

The lure of the screen

I used to tell my parents that the first cell phone I will allow my own children to have will be a flip phone, incapable of Internet access and certainly without the ability to use "apps." I argued that their first phones would have only the capabilities of my first phone — texting and calling — used primarily to contact their parents, and once in a while classmates to ask about homework. Isn't it primarily what we think kids need phones for?

It took me a while to realize how impractical this was because if the first piece of a given technology that I possessed had been the same as my parents', I would have been walking around with a cassette player in a world of iPods (incidentally, I loved my Sony Walkman CD player).

So maybe it was a little ridiculous for me to suggest this, but I think my point was (and is) valid. I look at young kids today and see that they're as attached to mobile devices as their adult counterparts. It has come to the point where kids would rather sit inside and play games on their parents' (or their own) iPads than go outside and play hide-and-seek, or catch, well, do anything.

And while I recall my parents telling me to drop the Legos or even the PlayStation controller and head outside, I, unlike these children, often actually did it, and when I didn't, at least I was capable of breaking away to utter a response.

Today, however, youngsters are becoming so attached to technology at such a young age, as young as 3 or 4, that they are forgetting — if they ever learned in the first place — how to have fun without an iPad — literally.

In April, The Telegraph quoted North Ireland teacher Colin Kinney, who said his colleagues, "have concerns over the increasing numbers of young pupils who can swipe a screen but have little or no manipulative skills to play with building blocks or the like, or the pupils who cannot socialize with other pupils but whose parents talk proudly of their ability to use a tablet or smartphone."

Kinney goes on to say that the "brilliant computer skills" these children possess is "outweighed by their deteriorating skills in pen and paper exams because they rely on instant support of the computer and are often unable to apply what they should have learned from their textbooks."

It is true that we are moving into a world in which the ability to understand the language of computer coding is more important than the ability to read and write cursive. This, however, is not an excuse for the extent to which young children have become as addicted (or more so) to their mobile devices as their parents.

LeapFrog, the popular children's brand is set to unveil a product called the Leap Band; the first wearable tech catered specifically toward children. And although the wristwatch-like product is designed to get kids up and moving, it raises a question for me: How young is too young?

I read that Google is considering allowing online accounts for children under the age of 13 (though giving their parents control over how the service is used).

Because of this cross-generational addiction, this week has been designated as "Screen Free Week" in schools around the country. The week is aimed at getting every member of the family away from computer and device use for just one week and head outside.

For parents, technology is now a dilemma: Give it to their kids at a young age so they are in line with their classmates in terms of computer prowess or withhold it and allow them the gift of social skills... only time will tell, but I fear the former is gaining ground.

Teacher Kinney is worried about children's...

1. ...writing skills.
2. ...communicative skills.
3. ...computer skills.
4. ...parents' attitudes.