate and distinguish among different technologies, the better.

Most screen time limits target preteens. By the teenage years, youth must learn to make proper choices for themselves. Undoubtedly, they will be bombarded with social media distractions and have access to plentiful but unsubstantiated information sources. After years of severe limits on their media choices, kids would then be thrust into the proverbial digital candy store, less able to make wise choices and to evaluate technological options.

Instead, informed use offers greater benefits. For instance, Jane McGonigal (2011) suggests in *Reality Is Broken: Why Games Make Us Better and How They Can Change the World* that the challenges offered by games enhance cognitive developments that may be difficult to replicate otherwise. We need to better understand such possibilities so that children might benefit from

them. Meanwhile, Facebook has recently announced plans to explore safeguards and conditions in which they might open access to children under age 13. This will undoubtedly cause alarm and consternation (Fox 2012). And yet with parental safeguards and monitoring in place, this change could be used to help children develop a better understanding of social media use. Parents can use this as an opportunity to teach (at an age when kids are more willing to listen) about online bullying, privacy concerns, commercialism, and other social media-related issues.

Eventually, the exclusion of screens will become impossible. The space-specific nature of desktop computers makes them easier to regulate, and laptops offer only slightly more flexibility. But tablets, iPods, and cell phones offer portability that allows technology to be everywhere, and Internet-enhanced eyeglasses may take this ubiquity to another level (Google 2012). We could easily imagine Turkle’s fears coming to fruition, with the creation of a society of lonely, isolated, and always-online individuals. Instead, early education and media literacy should expand to not only include enhanced literacy and critical thinking about media messages but also critical thinking and mindfulness about different types of media use (Rheingold 2012).

Just as restricting a child’s use of a pencil to 30 minutes a day makes no sense, so too are limits on screens often equally ill-conceived. One must determine how, where, and when a specific technology is best used (or best avoided). The opportunities (and dangers) with digital technologies are greater than with pencils (although it is easier to poke your eye with the latter), but computers offer so many options for problem solving through complex video games; creativity through drawing, multimedia art creation, video remixing, and programming; and knowledge acquisition through text and video, that parents need to educate their children and themselves about what activities offer the most benefits and move past the question of whether they are simply looking at a screen. Digital technologies are not out to get our children, but they are here to stay. The problems adults encounter as they use technology do not necessarily reflect what children experience. The current period of parental control over screen time creates a smug and false sense of security against a vaguely defined threat. More meaningful parenting occurs when one takes time to fully educate children in new digital literacies.

Appendix: URLs for Websites Cited in the Article

Wikipedia	http://www.wikipedia.com/
Club Penguin	http://www.clubpenguin.com/
Facebook	http://www.facebook.com/
Poptropica	http://www.poptropica.com/
Webkinz	http://www.webkinz.com/
YouTube	http://www.youtube.com/

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