growing up WIRED
raising Pinoy kids in the digital age

Queena N. Lee-Chua, PhD
Ma. Isabel Sison-Dionisio, MA
Nerisa C. Fernandez
Michele S. Alignay, MA
growing up WIRED
raising Pinoy kids in the digital age

Queena N. Lee-Chua, PhD
Ma. Isabel Sison-Dionisio, MA
Nerisa C. Fernandez
Michele S. Alignay, MA
ANVIL BOOKS BY QUEENA N. LEE-CHUA

Helping Children Do Well in School: 10 Successful Strategies from the Parents’ Best Practices Study of the Ateneo de Manila High School (with Ma. Isabel Sison-Dionisio)

The Filipino Family Surviving the World: The Psychology of Pinoy Families (with Ma. Lourdes A. Carandang)

Eureka! Thoughts on Math

Homework: Everything Parents Ask About School

The Learning Series: What Parents, Students, and Teachers Should Know
  – Learning
  – Start the School Year Right
  – Study Smart

Ten Outstanding Filipino Scientists

Straight Talk on Everyday Mysteries

In Love with Science: Outstanding Filipino Scientists Tell Their Stories (co-edited with Leocadio S. Sebastian)

ANVIL BOOKS BY MA. ISABEL SISON-DIONISIO

Helping Children Do Well in School: 10 Successful Strategies from the Parents’ Best Practices Study of the Ateneo de Manila High School (with Queena N. Lee-Chua)

I’ve Been Dating … Now What? (with Michael Asis)
Contents

Acknowledgments
Introduction
Media Matters / Alberto V. Ampil, SJ

CHAPTER ONE:
EASY MYTHS, HARD TRUTHS
Tech Does Not Make Us Smarter
Of Pixels and Power / Scott Lee Chua
Straight Talk on Edutainment
From Infancy to Preschool
Queena Speaks: Brain Rules
From Primary to Middle School
A Foundation of Faith and Love / Rhoda Buenaventura-Pinlac
TV Viewing for Kids
Ichel Speaks: Only Two Digital Hours a Day
Media Literacy for Tweens and Teens
Why Teens Act the Way They Do
From a Psychology Major / Angelica Marie S. Dionisio
What NOT to Tell Teens
Harnessing Tech’s Fullest Potential / Regina Jay Garcia
Bam Aguirre and Family: Toward Excellence

CHAPTER TWO:
FAST AND INSTANT, BORED AND BORING
The World Unplugged
Life’s Too Short to Be Bored / Scott Lee Chua
We Want It Now
Ichel Speaks: Breaking the Boredom Blues
Boredom: The Forbidden Word / Mary Rose Fres Fausto
How to Manage Boredom
Queena Speaks: Beyond the Self
Why Gaming Gets Boring / Kester T. D. G. Ng Wee
Reconnect / Rene Antonio S. Tan
Active, Not Passive Learning
Queena Speaks: Ateneo High School Boys, Unplugged
Adventures of a Blogger Mom / Jennifer Joy C. Ong
Resilience
Eden Acosta and Family: Mind Conditioning

CHAPTER THREE:
INFORMATION OVERLOAD, ATTENTION DEFICIT
Much Ado Over Multitasking
How Distracted Are You?
Why Multitasking Does Not Work
When Multimedia Works
How to Counter Multitasking
Queena Speaks: A Culture of Shortcuts
The Power of the Router

Notes from a Developmental and Behavioral Pediatrician / Jacqueline O. Navarro
Battling Distraction in Schools
Ichel Speaks: E-learning in Miriam College
No Cable TV, More Time for Other Things / David Francisco S. Dionisio

Marge Acosta and Family: Gadget Central

CHAPTER FOUR:
REAL FRIENDS, FACEBOOK FRIENDS
Lack of Empathy in a Wired World
Ichel Speaks: The Story of Jabez Rodriguez
Talking Face to face, Talking Online
Teens and Electronics / Ysabel Acosta
Generation Me

Face to Face Friends, Not Facebook Friends / Rafael Ignacio S. Dionisio
The Perils of Social Media
Rowie and Ria Juan: Using Social Media Responsibly
Raising Socially Adept Kids
Ichel Speaks: Starting Young
Using Social Media Effectively
Queena Speaks: Bullying in Cyberspace
The Selfie / Mae Esguerra-Sy
Let’s Talk About Sex
Elaine Morales and Family: Engineering Effective Habits
CHAPTER FIVE:  
**GETTING A HIGH, ESCAPING THE WORLD**

Addicted to Games

**DOTA Blues / Rafael Ignacio S. Dionisio**

Internet Addiction May Be Similar to Drug Addiction

**Are You Addicted to the Net?**

**How I Beat My Facebook Addiction / Angelica Marie S. Dionisio**

Escape into Virtual Reality

Digital Addiction and Treatment in South Korea, Japan, the United States

**Balance / Ethan Zachary L. Chua**

**Blessing in Disguise / Matthew Leland David Y. Gue**

**Nesy Speaks: From a Rookie Senior Techie**

**Mary Ann Santiago and Family: Preparing for the Real World**

CHAPTER SIX: 
**READING AND SCANNING, PAPER BOOKS AND SCREENS**

Scan and Skim

**Reading, Attention, and the Brain**

**Queena Speaks: Raising Writers**

**What Research Entails**

**Reading FREE / Marjorie M. Evasco**

**Motivating Kids to Read**

**Marie and Anabelle: Successful Single Parenting**

**Ichel Speaks: Kids Unplugged**

**Joji Garcia and Family: Gadgets Can Never Replace Relationships**

CHAPTER SEVEN:  
**RAISING GENERATION TECH, GROOMING DIGITAL CITIZENS**

**Lourdes Ozaeta and Family: Family First**

**How to Talk So Our Kids Will Listen**

**Ichel Speaks: Raising Digital Citizens**

**Why We Need to Say No Sometimes**

**Nesy Speaks: Saying No**

**When Children Resent Gadget Rules**

**A Christian Home / Mae Esguerra-Sy**

**The Self-Worth of the Digital Child**

**Hands-On Dad / Custer Alignay**
Health Risks from Technology Abuse
Yvonne Luna and Family: Vigilance
Why Family Meals Are Essential
Integrating Technology in Xavier School
Teaching Social Science with Tech / Franco Nicolo P. Addun
Using iPads in Filipino Class / Reagan Austria
Milen Aviles and Family: Keeping Values Intact

About the Authors
Acknowledgments

THANK YOU, Ateneo de Manila University chemistry professor Christopher Peabody, for journeying half of the way with us. Chris collated the survey results, led focus groups, and shared his teaching experiences.

Thank you, Ateneo de Manila High School. The project started under the leadership of former principal Raymund-Benedict Q. Hizon, SJ (now at Ateneo de Naga). The current A-team, headed by principal Gabriel F. Mallillin, ensured that the survey reach as many students as possible. Our gratitude to Maria Jennifer A. Concepcion (Associate Principal for Academic Affairs), Jessel Gerard M. Gonzales, SJ (Associate Principal for Formation), and Ronan B. Capinding (Associate Principal for Student Affairs). Thank you, Ferdinand Francis V. Verayo (guidance counsellor), for choosing the student participants for the focus groups. Thank you, Ma. Monette C. Dator (arts/media teacher) for joining us in sharing insights with the high school community.

Thank you, Alberto V. Ampil, SJ (Director for Parent Relations and Programs), particularly for the inspirational opening prayer during the parent media seminar. Thank you, Alma Renee R. Pavia (Assistant to the Director) for organizing, and Ateneo parent Mary Rose Fres Fausto, for emceeing the affair. Thank you, Ateneo High School Parents Union for School and Home (PUSH) chair Dr. Manuel Delfin and wife Anna Maria, former chairs Dada Lorenzana-Santiago and Cecile Serrano, past and present parents Larry Azura, Chari Reyes, Gene Jacinto, Jean Montinola, Mita Adre, Miej de Dios, Hanna Gonzales, Portia Santos, Rowen de Jesus, Rox Sevilla, Letlet Cepeda. PUSH has supported the project since its inception, and provided valuable input for the pilot version of the survey.

Thank you, Ateneo parents Ma. Teresa Aguirre, Lourdes Ozaeta, Mary Ann Santiago, Vicky Tantoco, and Yvonne Luna, for sharing your experiences with us.

Thank you, Miriam College High School (MCHS). The project started under the leadership of former principal Ma. Corazon R. Reyes (now Director for Basic Education), and achieved full force with the help of dynamic principal Edizon E. Fermin and his team. Our thanks to Reina M. Rama (Assistant Principal for Academic Affairs), Nancy C. Roman (Assistant Principal for Student Affairs), Jeanilyn S. Guarnes (Guidance, Testing and Research Center Supervisor).


Thank you, Eden Acosta, for helping us in data gathering and introducing us to more Ateneo and Miriam parents who are willing to share their stories about gadget use.

Thank you, Margarita A. Acosta (chair, Department of Communications) and Victoria
Apuan (chair, Family Studies/Social Sciences Department), for not only inspiring Ichel in her graduate studies, but for also sharing your time and wisdom with us.

Thank you, Milen Aviles, Rowena Juan Matti and Rosario T. Juan, Charlene C. Rodriguez, Marie and Anabelle (you know who you are), for opening up about your reflections and experiences.

Thank you, Colegio Sto. Domingo. Fe L. de Guzman (president), Karla Ma. U. de Guzman (Director for Early Childhood Education), teachers Glenna Marie Gatapia and Lynette del Castillo for sharing your experiences with preschool and primary school students.

Thank you, Xavier School. The NExT office started under the administration of former director Johnny C. Go, SJ, and now flourishes under current director Aristotle C. Dy, SJ. Our thanks to the NExT team, particularly Galvin Ngo (head), Jessica Demegillo, Tess Torralba, Melvin Gallardo.

Thank you, Xavier teachers Franco Nicolo P. Addun and Reagan Austria, for sharing your technology experiences in and out of the classroom.

Thank you, Filipino paediatricians, for stimulating discussions on our wired youth: (in Cardinal Santos Medical Center): Dr. Demetrio L. Africa, Dr. Rosario Gamus-Te, Dr. Eleanor P. Custodio, Dr. Suzette A. Bautista, Dr. Edna G. Santiago; (in Medical City): Dr. Jacqueline O. Navarro, Dr. Stella G. Manalo, Dr. Romeo D. Santos, Dr. Corazon Jesusa Serafica-Diaz, Dr. Carmela Kasala; (in Philippine Children’s Medical Center): Dr. Joel S. Elises, honorary president of the Philippine Pediatrics Society Central Luzon chapter; (in the University of the Philippines-Manila): geneticist Dr. Eva Maria Cutiongco-dela Paz; (in Cebu Doctor’s University Hospital): Dr. Jovito B. Lee, Jr., Dr. Jose Antonio S. Quitevis, president of Philippine Pediatrics Society Central Visayas chapter, Dr. Myra V. Altonaga; (in Chong Hua Hospital, Cebu): Dr. Anna Marie Edvina S. Cabaero; (in Cebu Institute of Medicine): Dr. Emmalyn L. Reveldez; (in Gullas Medical Center, Cebu): Dr. Nancy T. Cinco.

Thank you, parent contributors: Custer Alignay, Rhoda Buenaventura-Pinlac, Jennifer Joy C. Ong, Mae Esguerra-Sy. Our thanks to De La Salle University-Manila literature professors Marjorie M. Evasco and Isagani R. Cruz for sharing the FREE strategy of close reading.


Thank you, Ateneo and Miriam students, for taking the time to answer the survey, and for candidly sharing your thoughts in the focus group discussions.

Thank you, Philippine Daily Inquirer (PDI), particularly to the editors who shared their personal and family digital experiences. Thank you, CEO and president Alexandra Prieto-Romualdez, for your parenting recommendations to develop in our youth a love for reading. Thank you, Mobile head Javier Vicente Rufino, for your insights into the digital life, including Silicon Valley executives choosing to send their kids to schools with no
computers. Thank you, Lifestyle editor Thelma Sioson-San Juan and writer Pam Pastor, for writing about ways to deal with boredom.


Thank you to all who shared resources, suggestions, insights: National Scientist Bienvenido F. Nebres, SJ; Outstanding Social Scientist Ma. Lourdes A. Carandang; Ateneo President Jose Ramon Villarin, SJ; Miriam College President Rosario O. Lapus; Ateneo Vice President for Basic Education Fr. Anthony Pabayo, SJ; Ateneo Associate Dean for Academic Affairs Eduardo Jose Calasanz; Ateneo alumnus Ruben Gomez; and Ateneo professors Gregory L. Tangonan, Ma. Regina M. Hechanova, Lota A. Teh, Flordeliza F. Francisco, Liane P. Alampay, Ma. Emma Concepcion D. Liwag, and Jan Tan Co-Chua.

Special thanks to Evangeline Bautista (Dean of Ateneo School of Science and Engineering), for graciously granting Queena a three-unit research load in order to complete the study.

Thank you, Anvil Publishing, for your support of this project from the very start. Ani Habúlan has not only done a superb editing job, but has also provided updated resources on key points of the text. Our gratitude also goes to Karina Bolasco (head), Gwenn Galvez, Joyce Bersales. Thank you, Rachelle O. Santos, for the caricatures, and Ray Sunga, for the cover.

To our husbands (Bobbit, Allan, Smith, Koots) and our kids (Ged, Raf, Dav, Gica, Scott, Migo, Maia): thank you for your patience while we were immersed in this project for three years. We love you very much.
THE BIGGEST difference between our kids and us? They are digital natives, having never known a world without the Internet and 24/7 connectivity. We are merely digital immigrants, having visited their world only during our early, middle, or even late adulthood.

Digital devices have revolutionized the planet, affecting not just wealthier countries but also developing ones. The Philippines touts itself as the texting capital of the world, a dubious distinction considering that so many of our people still cannot meet basic needs such as food, shelter, clothing, and education.

Fifty-seven percent of Filipinos aged 23 to 25 prioritize buying gadgets, according to a 2013 survey by Sun Life Financial Philippines. “Unlike older or same-age peers who are married or who have financial dependents, the selfies tend to allot more of their recurring cash flow to support their lifestyle,” reports the Philippine Daily Inquirer. “Eighty-six percent of them considered spending on communication as a priority.”

According to the Broadband Commission for Digital Development, two-thirds of Filipinos regularly visit social-networking sites, even if only about a third have Internet access at home.

In 2010, Ateneo de Manila University psychologists Ma. Regina Hechanova and Renee Ann Ortega-Go surveyed almost 400 Internet users across the Philippines. Participants ranged in age from 13 to 70, with a mean age of 31. Thirty-one percent were students.

The researchers found that the top activities engaged in by the participants were social networking, school-related matters, entertainment, gathering news and information, e-commerce, communication, and technology deviance (such as hacking or spreading a virus).

The pace of digital technologies is so fast that in only a few years, gadget use has changed, especially among young people. In 2006, Ateneo psychologists Liane Peña-Alampay and Ma. Concepcion Liwag surveyed more than a thousand high school and college students from eleven public and private schools in three cities in Metro Manila.

Ninety-seven percent of the respondents reported going on the Internet on average of three to five times a week, with no differences between age groups, genders, or school types. In our own 2010–2012 survey, albeit in two private schools, 98 percent of respondents reported accessing the Internet daily.

In the 2006 study, more than 80 percent used e-mail for school-related activities. Friendster was the top social-networking site of choice (62 percent), followed by Multiply (12 percent), and then Facebook (8 percent).

In our study, e-mail is not the preferred method of communication. Only 65 percent use e-mail, as compared to 98 percent who prefer Facebook (for educational and other purposes), and those who do use e-mail utilize it mainly to communicate with adults, not
peers. Friendster and Multiply have virtually disappeared.

Given our hurly-burly tech world, we cannot let our kids roam unfettered in the
digital world without guidance of any sort. Without proper care and caution, our kids may
very likely use technologies in ways that are not healthy for them in the long run. Once
these bad habits are formed, they are difficult to erase.

“Once a relationship based on unguided experience, attitudes, and habits is
established between children and technology,” says American psychologist and new-
media expert Jim Taylor in his book, Raising Generation Tech, “there is little hope of
reshaping that relationship in a more positive direction later on.”

**SURVEYS**

All four of us authors are mothers, with supportive spouses and, for the most part,
happy and fulfilled children. At the time of this writing, Nesy (married to Bobbit) is in her
sixties, Maribel (married to Allan) in her fifties, Queena (married to Smith) in her forties,
and Ichel (married to Koots) in her thirties.

Our children also span a generation: Nesy’s son Ged and Maribel’s sons Raph and
David are in their twenties; Maribel’s daughter Gica in her late teens; Queena’s son Scott
in his mid-teens; and Ichel’s son Migo in middle childhood and daughter Maia a toddler.

All our children are digital natives, and in the process of doing this book, their inputs
have been invaluable.

Our research began in 2010, with Maribel’s observation that in her various talks
around the country, the biggest worry of parents is how to manage their children’s
computer use. The parents were anxious about bullying, porn sites, and addiction, among
others, which we felt were valid concerns.

But we did not want to give recommendations until we had solid data. In 2004, we
had worked closely with Ateneo de Manila High School on a best-practices study,
surveying the families of the top achieving students and involving several of them in
focus-group discussions.

We approached Ateneo in 2010, this time to do a media study, and the enthusiasm of
the administration and the parents’ group gave us confidence that studying student media
behavior was indeed a worthwhile endeavor.

Ateneo gave us enough respondents (practically the entire high-school student body),
but we were curious to find out whether there would be gender differences in media use.
Ichel sent feelers to the Miriam College High School administration, which promptly gave
us access to their students as well.

In 2012, we started focus-group discussions with selected parents and students who
gave us more insights into their media behavior.

After pre-testing the survey on selected students, we proceeded with data collection.
From 2010 to 2012, our respondents included 2,144 Ateneo and 1,905 Miriam students,
for a total of 4,049 students.
We did not expect many of the results. We were surprised (and relieved) to discover that bullying was not as endemic an issue as we had surmised, a testament we believe to the effectiveness of the anti-bullying programs instituted by both schools.

Don’t get us wrong. Bullying does exist. And even one bullying case is one case too many. But the figures for bullying pale in comparison to other results.

**We cannot—and should not—monitor our children all the time.**

A huge majority of respondents say they are bored. Most students are distracted. Many students prefer to interact online rather than face-to-face. A significant number display addictive tendencies, particularly to gaming and social networking. Only a third of the respondents read for pleasure.

On the other hand, the things highlighted in media and parents are most worried about do not seem to be pressing issues. For instance, online gambling does not seem to be a problem, at least in these two schools, since 80 percent of respondents have never engaged in this activity.

As for pornography, some students (particularly males) say they visit porn sites. But the figures for (accessing) pornography do not worry us too much; it is but natural for adolescent boys to be curious about sex and to seek out materials to satisfy their curiosity. Their fathers used to trade *Playboy* magazines, now their sons visit the Web.

Sixty percent of the respondents say that their parents have rules and warnings against porn, which are heeded most of the time.

In this book, we have included a couple of articles on bullying and pornography, because we know many parents are worried about them.

However, our main concerns are those which have surfaced in our surveys, focus-group discussions, and interviews: Boredom, attention problems, self-absorption, possible addiction, and lack of interest in reading printed books, magazines, newspapers, in favor of online activities.

»**WORLDWIDE CONCERN**

In this book, we give you the latest research on how online activities affect our children and us. Neurological data, especially functional magnetic resonance imaging scans, have revealed what happens to our brains when we play video games or surf the Net. No longer just the area of concern for pediatricians, these studies need to be communicated to parents and educators as well.

Psychological experiments, with participants subjected to an array of tasks, have shown what happens to our attention span, our social skills, and our emotions when we spend too much time in cyberspace.

Educational studies, from massive surveys to individual case studies, have convinced us that educators around the world, from primary school to graduate school, share many
similar observations about what is happening to our youth today in and out of the classroom.

These studies have burgeoned in the last five years, not only in the United States, but also in South Korea, China, Australia, and the United Kingdom, among others.

Locally, our study was limited to private-school students, a majority of whose families can afford to buy multiple cell phones, tablets, television sets, computers, and gaming toys for the home. We have not surveyed the media behavior of public-school students, whose families are not as affluent.

However, from various accounts, including Filipino pediatricians, it seems like youth belonging to the lower-middle and lower classes are increasingly imitating the bad habits of those in the upper classes.

Developmental pediatrician Myra V. Altonaga of Cebu Doctors University Hospital tells of a case she personally handled. A four-year-old girl had to stop school to give way to her two elder sisters. The family could not afford to provide all three of their children with an education. A not uncommon plight, to be sure, but Altonaga was nonplussed to discover that the kids quarrel over their iPad.

When Altonaga confronted the mother about her priorities, the parent was defensive. In our digital age, gadgets are often deemed more important than school.

In 2011, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) states in a Policy Statement, that “pediatricians need to ask two questions about media use at every well-child or well-adolescent visit: (1) How much screen time is being spent per day? and (2) Is there a TV set or Internet connection in the child’s bedroom?”

“Children and teens should engage with entertainment media for no more than one or two hours per day, and that should be high-quality content,” says the AAP. “It is important for kids to spend time on outdoor play, reading, hobbies, and using their imaginations in free play.”

The AAP is the biggest and most up-to-date pediatrics organization in the world, monitoring the health of children and teens eighteen years and younger. Throughout this book, we abide by the most current (2011) AAP guidelines, endorsed by the Philippine Pediatrics Society, on media and technology use.

**EXTERNAL CONTROLS**

Based on research findings both abroad and our own media study here, we suggest ways for you to start raising children who grow up already wired.

Often this involves external controls, such as regular monitoring of the websites our kids visit, especially when they are in primary or middle school.

Or talking to our kids about what they did online. Which friends did they interact on Facebook with? Which new websites have they encountered, and what make these attractive to them? Did they learn anything new online?

But let’s get real, we cannot—and should not—monitor our children all the time. If
they really want to view pornography, engage in violent gaming, or bully others online, they will find ways of doing so (if not at home, then at a friend’s house or an Internet café).

This does not mean that rules are not important. After all, we have rules for drugs and alcohol use, right? But we need to be realistic about what we can and cannot regulate, and sometimes we may need to choose our battles judiciously.

For example, when a teen is doing gaming, listening to music, and watching YouTube all at the same time while his grades are free-falling, you know you have to intervene.

But instead of banning everything, unplugging the router, and throwing the computer out of the house, try to figure out which activities he most needs to give up, at least until his grades recover and improve.

Gaming may be the most addictive, so if your teen can limit himself to half an hour of game time a day, you can let him relieve stress by listening to music and laughing at YouTube clips from time to time.

**WE KNOW OUR OWN SITUATION BEST**

Since each of us knows our situation best, by all means, do adapt and modify our suggestions to best fit your needs. For example, we abide by the AAP recommendation that preschool children have at most forty-five minutes of screen time (TV, computer, tablet, phone, and so on) combined, while kids younger than two years have none. Older children and teens can have a maximum digital time of hours a day.

This may seem extremely unrealistic, especially if our five-year-old is already glued to the tablet for five hours a day. Instead of giving the tablet away, we can gently decrease her screen time from five to, say, three, then hopefully, to one hour a day, making sure to provide alternative activities for her to enjoy.

**It is up to us parents to do not what is easy, but what is best for our kids.**

When our children are still babies or toddlers, it is possible for them not to indulge in any media time at all.

It is up to us parents to do not what is easy, but what is best for our kids.

For young children, we can program the computer to block online content we do not wish them to see, limit their time online, tell them that Facebook is off limits (this is legally true, anyway) until they enter high school. When our kids are online, it is safer and easier if we can monitor what they do in the process.

In his book, *The Cult of the Amateur*, Silicon Valley insider Andrew Keen says that many parents tell him they do not want to spy on their kids online.

“Well, neither do I,” he retorts. “But I also don’t let them watch the Playboy Channel, get in a car with strange men, or hop on a plane to Las Vegas for the weekend.”
BE PROACTIVE

Let us be proactive rather than reactive. Before potential problems arise, it would be better to have principles already in place, understood by the whole family.

For example, when setting limits on technology use, children and teens respond more willingly and are more likely to follow such limits when consequences are discussed with them in a nonjudgmental manner.

Many of us tend to swing from permissive to punitive and back. We are the ones who buy the gadgets for our children in the first place, for whatever reason, whether justified or not.

Then when our kids invariably succumb to gadget compulsions and start having cognitive, school, or social problems, we tend to immediately set stiff penalties, such as banning all gadget use for a week.

Banning devices is a strategy that seldom works and tends to lead children and teens to hide whatever infractions they may do. It is also so easy for them to break all our well-meant rules using their friends’ devices or rushing to an Internet café.

Self-regulation is the only way for any of us to ultimately be masters of our digital world.

SELF-REGULATION

As our children grow older, our aim is for them to self-regulate. In short, instead of external rules, we want them to develop internal controls.

Hechanova and Ortega-Go’s study shows that only self-regulation is positively correlated to positive outcomes (professional and social enhancement) and negatively correlated to negative outcomes (social harm and problematic Internet use). In other words, the more we regulate our own Internet use, the better for our professional and social lives. The less we self-regulate Internet use, the more problems arise.

On the other hand, external regulation (such as that done by parents) is negatively correlated only with social harm. This means that in their study, the most that parental control can do is to help kids avoid harm in cyberspace.

In the end, self-regulation is the only way for any of us to ultimately be masters of our digital world.

When children show us that they can abide by common-sense rules, then we can learn to start to trust them in cyberspace. Rules for teens then are naturally less externally restrictive; since they are on the verge of adulthood, we can give them more freedom to navigate the World Wide Web.

Of course, we need to discuss with them beforehand all logical and natural consequences if they violate our trust. Ultimately, we need to keep communication lines open. Communication is the foundation of strong family relationships, and no amount of cyber-damage can weaken them.
In this book, we have included several stories of Filipino parents and children who so far have successfully navigated the wired world. All have struggled in one way or another, some with gaming, others with social networking, still others with mindless surfing and more.

But those featured here, including those who have made their struggles public, share one thing in common: Despite the difficulties, all of them persevere.

Now that they have reaped enough benefits to know they are on the right path, they share their stories with us.

It is not surprising that the most poignant account comes not from experts, but from parents. American mom Rachel Macy Stafford’s young daughter has already seen images on the Net that she should not have witnessed. On her blog, Hands Free Mama, Stafford writes eloquently about the challenges we all face in the digital age.

“It would be lot easier to just let my child go to a separate room and stare at a separate screen,” Stafford says.

It would be a lot easier to just let her go it alone rather than delving into this cyberworld that seems to change with each passing day. But the cost of separate rooms, separate screens, and separate lives is high—not being a part of your child’s online world can lead to irreparable damage to his or her mind, body, spirit, and future plans.

Stafford implores us:
Even when the words don’t come easy …
Even when [your children] push you away …
Even when you’re tired after a long day …
Even when you think this doesn’t apply your child …
Even when you think you might be too late …
The moment you decide to open your eyes to the dangers of the digital world is the right time.

Let us all open our eyes. Growing up wired is not easy. But it can be done.

DEEPER READING


Keen, A. (2007). *The cult of the amateur: How blogs, MySpace, YouTube, and the rest of today’s user-generated media are destroying our economy, our culture, and our values*. NY: Doubleday.


Media Matters
By Alberto V. Ampil, SJ

Opening Prayer for “Media Matters?!” parent forum of the Ateneo High School, September 28, 2013

We thank You, Lord, for the gifts and wonders of your Creation.

We thank you for this gift and wonder of being able to see the world through the magical looking glass that is Media, and like Alice in Wonderland, to marvel, wide-eyed, at all its features, the paltry and the sublime, the chaos and the turbulence, the order and magnificence of a humanity, fallen, deformed, and yet redeemed, and touched by the Divine.

Keep alive in us, always a deep sensitivity to what Media represents in our mind’s eye, so that they do not become for us, mere shadows of the real, an endless procession of phantom images flickering against the wall of some half-lit cave, disappearing into thin air.

Protect us from an indifference to—and worse, from an ignorance of what Media lays before us.

“Media Matters?”
“Does Media matter?” we ask.

“Media Matters!”
“Media DOES matter!” we proclaim.

“Media IS important!” we insist. And yet, at the same time—paradoxically, we remind ourselves, “It is NOT that ALL important!”

Help us then to separate the trivial from the crucial, to sieve the life-giving grain from the life-less chaff, and to come away from this encounter, with the conviction, the belief, and the resolve, that we shall make Media matter in the lives of our children, in the same way that everything,
all life, matters to You;
and by so doing, teach them,
that because all things come from You,
it is within our power to sanctify All,
in order to help us find You,
and thus fulfill Your Will in our lives.

This prayer,
we make today,
Heavenly Father,
through Christ Our Lord.
Amen.
Chapter One
Easy Myths,
Hard Truths
Tech Does Not Make Us Smarter

SINCE SILICON VALLEY is the global hotbed of technology, we expect that the people there would send their kids to the most high-tech schools. Well, we are wrong.

In Waldorf School of the Peninsula in Los Altos, California, 75 percent of the children have parents who work in technology companies. Many parents are executives in eBay, Google, Apple, Yahoo!, and Hewlett-Packard, among others.

But there are no computers in their classes. The school does not even want kids to use computers at home.

»LOW TECH

Instead, kids learn the old-fashioned way—with pencils, pen, paper, blackboard, books, paints, even knitting needles.

This school runs on the philosophy that digital technologies may have ill effects on creativity, attention, and motor and social skills. This school stresses the importance of physical exercise and real-world interactions rather than virtual learning.

“Fifth-grade pupils practice knitting socks to help their math and problem-solving skills; second graders play catch with bean bags while repeating verses after their teacher,” reports the (UK) Mail Online. “They’re not synchronizing their mail boxes and Facebook (accounts)—they are synching their brains with their bodies.”

Cathy Waheed, a math teacher who used to be a software engineer, teaches fractions by asking kids to cut up apples or cake into quarters or even sixteenths.

“For three weeks, we ate our way through fractions,” she tells the New York Times. “When I made enough fractional pieces of cake to feed everyone, do you think I had their attention?”

Alan Eagle, who has a computer science degree from Dartmouth, tells the Times, “I fundamentally reject the notion you need technology aids in grammar school … The idea that an app on an iPad can better teach my kids to read or do arithmetic … [is] ridiculous.”

Eagle himself has an iPad and a smart phone. Moreover, he works in Google.

Ironically, his daughter in fifth-grade did not use Google, while his son three grade levels higher was just learning how to do so.

Pierre Laurent, who used to work for Intel and Microsoft, agrees with the no-gadget philosophy. His three children are all in similar schools, and his wife Monica was “so impressed” that she became a teacher in one of them a few years ago.

Both of them believe that in the real world, great teachers make a difference in learning.

Laurent, who now works in a technology start-up, tells the Times, “Engagement is about human contact, the contact with the teacher, the contact with … peers.”
“SUPEREASY”

Contrary to what many parents think, there is no need to start kids on technology early. Why? Digital technologies are very easy to use.

“It’s supereasy,” says Eagle. “It’s like learning to use toothpaste.” Eagle uses an apt description to drive home his point: “Brain-dead easy.”

Without computers, the children do not feel deprived at all. In fact, they get frustrated when people around them use gadgets all the time.

One kid complained that on a visit to his cousins, he saw them playing with their gadgets and not with each other. He had to wave his arms and say, “Hello guys, I’m here.”

Many children of technology executives also attend similar schools, such as the Greenwood School in Mill Valley, which is guided by a no-gadget philosophy as well.

BOTTOM LINE

The bottom line in the use of technology in education is: Does technology make us smarter?

When used properly, technology does help, as seen in the ways Xavier School, for example, has experimented with ways to make such use meaningful in class.

Ateneo High School and Miriam College High School are also thoughtful users. They have integrated technology in learning, but they prefer to proceed with caution and study the ramifications of digital learning before haphazardly requiring all students to buy tablets, laptops, or e-books.

Of course, most students prefer to learn with technology, for readily apparent reasons.

“Digital technology might brighten the students’ outlook not only for the obvious reason that it gives them mouses and keyboards to wield, but also because it saves them the effort of acquiring knowledge and developing skills,” says Emory University English professor Mark Bauerlein in his book *The Dumbest Generation: How the Digital Age Stupefies Young Americans and Jeopardizes Our Future*.

There is a price to pay.

**Studying is most likely not the main reason why students stay long online.**

“When screens deliver works and numbers and images in fun sequence, digital fans assert, the students imbibe the embedded lessons with glee, but in fact, while the medium may raise the glee of the students, we have little evidence that the embedded lessons take hold as sustained learning in students’ minds,” Bauerlein says.

Do students really use the Internet mainly for studies? In our survey, 90 percent of students say they surf the Net for homework and school projects. Less than 10 percent spend more than four hours a day doing so.
On the other hand, 85 percent of respondents say they surf the web for personal interests. Twenty-five percent spend more than four hours a day doing so.

So studying is most likely not the main reason why students stay long online.

**LITTLE EVIDENCE**

At the turn of the millennium, Stanford University professor emeritus Larry Cuban studied computer use in several preschools and kindergartens, high schools, and universities in Silicon Valley. He concluded that generally, computers were “oversold and underused,” with few lasting benefits.

More than a decade later, Cuban has not changed his mind. So far, the “cumulative evidence” regarding the effectiveness of digital devices in learning is “missing-in-action.”

“Occasional studies that do show promising results for new technologies are dragged in to cover the near nakedness of research, much like a fig leaf, to justify the high costs of these new devices in the face of little evidence,” says Cuban in his blog in March 2012.

“The fact remains that no one knows for sure whether the new hardware and software appearing in schools work,” he continues. “They are all beta versions with glitches that teachers and students end up discovering.”

Bauerlein cites many studies showing that students using digital technology do not do better, and sometimes, do even worse, than students who don’t use it.

In 2000, policy expert Kirk Johnson of The Heritage Foundation studied data from the National Assessment on Educational Progress on students who used computers in class at least once a week and compared their performance to students who used computers less than once a week.

His sample was fourth- and eighth-graders who took the reading test in 1998.

Johnson concluded that students who used computers more often in class did not do better than those who did not.

“The use of computers in the classroom may not play a significant role in explaining reading ability,” Johnson says. “Thus, dedicating large amounts of federal tax dollars to the purchase of computer hardware, software, and teacher training could crowd out other worthwhile education expenditures on, for example, new textbooks, music programs, vocational education, and the arts. [I do] not suggest that there is no place for computers in the classroom … [But] computers may not have the effect on academic achievement in reading that some might expect, even when they are used by well-trained instructors.”

In 2006, University of Chicago economists Austan Goolsbee and Jonathan Guryan studied how successful E-Rate had been so far in terms of providing Internet access to public schools. E-Rate, a federal program which started in 1998, gives subsidies to public schools for computers and Internet access.

The economists decided to focus on California. Because of E-Rate, the percentage of schools with Internet access grew from 55 to 85 percent in just two to three years.

But did student performance improve in these schools? The researchers decided to

Unfortunately, they found that the huge investment in computers had no effect on student performance in any of the six subjects after a year. After two years, student performance even went down!

“The E-Rate program has helped get basically every school in the country hook up to the Internet,” the economists conclude in an article for the journal, Education Next. “The Internet itself, though, seems unlikely to be a silver bullet for solving the problems of America’s public schools.”

»MIXED RESULTS

In 2004, University of Munich economists Thomas Fuchs and Ludger Wößmann studied data from the Programme for International Students Assessment (PISA), a test given to fourteen-year-old students in more than thirty countries in 2000.

After looking at test scores and background variables, including home and school computer use, the researchers concluded that computer availability at home shows “a strong statistically negative relationship to math and reading performance,” because they may “distract students from effective learning” particularly, the researchers hypothesize, if they serve as devices for gaming.

There is some good news, though. When computers at home are used for educational purposes, such as e-mailing and accessing websites, the researchers found that these can help in learning.

“Only by using computers in constructive ways can the negative effect of computer provision on student learning be partly compensated for,” they say.

As for computer availability in school, this is “unrelated to performance.”

But again, there is some good news. The researchers posit an inverted-U shape between computer time and academic performance. Students who never use computers at school have lower performance than those who sometimes use them.

But students who often use computers (several times a week) perform worst of all. Too much computer use may be chosen at the expense of more effective instruction, and may even hinder creativity.

This inverted-U shape finding suggests that there can be an “optimal level of computer and Internet use at school, substantially below a use intensity of several times a week.”

The best-performing students use the computer in school “a few times a year” rather than “never” or “several times a week.”

The recommendation was made in 2004, a lifetime ago in our digital age. Now can we really expect anyone to use the computer only “a few times a year”?

»SCHOOLS DROP LAPTOPS

In Liverpool Central School District, outside Syracuse, New York, students used laptops to cheat on tests, visit porn sites, and hack into businesses. Technical glitches occurred regularly, maintenance costs increased, Net connection often froze when many students logged on, not exactly for educational purposes.

Maybe all these could have been endured if laptops had improved student learning.

But “after seven years, there was literally no evidence it had any impact on student achievement—none,” Mark Lawson, Liverpool High school board president tells the *Times*.

“The teachers were telling us when there’s a one-to-one relationship between the student and the laptop, the box gets in the way,” he continues. “It’s a distraction to the educational process.”

**Students who used computers more often in class did not do better than those who did not.**

Especially in Math. Instead of laptops, teachers preferred to use graphing calculators, having found the latter much more useful in the learning process. Of course, nothing beat plain pencil and paper.

In subjects such as history, laptops were more helpful. Indeed, students used them to do research, but their teacher, Tom McCarthy, would remind them not to overlook books, newspapers, and academic journals.

“The art of thinking is being lost,” McCarthy tells the *Times*, “because people can type in a word and find a source and think that’s the be all and end all.”

**QUICK FIX**

The *Times* cites a large-scale 2007 US Department of Education study which showed that there was no difference in academic achievement between students using educational math and reading software and students who did not do so.

As for a longitudinal study being conducted by the Texas Center for Educational Research, which has for years examined state test scores between schools where students received laptops versus those where students did not, results are mixed.

What is more interesting is that when six of the schools in the study were offered laptops in 2007, all of them declined.

“Such disappointments are the latest example of how technology is often embraced by philanthropists and political leaders as a quick fix, only to leave teachers flummoxed about how best to integrate the new gadgets into curriculums,” says *The New York Times*.

Many schools in the United States are giving up or giving back their laptops. Not just large districts, but also small. Not just urban schools, but also those in the rural areas. Not
just schools for the wealthy, but also those for disadvantaged and/or minority students.

These schools include Matoaca High, outside Richmond, Virginia, Everett A. Rea Elementary School in Costa Mesa, California, and Northfield Mount Hermon School in Massachusetts.

Matoaca is phasing out its laptops after concluding that five years after asking students to use laptops for learning, students did not have any academic gains with their computers.

Northfield has already eliminated its entire laptop program, after five years, when it discovered that more energy was spent on repairing laptops rather than on training teachers to teach with them. Everett gave away thirty new laptops to another school in 2005 after new teachers did not do much with the technology.

The art of thinking is being lost, because people can type in a word and find a source and think that’s the be all and end all.

»BUY MORE BOOKS INSTEAD

In August 2013, Sen. Juan Edgardo Angara filed a bill to equip every public elementary and high school with a computer laboratory with at least ten computers. While we might expect our computer professionals to applaud this move, the Computer Professionals’ Union (CPU) instead told Angara to use funding to buy more textbooks and hire more teachers instead.

Again, people in the computer industry know the score. CPU reminded Angara of the much-heralded One Laptop Per Child Project spearheaded by Massachusetts Institute of Technology-Media Lab founder Nicholas Negroponte. While the project made headlines worldwide, a 2012 study of the Inter-American Development Bank on its effects in Peru concluded that there was no measurable improvement in test scores after implementation.

“What would give more long-term positive results—giving ten computers or providing thousands of textbooks and hiring more teachers?” says CPU national coordinator Rick Bahague, in a statement. “Of course, the most appropriate is to provide all necessary tools for learning to students and it will start with adequate budget in education and proper prioritization on its spending.”

»DRAWING BY HAND

Massachusetts Institute of Technology clinical psychologist Sherry Turkle gives an example to drive home the point that like the Silicon Valley parents and schools, many of the savviest tech users are also those who know its downside, and therefore, insist on the traditional ways of doing things.

Turkle once attended a conference of engineers, scientists, designers, and architects engaged in simulation. Though they were excited about using technology in their work,
there were some “sacred places” where “they felt most fully themselves in their discipline,” as she describes in her book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*.

What the architects held sacred was drawing by hand. Doing so made architects not just scientists, but also creators of art. Buildings were not just to be constructed, but also personalized.

“The most enthusiastic proponents of computer-assisted design defended hand drawing,” says Turkle. So when their students preferred to use computers instead of their own hands, and thereby losing the capability of doing so, they were made to take classes in drawing (by hand).

“It was not about rejecting the computer but about making sure that designers came to it with their own values,” says Turkle. “A sacred space is … where we recognize ourselves and our commitments.”
Of Pixels and Power
By Scott Lee Chua
High school student, Xavier School

This piece won Second Place in the Kabataan Essay Category of the Don Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature for 2011, in response to the question: What is the most valuable lesson you have learned from the Internet?

In the movie Spiderman, as Uncle Ben lay dying, felled by a robber whom his nephew Peter Parker had neglected to pursue, he said, “With great power comes great responsibility.”

Born and raised in the Information Age, I have seen the Internet grow up with me. As a toddler, I endured the crackling pings of the modem. As a child, I relied on giant drives with a few hundred bytes. Now, as a teen, I cram a million times more data into a tiny USB drive so lightweight I barely feel it around my neck. Computers — hardware, software, networks, processing, pixels — follow one trajectory: faster, smarter, more convenient, more powerful.

Adults debate whether the Internet is harmful or beneficial, how long we kids should stay online, if e-books are better than printed ones, yadda yadda yadda. But the Net is merely a tool; by itself, it is neither good nor bad. What matters is how we use it. After all, a laser can hack off armor, shields, and limbs; but it can also zap kidney stones, cataracts, and tumors.

Intentions can pave the road to heaven, hell, or somewhere in between. An hour of online study or chat may be fine, but twenty straight hours of gaming is an addiction. Whether books are made of silicon or fiber does not matter as much as whether they are read or ignored.


Of course, using the same websites, terrorists can view cities, examining their security or lack thereof; touch base with their fellows, hatching dastardly plots; and create molotov cocktails, following zoomed-in instructions.

But white and black mixed together make gray, and much of the Net is in the gray zone. We often find it hard to tell if marketing sites sell genuine medicines or dubious cure-alls; if celebrity clips are uncensored or doctored; or if research is done for commercial or academic purposes, or possibly, shades of the two.

Caveat emptor.
Wikipedia calls itself “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit.” Experts can and do discuss the Bose-Einstein condensate or Picasso’s Blue Period. But saboteurs exploit Wikipedia for their own ends. Neo-Nazi slogans pop up in the middle of World War II accounts. “Magical Rainbow Fish” entries appear (magically!) without proof.

No wonder most teachers ban Wikipedia as reference material in class.

But Wikipedia more often than not comes out first during a web search, and Wiki language is understood by almost every Juan. Hyperlinks to related topics make navigation easy. We click the mouse rather than lift hefty tomes (which reportedly was what my parents had to do when they were in school). Countless people, including teachers themselves, whether they admit it or not, turn to Wikipedia as an information source.

Since Wikipedia is so powerful, can its contents be regulated? The high-ups in Wiki-land say they try their best to check everything that enters the site. So I decided to test their claim: I would sign up on Wikipedia, write something, and see what happens.

I was instantly foiled. As I inputted username and password, the screen blared, “Account creation from this IP address (114.108.192.6) has been temporarily restricted.” This is probably due to persistent vandalism! Lest you think I am an evildoer, I investigated further, only to find that this Internet Protocol (IP) is not limited to one computer (mine), but is also assigned to other nearby routers. I dared not knock on neighbors’ doors to profile possible vandals, so I had no choice but to look for another entry point.

Next stop: School. Perhaps due to vandalizing classmates, I didn’t have much luck there either. Internet cafés? Worse. Finally I turned to my saintly aunt, who wouldn’t vandalize a fly. She lives in a quiet town, so there must be fewer Wiki vandals there. On her computer, I tried again, and at last saw with my own eyes the signup page in all its glory. Hallelujah!

Now came the hard part. Well, the harder part. I had to actually contribute something. I browsed carefully, and finally, on “Star Trek: The Motion Picture” page, I added what I thought was an innocuous fact: “Captain James T. Kirk became an admiral at Starfleet.”

However, the next day, my “minor edit” was red-flagged. “You did not quote the origin of this edit,” Wikipedia intoned. “This is a warning. Any more un-credited edits and we will track you down and behead you.” Or something like that.

But my experiment was a success. The Wiki people are indeed trying to ensure the veracity of their info. And the editors had taken the time to check my contribution, since James T. Kirk as Admiral remains in the Star Trek entry to this day. Go ahead, check!

My belief in the Wiki validated, I vowed to be vigilant. I was about to report the Neo-Nazi war cry to the Wiki police when to my relief, it was taken down after two
days since I checked. I corrected entries on “The History of the Philippines,” relying on an impeccable source—Agoncillo’s *History of the Filipino People*. And as a bonafide Wiki member, I felt it my duty to at last delete the “Magical Rainbow Fish” page, which I did with great relish.

This was heady stuff. I am just a teen who loves sci-fi, history, and democracy, but I can make a difference. Never has so much power been granted to so many—and to so young.

**Will we control the Internet, or will we let the Internet control us?**

**SOCIAL NETWORKS**

In the novel *Jurassic Park*, the physicist Ian Malcolm says, “Most kinds of power require a substantial sacrifice… Whatever kind of power you want. President of a company. Black belt in karate. Spiritual guru… Whatever you seek, you have to put in the time, the practice, the effort… Once you have attained it, it is your power… [and] the result of your discipline.”

According to Malcolm, traditionally, powers have “built-in control.” When a novice in karate finally attains the black belt—and the skill to kill efficiently—he has also mastered with it the discipline, paradoxically, not to kill indiscriminately.

But the world’s newest power—that of science—often disdains discipline. Rampaging dinosaurs cannot be controlled. Without discipline, scientific power destroys. Malcolm decries the hubris of scientists who play God just for the sake of a theme park—but his words also apply to us, who are continuously tempted to abuse the Internet’s godlike power: “You can do it very young. You can make progress very fast. There is no discipline … only a get-rich-quick, make-a-name-for-yourself-fast philosophy. Cheat, lie, falsify—it doesn’t matter.”

The Internet gives anyone with a machine and a cable subscription access to virtually unlimited knowledge, mostly for free. What the Internet does *not* teach is wisdom. If anything, the Net erodes our already scanty self-control with the umpteenth link to games or porn even when we think we are safe in .edu or .gov sites. What starts out as plain homework can quickly become a haphazard journey on the Info Superhighway to drool over the latest PHAT gadgets, to download FTASB the latest hits, and to beat Level 12587 of the latest MMORPG, all done simultaneously, GIGO notwithstanding. Hi-ho Silver, away!

Social networking sites enable friends and foes to Comment, Like, Retweet. We can Share photos, messages, music. Twitter and text enable us to congregate, voice our concerns, even topple dictators. Thanks to tech, EDSA-like miracles are now happening in the Middle East.

But people often use social networks in less honorable ways. True, Charice Pempengco did become famous because of YouTube. But LOL after LOL after LOL can delude naive Netizens into thinking that their every act makes the world Laugh
Out Loud, while other mortals’ posts are FUBAR. The Net is the perfect medium for self-glrorification, not only for would-be Hitlers, but also for self-centered-but-otherwise-run-of-the-mill KSPs. To you who report every ingredient of your every meal, who give every account of your every ablution, who post every video of your every move: The world does not revolve around you.

Social networking sites urge us to make friends online. My parents reconnected with old batchmates through the Net, enough reason to celebrate. But many friends and relatives, who are not yet thirteen (the minimum age for Facebook), lie about their birth years to “friend” strangers solely to boast about how many “friends” they have. Will these “friends” really be around when they are troubled or in pain? And don’t get me started on cyberbullying.

The Internet is the greatest democracy in history. Everyone has the right to view, vent, voice, blurb, blog, block. In cyberspace, kings and peasants are equal. I can “friend” Obama, while my cousin can get Prince William’s status updates.

Once, a teacher blatantly taught the wrong thing in my cousin’s class, and everyone knew it. Later on, she cried after seeing derogatory remarks online. What the kids did might be cruel, but this example shows how the Net can empower the lowly and the young. That’s why China erected the Great Firewall—as a hedge against liberty. The Net sets people free.

Human cognition and behavior are steadily being transferred to the Internet. When was the last time we remembered everyone’s birthdays, without scheduled e-mail reminders? Or relied on snail mail, rather than Instant Messaging? Or used typewriters, rather than Word?

My generation has never known life before the Net. We cannot abstain—nor do we want to escape—from it. No security ware can eliminate all diversions, distractions, or delusions.

Will we control the Internet, or will we let the Internet control us?

Because of the deluge of megapixels, terabytes, and URLs from without, discipline, focus, and steadfastness need to come from within.

With great power truly comes great responsibility.

Thank you, Uncle Ben.
Straight Talk on Edutainment

WE ARE BORN with around 100 billion neurons, and in the next five to nine years, these are supposed to form connections for future learning, growth, and development. Exposing babies to media may be harmful because technology can interfere with ideal neural growth.

Cris Rowan, an American pediatric occupational therapist, says that if babies’ environment revolves around sedentary and isolative technology use, with limited real human connections, their development will be impaired in all aspects.

In the article “The Need to Move—The Impact of Sedentary Technology Use on Children,” Rowan says, “In order to help our children, we need to go back to the basics of our nature. For generations, human beings have engaged in heavy work, and sensory stimulation was nature-based and calming. We moved to survive; chopping wood, hauling water, plowing fields … listening, looking and smelling nature.”

This does not mean that we force our children to chop wood or carry water. But our children need to detach from their devices.

“Advances in technology and transportation have resulted in a physically sedentary human body that is bombarded with chaotic and complex sensory stimulation,” Rowan says. “While TV and computers may be compelling and interesting, burying our heads in technology is causing sensory deprivation and a ‘disconnect’ from our worlds.”

Rowan cites ADHD expert Gabor Mate, who says that “happy interactions between parent and child generate motivation and arousal by activating cells in the midbrain that produce endorphins, and activating cells that trigger the release of dopamine.”

Dopamine happens to be essential for attention, since a lack of it may be related to ADHD.

Rowan warns, “Human evolution takes time, lots of time. Have we adapted as a species to accommodate to this sedentary yet frenzied existence? Are we pushing evolution? What will be the consequences for our children if we continue?”

»NO MOZART EFFECT

Saturating children with technology in the mistaken assumption that it will give them a vague edge over everyone else starts in childhood. Anxious mothers played Mozart’s music by the thousands in the 1980s, believing that the Mozart effect will make their babies more intelligent. But the original study on the so-called Mozart effect involved a few college students who did better on an IQ test after listening to Mozart, and the effect could not be consistently replicated on other students, certainly not babies.

The same brouhaha happened over videos like Baby Einstein (a marketing gimmick, no more). In fact, a decade ago, the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood in Boston had successfully convinced federal regulators that the so-called educational advantages of Baby Einstein were nebulous, which eventually led to consumer refunds.
A two-dimensional screen can never replace a real environment, rich in all five senses.

Now we are inundated with edutainment laptops, applications or apps, tablets, and so forth, pushed upon gullible parents who have more faith in technology than in themselves.

In her book, *Parenting, Inc.*, American journalist Pamela Paul interviews Berkeley psychology professor Alison Gopnik, who specializes in early childhood cognition and language development, about the efficacy of such technologies.

“The story with these products is quite clear,” Gopnik tells Paul. “There’s no FDA for children’s products. You can say whatever you want about how something will make your baby smarter, and nobody reviews it or asks if there’s research to back this up.”

“There is no research to show that watching a screen is beneficial to a baby in any way, educational or otherwise,” psychiatrist Alvin Poussaint tells Paul. Poussaint is director of the Media Center of Judge Baker’s Children Center in Boston.

“A two-dimensional screen can never replace a real environment, rich in all five senses,” Poussaint continues. “Holistic play is what develops all the pathways to the brain.”

The most that technology can do is perhaps to expose babies to associate words and sounds, not by themselves, but with the help of their parents.

But the consensus among educators and researchers is that having babies crawl and explore the world with their five senses, interacting with the people around, is still the best way for kids to learn.

In a 2011 Policy Statement, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) says, “Some media industry executives claim that educational-media programs are meant to be watched by both the parent and the child to facilitate social interactions and the learning process. However, it is not clear whether this happens in the real world. In fact, it seems that audible television is associated with decreased parent-child interactions. Although a leading survey of family media use has reported that 40 percent of parents watch with their child all the time and 28 percent watch with their child most of the time, parents also report that they avoid co-viewing because their child’s media time provides an opportunity for them to do other things.”

“The best you can say about most edutainment,” says Gopnik, “is that it’s a waste of money.”

**HARMFUL TO LEARNING**

This is an irony of ironies: Not only is electronic media not useful, very likely, it can also even harm child development.

The AAP says, “The educational merit of media for children younger than two years remains unproven despite the fact that three-quarters of the top-selling infant videos make explicit or implicit educational claims. To be beneficial, children need to understand the
content of programs and pay attention to it.”

When kids stay in front of screens for hours at a time, without engaging in the usual play or touch, brain size can decrease by 20 to 30 percent, according to American pediatrician Susan Johnson.

Only two senses (sight and sound) are stimulated when children play with computers or watch TV.

“The … quality of reproduced sound presented to our hearing and the flashing, colored, fluorescent overstimulating images presented to our eyes cause problems in the development and function of these two critical sense organs,” says Johnson in her article “Strangers in Our Homes.”

“To begin with, a child's visual acuity and full binocular (three-dimensional) vision are not fully developed until four years of age, and the picture produced on … screen is an unfocused (made up of dots of light), two–dimensional image that restricts our field of vision,” Johnson says.

This results in fuzzy images, “so that our eyes, and the eyes of our children, have to strain to make the image clear.”

**SESAME STREET**

Even the venerable *Sesame Street* does not seem to be healthy for very young children.

According to the AAP, research shows that the show has a negative effect on language for children younger than two years.

In her book *Endangered Minds*, American educational psychologist Jane Healy contrasts reading with watching TV.

Basically, when we read, the active beta waves in our left brain spring into action, but when we watch TV, the slow alpha waves dominate. The left hemisphere of our brain is the center for reading, writing, speaking, and reasoning, among other things.

**The best you can say about most edutainment is that it’s a waste of money.**

The pulsating TV light may lull us to slow-wave activity, waking up our brains when something new or exciting pops up, but letting our brains fall asleep when stimuli are repetitive. We easily habituate to TV and computers, so in order to constantly stimulate us, new images, flashing colors, loud sounds, and so on clamor for our attention.

These gimmicks attract us, but unfortunately, we are still operating in our lower brains, which cannot distinguish between the real and the virtual. This ability to discern is housed in the neocortex, the upper brain, which is not yet fully formed in babies or even in teens.

To make matters worse, these loud sounds and frightening images can make us go
into fight or flight mode, increasing our heart rate and blood pressure. But since we remain glued to the screen, without alleviating these stressors through movement, then some TV programs and computer games can bring us to a chronic state of anxiety.

Eventually, this downward spiral can cause our left brain to deteriorate and atrophy.

According to the AAP, young kids also find it difficult to distinguish between events presented on the screen and those presented by a live person, termed “video deficit.”

Kids who are one to one-a-half years old learn more effectively, and remember more information, from a live presentation rather than a televised one.

In August 2013, the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood urged the Federal Trade Commission to investigate the marketing strategies of Fisher-Price’s Laugh & Learn mobile apps and Open Solutions’ Baby Hear and Read and Baby First Puzzle games.

“Everything we know about brain research and child development points away from using screens to educate babies,” director Susan Linn tells the Associated Press. “The research shows that machines and screen media are a really ineffective way of teaching a baby language. What babies need for healthy brain development is active play, hands-on creative play, and face-to-face interaction.”

**REAL PLAY**

The AAP urges us to “evaluate the claims made by marketers and advertisers about the products or interventions designed to produce super-children.”

What is the best way for our children to learn?

“Children will be poised for success, basking in the knowledge that their parents absolutely and unconditionally love them,” the AAP continues. “This love and attention is best demonstrated when parents serve as role models and family members make time to cherish one another: time to be together, to listen, and to talk, nothing more and nothing less.

“The most valuable and useful character traits that will prepare … children for success arise not from extracurricular or academic commitments, but from a firm grounding in parental love, role modeling, and guidance.”
From Infancy to Preschool

THE IRONY OF the digital age is that no matter how advanced we want our kids to become, it is not wise to expose them too much too soon to gadgets and digital media.

Human development cannot be rushed. Pioneer psychologists Erik Erikson, Jean Piaget, and Lawrence Kohlberg have long stressed the importance of appropriate development, but in today’s hectic world, we often overlook long-proven truths.

Let us discuss the milestones that babies, toddlers, and young kids are expected to have and what we parents can do to optimize their development.

» TWO TO SIX MONTHS

Once babies can see better, they are engaged with the world and can interact with the people around them. They smile, make funny sounds, babble or even “pretend” to be conversing with adults.

By around six to seven months, babies can lie on their tummies, and eventually roll around and back, until they can eventually sit with or without support. They try to “rake” with their hand objects within reach and try to grasp almost anything they can get their little hands on. They shriek with glee playing peek-a-boo. They can recognize many familiar objects, and delight in watching themselves in the mirror.

At this stage, our babies’ main source of interaction is with parents and other adult caregivers. When we are with babies, it would be best to “tuck into play” everything we do with them: singing to them and tickling them while dressing them up, cuddling them and chatting with them during car rides, talking with them when they babble, putting them on our lap while we read books with them.

Through these activities, we can help our babies develop language and social skills.

Now as much as we want babies to stay put and not to get hurt, they need to crawl, attempt to sit, fall on their butts, and explore everything they can reach or see.

We need to let babies explore, but let us keep their immediate surroundings safe. Babies need to strengthen their muscles and develop both fine motor (hand gripping) and gross motor skills (walking, sitting up) that are very critical to the development of later skills.

» SIX TO TWELVE MONTHS

It is such a joy to be with the little ones! But so much energy is needed to keep them safe when they explore. During these months, babies sit, crawl, try to stand, grab anything around them, and even take little baby steps.

Babies want to always break free, either from the playpen or from our arms. They start babbling syllables like “mama,” “dada,” or even “papa” (food), forming new vocabularies that eventually lead to simple phrases.
Babies like to put food and other objects into their mouth, grasp things with their fingers, try to comb their hair, hold the sippy cup unassisted, press buttons of a toy, pretend to use the telephone, and many others.

Let us play ball with our babies; let them crawl with blocks we help them set up. Their motor skills increase significantly with movement and play.

Let us talk with our babies. Babies may not fully understand what we mean, but let us not use baby talk. Label in a clear, catchy voice our babies’ body parts while bathing them. Name and let our babies touch the vegetables in the kitchen. Imitate the sound of a car engine or the neighbor’s cat.

Best of all, we can express how happy and excited we are in seeing them.

**ONE TO TWO YEARS**

As babies move to their second year, their growing confidence drives them to walk on their own, climb stairs and chairs, kick a ball, tiptoe, and eventually run by themselves.

They begin to express themselves in words, phrases leading to sentences, and start to comprehend and respond to what they hear. When we give them simple directions, they will know what to do.

Let us converse with our toddlers, and read books with them. Intertwine language with emotions by naming their feelings, “Oh, you are sad!” or “How happy you are today!”

We need to pose questions, too, to arouse their mind and interest. Toddlers can identify many objects around them: animals, shapes, colors.

Give toddlers pencils or crayons to scribble with. Lay down blocks to build towers and castles. Instead of electronic toys, most toddlers naturally prefer playing with real objects in the house, like empty containers, ladles, cups, mops, or brooms.

Let us allow our toddlers to just play and be safe. This is not the time to be worried about coloring within the lines, or messing up during play. A scratch paper full of jagged lines might be the work of art our tots are proud of.

The terrible twos is also the time of growing independence, when toddlers often want to do things on their own and take pride in saying, “Me only!” and “I can do it!” They want to put on clothes by themselves, get their own toys from the shelf, even eat by themselves.

Stressing independence may make toddlers seem defiant, but at this stage, this is their way of understanding their world through their own abilities. Let us guard against overprotectiveness in the belief that they are too little to do things on their own.

When kids say, “I can,” it means they are ready. If they are ready, we need to allow them to experience something new, with assistance if needed. If toddlers want to eat on their own, let them do so as long as they do not throw the food at others. If they want to try putting on their shirt, assist them by showing into which holes their arms should go.

As they accomplish the task, let us affirm them for a job well done.
**IMITATION**

Toddlers are fond of imitating others. They pretend to drive, cook, use the telephone, or copy dance moves.

Toddlers imitate both the good and the bad. If they get exposed to inappropriate content on TV or videos, they indiscriminately pick on anything that attracts them, whether good or bad. If they watch noontime shows with sexy ladies dancing and spinning their bodies, they copy these dance moves (which misguided adults find cute). If kids see slapstick comedy or lousy or violent cartoons shows, then these become normal for them.

If young children are left in the care of the TV or the tablet, then there is little time left to develop their physical, social, and language skills through direct interaction with other people. Instead of letting our toddlers play baby apps on the table or watch TV, encourage them to spend more time playing with actual toys, exploring the house, walking in the park, and meeting other children.

Toddlers need to learn to develop their inner resources and confidence as they interact in their environment.

TV was the old babysitter. Now it seems to be the tablet. Babies in their high chairs with bibs, barely able to sit and to feed themselves, tap the time away on the tablet before them. To the delight of parents, the tots can sit still and the parents can go on peacefully with their meals.

But the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) reiterated in 2011 that screen time or media use should be “discouraged” among children two years old or below.

Many of us say our kids need to learn technology as early as possible, because everything and anything is connected to the Net, and we believe our kids should learn as much as soon as possible. We never stop to think that gadgets are so easy to use that practically no one has to learn to use them.

Some of us depend on mobile apps for kids. Others feel that this is the only way for their kids to sit still and refrain from throwing a tantrum.

It is no wonder many little ones are developing physical, mental, or emotional problems. The queues to get appointments with developmental and behavioral specialists often take anywhere from three to six months. Common issues referred to specialists include: attention and focus problems, speech difficulties, delayed development, and behavioral problems among young children.

No gadget or applications can replace the role of parents, playmates, real pencils, crayons, dirt and grime, laughter, and cries that our kids should be experiencing to the fullest in order to assist in their healthy and optimal development.

“Unstructured playtime is more valuable for the developing brain than any electronic media exposure,” states the 2011 AAP Policy Statement on “Media Use By Children Younger Than Two Years.”

“If a parent is not able to actively play with a child, that child should have solo playtime with an adult nearby,” the statement continues. “Even for infants as young as four months of age, solo play allows a child to think creatively, problem-solve, and
accomplish tasks with minimal parent interaction. The parent can also learn something in the process of giving the child an opportunity to entertain himself or herself while remaining nearby.”

**PRESCHOOL**

At the age of three until about five or six, our little ones enter preschool. Their conversation is intelligible, their vocabularies increase. They can try to storytell aloud while holding a book, or engage in imaginary conversations on the phone.

Let us lavish our preschoolers with real books and make time for storytelling. We can tell them stories of how we did things when we were little, or even what we saw on the way home. We can ask them for their thoughts, feelings, or opinions on the family menu, activities for the week, or happenings in school.

Keeping eye contact with our children is key in instilling the skill when communicating with them.

Preschoolers love to run, jump, and play outdoors. Let them expend their energies and improve their gross motor skills. Preschoolers can ride three-wheeler bikes, skip hop, play kick ball, play tag or hide-and-seek. They can dance and sing, water the plants, and help wash the car. They love to draw, color, play with toys, and do puzzles and just about anything they can get their hands on. They can make wonderful artwork out of the simplest things.

**We do not need to buy fancy toys. All it takes for kids to be imaginative is for parents to boost them to use their imaginations as well.**

While we may worry that they might get poked in the eye by a pencil, cut by a pair of scissors or soiled by watercolors, there are no substitutes to letting our kids experience the real thing. Let them use all these, with adult supervision, of course. Give them lots of paper, kid-friendly scissors, easy-grip pencils and crayons, and nontoxic paints, and other materials so they can imagine, draw, create, cut, make a mess, and more importantly, enjoy and develop their skills and confidence in themselves.

While mobile art apps are freely available for kids, and they may be safe or cleaner, these apps do not develop the fine motor skills children need for school.

Children love to play make-believe, either by themselves or with friends. From putting together a village out of blocks and die-cast cars, having their dolls go to the doctor for checkups, cooking noodles made of clay, making houses out of big cardboard boxes or blankets, girls pretending to be fairies and boys superheroes, their imagination and avenues for play at this age are limitless!

While we may be concerned with the mess that kids make, it is when they use props and toys and experience their make-believe world that their imagination is at peak. Let us encourage their creative play and allow them to setup their camps or playhouses, on the
condition that they will help fix up once they are done.

We do not need to buy fancy toys. All it takes for kids to be imaginative is for parents to boost them to use their imaginations as well.

Children start making friends, learning to share and play interactively with others. That is why it is important for us to provide our kids the chance to play with other children. Bring them to play dates, socialize with neighborhood kids, or attend birthday parties.

Some of us worry that other children may pick on ours, or (disturbingly) that our kids would lose in the parlor games! But when our kids are shielded from the real world and have limited opportunity to deal with different kinds of people, they lose the opportunity to learn and understand how socialization actually works.

The more playmates and playtime they experience, the more our kids learn how to share toys, how to fight, and eventually resolve conflicts. They learn to say “thank you” and “sorry.” How can digital media replace any of these?

Many young children are exposed to cartoons and TV programs with inappropriate content, such as fight scenes, love affairs in soap operas, lightning-fast music videos, and others. To make matters worse, it is hard for many kids to differentiate between reality and make-believe. As counselors, Queena, Maribel, and Ichel have seen four-year-olds being physically violent toward classmates during play, imitating their favorite superhero or Dad’s wrestling shows. Some three-year-old girls declare that a favorite actor is their “boyfriend” and they want to dress up as teenage girls do, having seen them on mom’s soaps or big sister’s reality TV shows.

>BANG BANG

As a family counselor, Maribel remembers a case involving the four-year-old daughter of a family down south. When angry, the little girl would say: “I will bang bang you! I will kill you!”

Initially, the parents felt this was “cute,” but after some time they got worried. Their daughter looked so serious when she would say these things, so the family became alarmed. They hid all toys and other things in their house that could possibly be used by their daughter to hurt other people: knives, scissors, cutters, and so on. They didn’t want to risk their daughter hurting anyone in their family.

The family had a newborn baby boy and the daughter could have been saying these things because she was jealous of the attention being given to her baby brother. She was a little angry with her parents because she felt neglected.

Yes, even at four years old, our little ones can feel these things.

Maribel asked the parents to teach their daughter to express feelings of disappointment or anger using the “I” message.

For example, she was taught to say, “I am angry you are carrying Pedro and you are not carrying me,” or “I am sad because I cannot go out with you and Papa.”
Though the little girl would still sometimes say “I will bang bang you,” she is now able to express her angry, negative feelings more productively.

In the meantime, all violent books, TV programs and websites are banned from the house. The parents continuously expose her to more positive and pleasant TV programs and books.

The daughter may still remain jealous for a while, but at least the media that this child consumes is now more controlled and monitored.

While kids start school, it is a must to provide them with alternative activities so they will not just succumb to the draw of the screen. We adults must be conscious of our own digital use as well as our kids’. We do not want our kids overstimulated or bored.

Even if the TV or computer is on “just in the background,” it can have a negative effect on our children.

“Television that is intended for adults and is on with a young child in the room is distracting for both the parent and the child,” says the AAP.

For preschoolers, the AAP encourages only a maximum of an hour of screen time (combined time for TV, videos, games, computers) a day, with our supervision.
**BRAIN RULES**

My son Scott stayed in Guangzhou, China, from October to December 2011. One hundred and thirty Grade Seven Xavier School students, supervised by a dozen teachers, immersed themselves in Chinese culture, language, and studies.

Days and nights were hectic. Aside from tests, assignments, and intramurals, the boys did chores such as laundry and bathroom cleaning.

Scott loved it all. With excellent teachers (from Xavier and from South China Normal University), a stimulating environment, and fun-filled activities, Scott thrived. He stayed strong and alert.

His secret? He took a nap during the day.

The boys were up by six in the morning and did not sleep till ten in the evening at the earliest. So after lunch and before afternoon studies, Scott napped for half an hour, waking up refreshed and ready for more. Some friends followed his lead, with good results.

**A 45-minute nap made students sharper, an effect lasting more than six hours.**

**SLEEP INCREASES LEARNING ABILITY**

Scott and his friends did the right thing.

In mid-afternoon, “it can be nearly impossible to get anything done, and if you attempt to push through, which is what most of us do, you [will be] fighting a gnawing tiredness,” says American molecular biologist John Medina.

“The brain really wants to take a nap and doesn’t care what its owner is doing,” he continues.

NASA scientist Mark Rosekind found that a 26-minute nap made NASA pilots perform 34 percent better. Other researchers found that a 45-minute nap made students sharper, an effect lasting more than six hours.

“What if businesses and schools took [naps] seriously?” Medina says. “No meetings or classes … no high-demand presentations and no critical exams … would be scheduled at these times. Instead, there would be deliberately planned downshifts. Naps would be accorded deference … People hired for their intellectual strength would be allowed to keep that strength in tip-top shape.”

**EXERCISE IMPROVES COGNITION**

In his book Brain Rules, Medina culls from his lifelong work on the brain and lists several principles “for surviving and thriving at work, home, and school.” Aside from the importance of sleep, Medina also touts the benefits of physical exercise, especially aerobic
activities.

Exercise makes blood flow to our brains, increasing glucose to burn for energy and oxygen to “soak up the toxic electrons” that remain. Twenty to thirty minutes of walking increases protein production which makes brain cells communicate better. Aerobic exercise just twice a week decreases our risk of dementia by 50 percent and Alzheimer’s by 60 percent.

Physician and athlete Dr. Antronette Yancey found that when children exercise aerobically, their minds work better, and when they stop exercising, the cognitive gain disappears. Kids who are fit grasp ideas and focus on them better than their sedentary classmates.

Yancey says that kids who exercise are less disruptive. Since they have higher self-esteem, they are less depressed and less anxious. They are likely to be happier.

To give more time to other subjects, physical education classes have unfortunately decreased throughout the United States, and in many schools in the Philippines.

“Cutting off physical exercise—the very activity most likely to promote cognitive performance—to do better on a test score is like trying to gain weight by starving yourself,” Medina says.

**Multitasking is a myth. The brain naturally focuses on concepts sequentially, one at a time.**

**BRAINS CANNOT MULTITASK**

“Multitasking is a myth,” Medina says. “The brain naturally focuses on concepts sequentially, one at a time.”

Even if students claim that they can multitask, studies show that attention, and therefore performance, suffers.

Medina describes several processes when we try to multitask, from alerting the cortex and firing of appropriate neurons to engaging different parts of the brain and activating various commands. These steps occur every time we switch from one task to another.

“[The whole process] is time-consuming, and sequential,” says Medina. “That’s why we can’t multitask. That’s why people find themselves losing track of previous progress and needing to start over, muttering things like ‘Now where was I?’ each time they switch tasks.”

Studies show that people who are interrupted take 50 percent longer to finish something, and worse, make 50 percent more errors in everything.

Students who try to write a term paper while instant messaging, playing games, and rocking to music will not do any of these things as well as if they had done them one at a time.

Multitasking can literally kill. Eating, putting on makeup, or talking on a cell phone while driving have been shown to lead to significantly more accidents.
“Cell-phone talkers are a half-second slower to hit the brakes in emergencies, slower to return to normal speed afterward, and more wild in their following distance behind the vehicle in front of them,” Medina says.

“In a half-second, a driver going 70 mph travels 51 feet. Given that 80 percent of crashes happen within three seconds of distraction, increasing your amount of task-switching increases your risk of an accident,” he continues.

“More than 50 percent of the visual cues are missed by cell-phone talkers, [so] they get in more wrecks than anyone except very drunk drivers,” Medina concludes.

We do not outgrow the thirst for knowledge.

NEVER STOP EXPLORING

Scott was excited about their group’s science experiment: testing whether China-made sticky tapes are better in quality than those made in the Philippines. His group gathered data from manufacturers and designed tests of adhesive strength.

When he was growing up, Scott turned our house into his own lab. We never knew when the fridge would have mixtures of oil and water, when the bathroom would house real or plastic insects and reptiles, when a solar toy car would suddenly zoom by. Mishaps occur, but all of us have survived so far.

“We do not outgrow the thirst for knowledge,” Medina says. Scientists used to think that “we are born with all the brain cells we were going to get, and that they steadily eroded in a depressing journey to old age.” Research now shows that even when we are grown, our brain creates new cells for learning, and that our brain responds to new experiences. Let us never lose our sense of wonder.
MIDDLE CHILDHOOD IS the long stretch of grade school, starting when children are about six years old up to twelve years old (Grades One to Six). Regarded as the school years, the major milestones of our childhood are in line with their experiences in school.

During this stage, children hone physical skills even more, this time not just to play but also to join organized games or sports. They learn logic and creativity, advance in moral judgments, and develop their memory.

When our growing children enter grade school, they are expected to be more adept in a number of skills, including language, self-help or independence, social skills. Their competencies also affect their developing self-esteem and their acceptance by peers.

A critical area that needs to be developed is language. When children are about eight years old, we can expect them to have good command of language, be more articulate, pronounce and use words well, and speak in complete sentences.

It is usually a delight speaking with them, because they can share their experiences and the day’s events, with details and in a logical manner.

While they are improving their speaking prowess, we can also use this stage to develop communication bonds with our child. Though they ask a multitude of questions, it is great to hear how they are interested in matters around them.

We need patience and diligence to answer our children’s constant questions. Let us encourage them to think about not only the “what” but also the “why” and the “how.”

Gone are the days when children are only seen and not heard. When we counselors ask grade-school children about certain incidents, an automatic answer is “I’m afraid to tell my parents because they will get mad!”

Indeed, our sarcastic comments, reprimanding tone, and immediate judgment hinder our children from disclosing things they are not proud of.

Many of us lament that our kids talk back or reason out, unlike in the past. It is good for us to allow our children to share their thoughts, feelings, insights, and even opinions.

Yet it is also important for us to guide our children to speak appropriately, with respect, in the use of tone, manner of speaking, and with plausible reasons for what they say.

**SELF-HELP**

Self-help skills are part of growing up. Children can only establish routines on doing things for themselves, if their basic fine and gross motor skills have been developed in previous stages.

By the time they enter grade school, children should be able to bathe and groom themselves and dress up on their own, feed themselves, put away their toys and fix their
personal items, and pack their own school bags. In school, it is a must for kids to keep up with the demands of the subjects, activities, and class rules, on their own.

As a grade-school counselor, Ichel has encountered children who constantly lose one thing after another in school. Their desks and bags are in a constant disarray of books, notebooks, circulars, and so on. When Ichel confers with the parents, she often learns that it is the yaya (nanny) or the mother who would fix the school bags.

**Parenting becomes a bigger challenge, as rules are tested when kids assert themselves.**

Children are usually not given any responsibility at home. Everything is done for them, so at school, they do not even know where to look for things, or how to put them away tidily.

We have to raise our kids not to need us. This may be difficult for us to accept, but this is the end-goal of proper parenting. Self-help skills are the building block for independence, resilience, and decision making later on.

Ichel remembers a Grade One boy named Ron (not his real name). In swim class, Ron would keep on grabbing the kickboard of other kids. He would get furious if he did not get his way. Given his big physique, he was quite wobbly and panted for breath after warm-ups.

Ron was an only child, and his mother worked abroad. His father enrolled him in swimming lessons to give him an outlet for physical activity. It turned out that after school, Ron would just engage himself with an iPad and the TV, doing whatever activity he wanted for as long as he liked. Ron did not have playmates, and before swimming, he did not engage in other forms of play.

In school, his yaya would go inside the campus during lunch time and feed him.

Sadly, with electronics being his only activity, Ron had a lot of limitations at his age: lack of social, self-help, and physical skills.

**SOCIAL SKILLS**

When children start school, a new world opens up for them. Our little ones start developing relationships outside of the home, and say comments like, “My friend said …” or “But teacher told us …”

Our parental authority is not really diminishing, but outside influences are more powerful. Children like bringing extra food items to share with friends, but still claim their right to their personal belongings. “It’s mine!”

Interacting with playmates is essential. Children can take turns, make up rules of the game as they go along or follow the rules set before play. They learn how to lose and to deal with the frustration of having squabbles with their peers.

Grade-schoolers also start to develop a sense of humor, cracking jokes and just being
funny.

Aries (not real name) was a smart, articulate and buoyant child, but he often had squabbles with friends. He would have major fights with another classmate because he was strong-willed. With one incident after another, he tended to have different versions of what happened.

It was so hard for Aries to have real friends, no matter how active and fun he was. He often complained that others hurt his feelings. One time, Aries hurt himself, but said that a classmate was the culprit.

After some prodding, Ichel and the school director learned that the boy’s story of how he hurt himself was similar to a game he liked playing on his iPad. After fights, for instance, Aries would say, “Game over!”

We learned that Aries was allowed too much screen time, with cable TV, a desktop computer, the PlayStation Portable (PSP) and the iPad. Before he turned seven, he was already allowed to download games by himself.

But he was not allowed to go out of the house, play with neighbors, ride a bike, or engage in other activities.

Implementing discipline at home was inconsistent, since rules varied among Aries’s mother, father, and grandparents. Thus, there were many occasions that teachers needed to validate Aries’s stories about certain incidents. Some were inconsistent, many were unrealistic.

Aries had difficulty handling his emotions and dealing with peers, and he often confused the real with the virtual. His parents admitted that they found it hard to discipline their child. Aries’s problem persists to this day.

**COMPETENCE AND SELF-CONCEPT**

As children enter first grade, they seek to control their world. They want to do their own thing at their own pace. If we call them to come in for meals while at play, we often hear them bargain, “Ten more minutes!” If we ask them to nap, they would rather play. If we give them screen time for fifteen minutes, they would demand for thirty.

According to American developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, children develop industry at this stage, which is their capacity for productive work. If they fail in this task, they will experience feelings of inferiority. Failing to succeed otherwise results to a child’s feeling of inferiority.

Successfully completing their need to be productive results in being competent, and competence becomes a critical foundation of our children’s self-esteem.

Children also imitate (consciously or unconsciously) what others do, say, or engage in. They imitate their parents, peers, and what they see on screen. Children pick up habits fast: a cool expression, a bad word, an interest in a new game, the newest clothes.

Imitating becomes their way to validate who they are through other people. Their interactions and ability to do things for themselves add to their growing self-concept and
boost their self-esteem.

»TWEENS

Despite the fact that they are still considered children, there are distinctive differences in the so-called “tweens.” Tweens hover in the awkward (alanganin) phase between childhood and adolescence. Development at this stage is a continuation and maturation of what has happened in the earlier childhood stages.

During pre-puberty, girls experience a growth spurt. Girls and boys develop pimples on their oily faces, become conscious of their appearance, and hang onto what their friends say and do.

It is not surprising why many children at this age are into social networking. They attempt to fit in with peers while they try to search for their place in this world. Acceptance by peers means the world to them, and they follow the trends and seek always to be in the know about what is happening around them.

In our survey, 75 percent of students say that having lots of friends makes them feel good.

Common worries at this stage concern friendship or other peer-related issues. Tweens often get into fights, as differences unfold and everybody wants to be accepted. Considering their adeptness with digital media, children nowadays do not just fight among each other in class. They bring their squabbles online, through text, chat, and especially through Facebook and Twitter.

One negative post on Facebook by one girl about another person in class can bring about tumultuous comments and even insults by those who agree or disagree. Worse, parents jump into the fray, posting their own thoughts.

Acceptance by peers means the world to tweens.

While they are trying to be accepted or to go with the demands of the peer group, many tweens find it hard to confront problems, especially relational concerns, face-to-face. But they do not want their parents smothering them. They often prefer to do things on their own or be by themselves.

As parents, we need to allow our tweens space and time to discover who they are and what they like to do. Yet we should also be vigilant. If our tweens prefer to be all by themselves in front of the screen, then allow them only limited time to do so.

Giving tweens their own space means allowing activities that enhance creativity, learn something new through reading books, or exploring the real world.

Parenting becomes a bigger challenge, as rules are tested when kids assert themselves. Many parents feel that tweens are now bigger and so are able to take care of themselves. The patterns, rules, and routines we have established when our children were younger may either be followed through, diminished, or even be taken for granted.

The preadolescent stage is an opportune time for us to bond with our tweens. Our
tweens are curious and (still) conversant, and we can strengthen relationships and communication lines.

If we fail to foster solid relationships with our tweens in what experts feel is still a calm stage, then we may find it difficult to be part of their lives when they finally become adolescents.
A Foundation of Faith and Love

By Rhoda Buenaventura-Pinlac

Mother of two, guidance counselor

We are part of the growing number of transnational Filipino families. In 2007, my husband Jose and I made the difficult decision to embrace the dynamics of an OFW family—physically separated but emotionally connected.

Maintaining a healthy family relationship is tough and challenging, but the strong foundation of our faith and love holds our family together. Focusing on our family goals has enabled us to overcome challenges and has made us stronger to cope with the increasing demands of modern times.

We are a dual-earning family with school-age children: Riam Chi and Jose Ramon Carlos, 13 and 8, respectively, at the time of this writing. With a master’s degree in Family Psychology, I work as a guidance counselor.

Raising two sons with different needs and interests makes our role as parents more exciting and challenging. Open communication and high-level of understanding are needed for us all to establish a win-win setup, especially when it comes to our children’s wants.

We are aware of the pressing concern of parents like us regarding the usage of gadgets among young people. So we make it clear to our children that gadgets should be used with full responsibility. Gadgets must serve their purpose and should not be used to isolate oneself from the family.

My husband and I are not against gadgets. We value technology because it is our medium in maintaining closeness among family members. Gadgets allow us to continue celebrating rituals and traditions online. But we want our children to learn to use technology well.

We empower our children by consulting and involving them in family decisions, such as setting family rules and defining family values. We emphasize the uniqueness of every family; thus, we must not compare our practices with those of others.

To improve their critical thinking and decision-making skills, we encourage our children to talk to their peers about family practices. Of course, one of their favorite topics revolves around the latest model or toy!

To ensure parental regulation on the use of gadgets, here are the rules and provisions we have agreed upon as a family:

1. Cellular phones can only be used during Friday afternoons until Sunday evenings—except when there are activities outside school on weekdays.
2. The iPad or the laptop can only be used once a month, for two to three hours at a time.

3. TV viewing on weekdays is allowed, after homework and enrichment classes. The TV must be turned off at 8:30 p.m.

4. With good school or enrichment class performance comes options on rewards, such as an extra two hours of iPad use, a treat in a restaurant, or a new book.

5. Gadgets can be brought to family gatherings, as long as there is social interaction with other people, and gadgets shared with others.

6. Playing on the iPad or on cellular phones in a moving vehicle is not permitted.

We want to promote self-regulation in our children, but in cases of infraction, we immediately remind one another. A first offense merits a simple reminder. A second offense warrants a stronger warning, with a consequence chosen by the child (such as forfeiting playing privileges, or choosing a TV program).

Succeeding offenses result in a closed-door talk with the offender, with corresponding disciplinary action.

Maintaining simplicity in the family also helps in addressing our children’s attraction to gadgets. We constantly communicate with and be examples to our children that material possessions, especially gadgets, are not our first priority.

More than these luxuries, we stress to them the importance of our sacrifices. Their parents have chosen to be temporarily away from one another to invest in their education.

My loving presence is essential in diverting their attention from individual games and social networks. I make the children feel valued by giving them quality time (i.e., playing games, listening to their stories through daily reports of “good, bad, and okay news”), sitting together with them to read our favorite book, and watching movies as a family.

We also enroll our children in enrichment sessions and give them online math exercises.

Attending mass every Sunday and reading the Gospel daily make a big difference on how our children respect and obey their elders. It is not difficult for them to understand that our lives are merely on loan, and that we must be good stewards while on this earth. Our children strive to use their talents and time wisely to follow God.

Only with constant parental involvement and regulation can we safeguard our children from the negative traps of cyberspace. We parents must be vigilant in embracing full accountability in forming our young to become responsible and capable of practicing self-control over their wants and resisting peer conformity.
TV Viewing for Kids

DIGITAL NATIVES SAY that TV is an old medium. Yet TV still has a strong influence at present, with the plethora of programs on free channels, and the multitude of cable networks available.

In our survey, 90 percent of respondents watch TV or video every day. Twenty-five percent watch more than four hours a day.

The most popular TV shows are: comedy (69 percent), music TV (45 percent), cartoons (44 percent), romance (43 percent), drama (35 percent), thriller (31 percent), sci-fi/fantasy (30 percent), science/nature (28 percent), lifestyle (28 percent), reality shows (27 percent), horror (24 percent), talk shows (24 percent), game shows (23 percent), telenovela (21 percent).

In 1999, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) issued a policy statement that attempted to educate parents about the effects of media, including the amount and content that might have effects on children.

The AAP recommended that pediatricians urge parents to discourage television viewing for children under the age of two, and to regulate the screen time of kids older than two.

Since then, the AAP has included guidelines on computer and Internet use in their policy guidelines, aside from TV, movies, and videos. The AAP recommends one hour of digital use for primary-school children and a maximum of two hours for tweens and even teens.

Though almost impossible to implement, these are the current AAP recommendations, endorsed by the Philippine Pediatrics Society (PPS).

LOCAL GUIDELINES

Locally, the Movie and TV Regulation and Classification Board (MTRCB), together with almost all TV networks, signed a memorandum of agreement in February 2012 that encourages members of the industry to observe self-regulation by policing their own ranks.

Importantly, the parties agreed to support efforts and initiatives on educational campaigns to “empower parents with informed decisions in the exercise of parental guidance in the choice of motion pictures and television programs that children watch.”

This initiative of the TV and movie industry is an attempt by the MTRCB to ensure proper regulation of the media to extend parental education on media content.

The MTRCB, under the headship of former Chairman Grace Poe-Llamanzares, has revised the old classification ratings for television shows in an attempt to help educate parents on exercising “caution and vigilance” on the appropriate programs they would allow their children to watch.
In line with MTRCB Memorandum Circular 12-2011, and made effective on February 2012, the revised ratings are as follows: General Patronage (“G”), Parental Guidance (“PG”), Strong Parental Guidance (“SPG”) and Disapproved for airing on TV (“X”).

The SPG classification “warns parents to exercise greater parental responsibility in their children’s viewing of (a) program.”

**The AAP and the PPS recommend one hour of digital use for primary-school children and a maximum of two hours for tweens and even teens.**

“The television program classified as SPG must still fall within the parameters of the existing Parental Guidance classification rating,” says the MTRCB. “However, to merit the issuance of an SPG rating, the gravity of the material must, in the judgment of the Board, be leaning toward the maximum allowable for Parental Guidance rating.” When a program is rated SPG, it includes material not appropriate for many children, along with these content descriptors: T for Theme, V for Violence, D for Drugs, L for Language, S for Sex, and H for Horror.

TV networks are required to display descriptors, along with the SPG rating, thirty seconds before the specific show is aired.

When we look at the recommendations of the governing bodies—the AAP, the PPS, and the MTRCB—we can infer their concern about our need to follow through on their strong recommendations and provide the optimal media environment for our children.

While we might not have a say on the availability of programs, we have a strong say and an essential responsibility to monitor what our children are exposed to.

**TUNE IN**

In 1998, the United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) published the booklet *Your Guide to Kiddie TV Viewing: How to Use TV Programs to Your Advantage*, based on research by the College of Mass Communication in the University of the Philippines–Diliman. While there is a lot of worry about effects on kids being too glued to the tube, the booklet says that TV can be educational “if children watch the right programs, at appropriate times, and with [parental] involvement.”

The following tips can be practised in getting the most from TV and minimizing its harmful effects on our kids:

- Regulate TV viewing.
- Create alternatives and extend TV lessons after the show.
- Watch TV with children and talk about what was watched.

UNICEF also discusses the impact of commercials and how we and our kids can cope with them. TV watching can develop consumerism in the susceptible young, and so to become wise end users of TV, our children need to be critical viewers.
The following pointers hold true for TV, radio, print, and Internet ads:

- Help children distinguish the ads from the programs.
- Discuss with children how TV ads work by making products desirable.
- Help children appreciate the value of non–material things.
- Cut out TV commercials altogether (say, by just watching prescreened videos).
- Beware of toys that are linked to TV, especially violent programs.

How do we evaluate the quality of TV programs? Quality programs are appropriate for kids. They promote positive values, including appropriate language, without gratuitous sex or violence. They have good production value, and treat realistic themes and issues cautiously. They are open to active viewer participation, allowing feedback.
ICHEL SPEAKS
When I took a communications class under Prof. Margarita Acosta, my eyes were opened to the detrimental effects of too much TV. The pointers in the guide book Your Guide to Kiddie TV Viewing affirmed my belief as a parent, educator, and counselor regarding the appropriate utilization of TV among young children.

Working with school-age children for more than ten years presented me with student cases that benefitted negatively from too much TV. Many children lacked motivation for school and academic activities due to excessive television exposure, thus their grades and focus in school were significantly affected.

Many times, I explained to children that watching TV is not a need or a must, but a privilege. In my encounters with parents, some are oblivious to their child’s TV-viewing habits, while some lack the information on what for them seemed to be a harmless form of entertainment.

From some readings and lectures in my graduate class, I learned about the detrimental effects of extreme television exposure for children. When I became a mother, my son’s pediatrician reiterated the guidelines of the AAP on TV viewing.

These strengthened my resolve in managing television exposure, and with my husband’s support, we limit our son’s exposure to TV shows, in spite of other influences who did otherwise, like our extended families, peers, trends, and our child’s growing interest in everything.

We have tried to live with the AAP recommendations, and we have been successful in abiding by the two-hour TV-viewing maximum for children above two years old. As parents, we feel that it is our responsibility to monitor what shows our children can be exposed to.

Thus, we have even resolved to limit our own TV-viewing exposure to news and some chosen shows, in order to be good models for our children.

Creating Alternatives

We created alternative activities for our children to allow them to explore other things other than sticking to the idiot box. We introduce other sources of entertainment, like chosen videos or cartoons such as Dora, Barney, and Hi-5.

We felt that videos were more beneficial because watching time is calculated (less than thirty minutes per show) and the shows were prescreened. Of course, we still tried to abide by the maximum of two hours of TV-video-gadgets combined.

This meant encouraging our kids to find other activities to engage in for fun, learning, and entertainment, such as playing with toys, biking, or walking in the neighborhood, coloring/writing, reading, playing board or make-believe games.

I have to confess that when my children do watch TV, I find it convenient to rest, or busy myself with other things. But I have resolved to talk more about what is happening in
the shows they watch.

When I discuss a show with them, I not only help my kids develop insight and reasoning skills, but also provide guidance for myself to understand the world through their eyes.

More than providing a critical eye for viewing the programs, as a parent, I know it is important to process my children’s insights, perceptions, and feelings toward a certain show. When I discuss a show with them, I not only help my kids develop insight and reasoning skills, but also provide guidance for myself to understand the world through their eyes.

COMMERCIALS

TV commercials are created to incite our children’s fancy. Yet as a consumer, I explain to my kids that we cannot have all the things we see on TV. So far, it is just the hotdogs they often bug us about.

Nevertheless, I persevere in properly explaining to my children the difference between needs and wants to help them manage the influx of products they see on TV.

Cutting out commercials altogether is a good way to filter them. That is the advantage we have in watching videos, because what our kids see are prescreened and limited only to what their young minds can hold.

The AAP guidelines and the inputs in the UNICEF guidebook affirm what my husband and I are practicing at present, and what I recommend to parents during talks and consultations. The challenge is to continue along the track we have taken, to help ourselves and educate more families to manage the impact not just of TV, but of the Internet as well.

Becoming media-literate is my responsibility, not just for the sake of my kids but also for the sake of other Filipino children and families who are not aware of the harm of excessive and/or inappropriate exposure to media.
Media Literacy for Tweens and Teens

IN OUR SURVEY, the top sites visited by respondents regularly are: YouTube (98 percent), Facebook (97 percent), Google (94 percent), Wikipedia (85 percent), e-mail (77 percent), Twitter (63 percent), BitTorrent (54 percent), game sites (60 percent), Yahoo! Messenger (69 percent), Tumblr (46 percent), porn sites (26 percent), and chat rooms (22 percent).

In her Family Studies doctoral program in Miriam College, Ichel enjoyed the course Multimedia and the Family taught by Margarita Acosta, head of the Department of Communication. A communication practitioner, Acosta knows that multimedia impacts greatly our family and daily lives.

While there is good and bad media, we cannot always control how these may affect our children, so it is important to train them to be media- and information-literate.

While we can do external monitoring of what our children watch or what they access on the Internet, it is still important for us to help them develop a critical-thinking mindset to help them discern between what is good and not so good.

Acosta has shared with the class scientific papers and studies on communication that can shed light on these skills we want our kids to have. One such resource is the 2010 book by American educator Renee Hobbs—*Digital Media and Literacy: Plan of Action*.

Following are ways we can apply as parents and educators to help children be literate in digital and media use.

**ACCESS**

*Access* means “finding and using media and technology tools skillfully and sharing appropriate and relevant information with others.”

This first step is the gateway to media and information literacy. We can access information at the tap of our fingers, but it is harder to be judicious in evaluating what we access.

Young kids are just starting to develop themselves, while tweeners and teens are in the stage of learning who they are. We cannot just let them get processed junk on the limited time they have, in accessing information that is not helpful for them.

We can start training kids to be literate by being attuned to the time they access information and what they get from multimedia. Take for instance Facebook. Why on earth would we allow our young kids to submit an application that is only recommended for people thirteen years old and older?

Our young kids are not allowed to watch PG-13 or R-rated movies, but we allow kids to lie about their age just to have their own Facebook accounts. Worse, some of us parents may even be the ones falsifying our children’s birthdates.
Why on earth would we allow our young kids to submit an application that is only recommended for people thirteen years old and older?

Facebook has its reasons why age limitations are placed on its site, similar to those of movie-classification boards. Information accessed ideally should be relevant and useful in school, at home, and in actual life. Social networking for young kids do not help them develop properly. Kids should be out playing (real-life games), interacting (non-digitally) with others, learning about things (preferably, non-digitally), and enjoying childhood (again, preferably non-digitally)!

Another area of concern is music, especially the effect of suggestive lyrics focusing on violence, depression, or death. “Some [people] have argued that children and adolescents use music only for entertainment, that little or no attention is paid to the words, and if any attention is given, understanding tends to be limited and related to the experiences lived by the listener,” says the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) in 2009.

But this is not the case. “Approximately 17 percent of male adolescents and 25 percent of female adolescents expressed that they liked their favorite songs specifically because the lyrics were a reflection of their feelings,” continues the AAP.

Moreover, when teens like a certain type of music more, then they will pay more attention to the lyrics. Even if young listeners may not comprehend every line of the lyrics, they get the general idea of what they all mean.

Multimedia should not be the center around which our children’s lives revolve; multimedia should be a mere vehicle to learn more about the real world.

ANALYZE AND EVALUATE

This step means “comprehending messages and using critical thinking to analyze message quality, veracity, credibility, and point of view, while considering potential effects or consequences of messages.”

After understanding the “what” and the “when,” our children should learn to think of the “why.” What is all this information for?

In social-networking sites, blogs, and radio and TV shows, we can ask ourselves and our children: Is the information worthwhile and value-laden for you? Are the contents worth sharing? What are the possible consequences of sharing such information?

The problem with the digital age is that we are getting too much information, which we fail to filter. In the process of getting too much, we have little time to pause and thoroughly understand the messages. Many angles exist in stories, various strategies are involved in using certain media, and opinions and facts are interchanged.

Children and teens need to heed the basic lessons in English class: differentiating fact from opinion, doing logical sequencing, and learning inferences.
If our children respond to “What is it for you?” with “Nothing” (“Wala lang!”), then it means we have failed to develop critical-thinking skills in them.

The problem with the digital age is that we are getting too much information, which we fail to filter.

» CREATE

Creating means “composing or generating content using creativity and confidence in self-expression, with awareness of purpose, audience, and composition techniques.”

Overwhelmed by digital media, it is easy to just follow trends. Teenagers posting “selfie” photos and adults, who should know better, follow suit. Bloggers post pictures of food and then many people in social-networking sites gladly give us accounts of what they eat, even their empty plates!

While self-expression is encouraging, and being able to create is important to every individual, we need to be more responsible in the information we create and disseminate.

Again, we ask: We have created this piece of information, so what or whom is it for? Who are the people we are targeting? What feeling or insight do we want to stir up in our audience?

Let us think before we click. If we can answer these questions well every time we post and share something about ourselves or other matters, then we can create with a sense of responsibility.

» REFLECT

Reflecting means “applying social responsibility and ethical principles to one’s own identity and lived experience, communication behavior, and conduct.”

Sadly, many of us simply access without filtering. We scan information without really understanding it. We create without responsibility.

In the multitude of games, online information, and TV programs we are bombarded with, many are unprocessed, some are archived, while most get junked as there is no time for us to reflect on them and put them to good use. But we cannot just swallow what we see or hear. Kids and teens are especially vulnerable; they need to develop reflection skills to think about the meaning and message behind the piece of information, no matter what medium is used.

They can ask questions like “How does the content affect me? Has it changed my words and actions? Can this piece of information serve a bigger purpose, given my personal and social responsibilities?”

Unfortunately, some of us post pictures of strangers we find weird, rant about trivial incidents, or insult others publicly. Some of us use the excuse of “self-expression” without considering how our actions may affect others, without thinking how our online behavior is a manifestation of how we are as persons.
Analysis requires critical thinking, but reflection calls for more: self-awareness, empathy, and a sense of responsibility.

**ACT**

*Acting* means “working individually and collaboratively to share knowledge and solve problems in the family, the workplace and the community, and participating as a member of a community at local, regional, national, and international levels.”

After analyzing, creating and reflecting, the need for us to train our children to act is important. Using media information to our advantage is being able to put it in good use in daily living.

For example, media and advertising promote “going green” now. Green living and saving on resources are often headlined, and much information is available. Yet have we really sat down together as a family and brainstormed on how we can live green and conserve resources?

Cyberbullying is a popular issue, including irresponsible posting of comments or indecent videos, whether of celebrities or ordinary people. Many titillating videos have gone viral.

Being able to take appropriate actions on such matters means sitting down with our children and discussing what they may inevitably view, in order to evaluate such material in line with the morals and values of our families.

**Analysis requires critical thinking, but reflection calls for more: self-awareness, empathy, and a sense of responsibility.**

Regarding cyberbullying, for example, we can encourage our kids to share experiences and opinions on the issue, then discuss family rules discouraging such behavior.

Regarding rude or unethical comments, we can help our kids empathize with the offended party and encourage use of positive words, whether in person or through digital means.

As for indecent photos or videos, this may be tools for us to discuss sexuality and values. We use them as springboards to establish action plans among teens about their online behavior, responsibility, and personal decorum.

As parents, we can do external monitoring by forbidding certain programs at home, blocking certain websites, or supervising our kids’ multimedia use. Yet there are more influences beyond our control.

We need to develop in our children internal monitoring skills so that they can wisely use their time to access and understand appropriate information, become critical in handling such, take responsibility in creating materials, and act in ways that benefit them and those around them.
Why Teens Act the Way They Do

SOME CALL IT the turbulent stage; others the time of raging hormones. We worry about how our children will become upon reaching adolescence. Crucial issues come to play at this age: sexuality and relationships, career decisions, peer pressure, risk-taking with sex, alcohol, smoking, drugs, and of course, identity development.

Now our digital teenagers have to contend and keep abreast with a lot of things happening to them in their online world.

SELF-ABSORBED

In this time of growing maturity, the adolescent way of thinking mostly focuses on the here and now. They may still not fully comprehend cause-and-effect relationships, especially those involving the hazy future.

While they are often idealistic, teens concentrate more on the self rather than on other people. Calling teens “self-absorbed” is an understatement. They may be conscious enough to understand matters in line with what is relevant for them at the given moment. Yet, being too self-absorbed makes it hard for them to see the impact on these matters outside their realm or their future.

Many teens succumb to negative peer influences, which may lead to experimentation and risky behavior. Since they desire to feel good here and now, they may fail to think of negative consequences. The process of seeking their identity makes them so obsessed with their image that they give the utmost regard to their reputation. Gossip and put-downs by parents, teachers, friends and peers can really dampen their self-esteem.

We know of teenagers caught in school who cheat, do drugs, and engage in sex. Faye, a high-school student, was caught entangled in an embrace with her classmate-boyfriend. Despite several warnings on being publicly affectionate on campus, they continue to do so. They fail to understand the future implications of their behavior and how these can affect them. Both teens cannot understand that being passionate may result in premarital sex. It is also a sign of disrespect for school policies, something that other students might emulate.

Gossip and put-downs, either through the actual or digital grapevine means (SMS, social-networking sites, chats), affect teens immensely. Junior-high Alex was a victim of rumors, which she believed was her classmates’ way of “getting back” at her. Alex was so affected that she hated going to school, since she felt that everyone was talking about her. Alex needed help in processing her insights and feelings to finally understand and manage the situation.

AUTONOMY AND STRUCTURE

As teenagers strive to be independent, they often challenge authority. They test family rules and even despise their parents at some point. No longer do they want to be identified
as children; they tend to move away from matters they consider childish things, routines, and treatment by parents. Because of this, they can become argumentative and disobedient.

In our survey, 75 percent of respondents say being allowed to make their own decisions and having their own space make them feel good.

If there are already unresolved parent-child issues lurking on the sidelines, chances are these will be magnified at adolescence.

The irony of adolescence is that while teens seek new forms of excitement outside the home, they may fall into pits of loneliness or sadness, leading to mood swings. Some days our teens are sweet and polite, other days they are ready to bite each other’s (and our) heads off.

Not surprisingly, our survey reveals that many teens nowadays are sad and depressed. Many adolescents prefer to tune out the real world and would rather tune into its online version, perhaps to escape the void they feel inside.

Take the case of fourteen-year-old Bea (not her real name). Her mother was extremely concerned when she had a boyfriend at fourteen. Despite the warnings, Bea still did what she liked. When she had fights with her boyfriend, the mother cuddled her after the sobbing and wailing, the sleepless nights, and the banging of doors.

When Bea refused to go to school the mornings after these scenarios, she was allowed to rest at home, and would attend school when she wanted to, excuse letter in hand.

With all these, Bea was just striving for independence, but she was a child who had been passively raised. While her mom said she has rules, some are tweaked, others taken for granted, and most not implemented.

Rather than viewing Bea’s actions as outright rebellion, the truth is likely that she has never been used to structure. So when problems crop up, they are magnified at the same time that Bea is trying to assert her independence and establish her identity.

Take Samuel (not his real name), thirteen years old. He has just started high school but has already gotten into numerous fights with classmates. His moods are volatile. He is quite popular and even leads a group of other boys, but often he gets into fights—verbal and physical—with other classmates, even girls.

During consultations with Ichel, she discovered that Samuel is trying to find his proper place within the family. Material comforts are provided him, yet his father has high expectations and constantly compares him unfavorably with his older sister. Samuel feels distant from his dad.

So Samuel turns to his friends and his online life to escape the things he does not want to deal with at home. Samuel is trying to establish his identity and build his self-worth, but so far this is being derailed because of his mood upheaval.

There are many Beas and Samuels around. Teenagers have a whole spectrum of issues that have piled up through their growing years, now exacerbated with the changes in their bodies, their sense of who they are, their friends, and the rules and relationships with parents and siblings at home.
Family issues become even more pronounced when we parents are also going through our own midlife (which may include physical or emotional changes) changes. Thus, many of us come to counseling at this time when family concerns become full-blown. Many of us even feel that we need to have our teens (or ourselves) fixed!

While it is good that our teens get help at this stage, oftentimes their issues stem from their relationship patterns with their parents for the past decade.

We parents can get help, too, so we can journey with our teens in this conflict-filled yet exciting stage of their (and our) lives.

SELFIES

Because of their changing bodies, teens tend to be preoccupied with the physical changes they encounter and often become critical of their own appearance, even that of others. While they strive to be different and forge their own identity, they constantly compare themselves with peers, deliberately or unconsciously.

As teens grow, they generally learn to become comfortable with themselves. In an assembly of female high-school students, it is easy to spot the freshmen and sophomores. Many are ill at ease with themselves. They try to wear new hairstyles, swiping bangs off their face, or tuck loose hair behind the ears. Feeling conscious, they keep fixing or tugging at what they are wearing, even when in their school uniforms. They are embarrassed about pimples and the oils on their face.

On the contrary, the older high-school students—juniors and seniors—are more at ease. Most of them carry themselves better and are more comfortable with their bodies.

However, for all year levels and ages, the demands to be in sync with the latest fashion and most high-tech gadgets can affect our teens’ physical appearance and their feeling of peer acceptance.

No wonder the retail industry now has special lines for teens. Department stores have big selections in teen sections. Print, radio, TV, and digital media target teenage consumers.

What used to be products targeting females, like whitening lotions, facial toners, acne creams, and deodorants, now have specially made lines for males. Dressing up with preppy clothes used to be prevalent just among girls, while boys contented themselves with jeans and shirts.

Nowadays, teenage boys have become more conscious of how they look, wearing non-traditional outfits, taking pains to be as stylish as the most fashionable girls.

Marketing taglines know how to target our teens’ need for self-esteem, identity, confidence, and acceptance.

The popularity of Korean celebrities affects young Filipinos, particularly on the manner of dress and lifestyle. The image Korean pop (K-pop) stars portray—straight hair, quirky clothes, porcelain skin—has made its way into the heart of our teens. The K-pop look has become a model.
Many Pinoy high-school boys imitate the straight hair, with long bangs falling on their foreheads. Some have their hair straightened just to complete the look. Never mind the growing pimples peeking out from their foreheads! The boys seem to feel it is cool to look this way.

Of course, most traditional schools do not allow such haircuts, which has led some students into trouble.

Adolescent girls go gaga over American brands, Forever 21. Many girls take so much effort with their appearance that even on ordinary days they dress up like they just stepped out of a fashion magazine. Some girls already adorn themselves with makeup as early as high school.

In our digital age, the obsession with appearance is magnified. Take the so-called “selfie” (the name may be ironic, but is certainly self-explanatory). Teens (and even some adults who should know better) have become fond of taking pictures of themselves with handheld digital cameras and smart phones and posting them on their online social-networking pages for all the world to see.

They take photos of their “look of the day,” “going to school look,” “free time look,” or “out with friends look.” No wonder they are called the narcissistic generation!

▶SEEKING IDENTITY

According to American developmental psychologist Erik Erikson, adolescents are expected to develop their identity. Failure to complete this task would result in identity crisis.

The common preoccupation of teens is “Am I normal?” They ask for privacy, daydream, or act for according to what Erikson calls their “imaginary audience.” This audience becomes our teens’ external control on how to dress, speak, act, and feel accepted.

So teens tend to magnify even minor issues, feeling that “no one understands” them. “Lagi na lang ako ang nakikita!” (It’s always me whom they see!) “Ano na naman ang kasalanan ko?” (What did I do wrong again?)

While our teens feel they are often picked on, with most of what they do under the scrutiny of adult authorities, these matters validate their identity and value system. Teens need to figure out their own values in line with those of their family, society, or beliefs, sorting what they can embrace into their own value system.

▶PEERS

While we worry about the peer groups our teens have, peers serve a developmental purpose. Peers may have a stronger influence in the adolescent’s life, even more than family. Friends mean the world to our teens, as friendships have become deeper and more intense than when they were much younger.

What we need to be concerned about is if our teens who have established strong peer
allegiances that drive them to engage in risk-taking behaviors.

Parents say, “Nakakatakot kasi baka mapa-barkada!” For those whose teens have already encountered peer problems, the common reason is “Napa-barkada kasi!”

We counselors often hear these laments, with parents who claim they no longer know their children and that they cannot deal with much stronger influences in their teens’ lives. Many parents are lost, wringing their hands over their teens hanging out with “the bad crowd.”

These problems can be resolved with patience and wisdom, but it is doubly important for us to establish relationships with our children, from the time they are young and continue to deepen these connections through pre-puberty and beyond.

When we set the stage right before our children reach their teen years, we can make our teens’ paths less turbulent.
As an AB Psychology student, I am used to doing experiments. In our class in Experimental Psychology, we performed naturalistic observation on Ateneo students holding their cell phones. We sat in a populated area on campus, observing whether many of the students were just holding onto their cell phones, or if they were actually using them.

My groupmates and I found that most of the students who had their cell phones out “just because” were girls, while most of those who were actually using their phones were boys.

We also observed that the phones held by the students were smart phones, not the plain traditional cell phones (without functions like Internet connectivity).

For the girls, their cell phones were like an accessory that matched their outfits (the phones’ casing matched their clothes). Of course, some girls had their phones out to use them, too, but more often than not, a girl had her phone out just because.

On the other hand, boys had their phones out to listen to music, to text, and to call. Of course, there were also boys who weren’t using their phones and had them out just because.

We surmise that collectively, all cell-phone owners had their phones out because they wanted to literally be able to instantly update and check their social media accounts (Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, etc.).

**SELFIES**

My friend Kath Favorito posted a link to a post “The Selfie You Just Took Says a Lot About Your Current Mental State” by blogger Eric MacKinnon to her site. MacKinnon says, “Until (anti)social networking came about, cameras never had lenses that faced you. The act of taking a picture was largely reserved for capturing memories of somewhere, or someone, or some time—not to snap a photo of yourself for the explicit purpose of having your ego stroked by your social-networking contacts.

“It’s comically sad that a quick tag search on Instagram reveals tens of millions of photos tagged with ‘self’ in some regard, but given how emotionally needy your average young guy or girl is today, it’s not surprising,” MacKinnon continues.

Kath says, “I met a girl who fell into depression just because her profile photo did not get as many ‘likes’ as her friend’s. Sad.”

Kath also posted a link to the article “Is Our Culture Killing Class?” by Rachel
Jablow from the site *Elite Daily*. Jablow talks about the lack of manners today, the erosion of morals, and the flaunting of self.

“We seem to feed into this generation’s sense of entitlement creating the egocentric narcissist,” says Jablow. “Have you ever been on a date and the other person talks about (himself/herself) incessantly? Or the ‘friend’ you bump into on the street and in the five blocks you walk together, never asks about you? Or the consistently late person who thinks your time is less valuable? I say to those people, ‘It is not always about you!’ Take an interest in others. Ask questions. Inquire about someone else’s life other than your own.”

Kath says, “What I see every day is a society with low self-esteem, hungry for the acceptance and appreciation of others, and so we have selfies, the flaunting of possessions, the doing of anything that will give them the likes and comments and popularity”

**IN THEIR OWN WORLDS**

My friend used to play the PlayStation with her siblings a lot in the past. But ever since they were each given their own laptops, they disappeared into their own worlds.

The funny thing was that they sleep in the same room and share the same study room, but they hardly talk to each other.

My friend says she hardly knows anything about her siblings anymore and that they’ve grown apart from each other. Simply asking “How are you?” feels weird or awkward for them.

**CHANGE PASSWORD**

Here’s a funny but effective way to stop ourselves from doing unnecessary things while doing school work.

When she has a lot of school work, a friend of mine would ask another friend to change her Facebook account password so that she would not be able to use it. This was a precautionary measure to counter her addiction to social media. She would stop cold turkey, at least for a while. I also know some people who delete their accounts completely so that they won’t be tempted to use Facebook. Facebook can be that addicting.

**NO HONORS**

Much as Internet addiction can be harmful to us teens, it may even be worse for children. Once, I talked with a Grade Seven boy who belonged to the honors section of an exclusive boys’ school. The boy informed me that ever since he and his classmates had been allowed by their school to download games into their tablets, their studies were greatly affected. Their honors section used to have forty boys, now there were only twenty boys left.

I asked the boy if this decline was because of the (games in the) tablet, and he
said yes.

You’d think that honor students would have more self-control when it came to managing games on their tablet. But it would appear however, that anyone, even the best of us, could be prone to technology addiction.

One of my teachers related that whenever she and her kids would go out to eat, her kids would ask for the tablet.

“Mommy, did you bring the iPad?” they would regularly ask. The tablet seems to be a necessity for today’s kids, much like wearing a jacket is necessary for a rainy day.

**When she has a lot of school work, a friend of mine would ask another friend to change her Facebook account password so that she would not be able to use it.**

**ADDICTED ADULTS**

Surprisingly, some parents also get addicted to social media as well.

My friend’s mom is addicted to Facebook. There are times when she wouldn’t be available for my friend because she was updating her Facebook account. Unfortunately, all the mother’s stories at dinnertime were about posts in her Facebook news feed.

I also know of a father who has to post photos every day of what he’s wearing, including photos for Outfit of the Day (#OOTD), a fad in social media wherein one documents one’s clothing daily.

My teacher reports that once, when she was in a restaurant, she noticed that the father of a birthday celebrant was on his iPad the entire meal.

The father wasn’t paying any attention to what was going on in his son’s party. He was oblivious to everyone, even to other adults at the table.

Ironically, he was supposed to be the host, but he did not act like one.
What NOT to Tell Teens

EVEN THOUGH WE are tempted to do so, let us refrain from saying the following things to our teens.

➤“WHEN I WAS YOUR AGE …”

Come on, parents, we grew up in analog times, this is now the digital age! Given our teens’ tendencies to focus on the here and now, they often cannot think (or project) toward the future, even less on the past. Instead of sermons, it’s better for us to help them see the immediate realities in their decisions and the possible consequences of their choices.

When they want to come home late, resist the urge to say, “When I was your age, and I came home late, my parents would ground me for a month!” Instead, give them this choice: “I will pick you up at 1 a.m. or you cannot go.”

If they arrive late because they hang out with friends, do not say, “When I was young, I did not dare defy my parents. I obeyed them all the time!” Instead, explain the rules and consequences: “You still need to finish your homework, and you need to rest. If you wake up late for school and miss your ride, you have to commute. We will not bring you to school.”

➤“I’M WORKING HARD JUST FOR YOU”

Okay, this may be true, and we utter this line out of desperation. But when we do so, teens tend to feel “as if it’s our fault!” Teens cannot fully comprehend that our jobs have anything to do with their low grades, missed curfews, or their answering back (which for them is simply a way to reason out).

For teens to understand the relevance of our sacrifices, it is best not to use this line when issues arise.

As early as possible, we should help our kids understand the work we do, how we earn a living for the family. We can share how we try to budget our time between work, household, and family.

It would be helpful, too, for us to assign appropriate tasks and responsibilities to our children. Exposing them to challenges early on can prepare them for bigger tasks later. Our kids can learn household chores, budget their money, spend for their own mobile phones, and manage their time for online research and entertainment.

Many of us lament that our teens would not even concentrate on school work and would disregard rules, ungrateful for our sacrifice. But often the fault lies with us. We have made home life too perfect for our teens. They are not required to do house chores, they are given extra mobile load or allowance for no reason at all, they can wrangle an excuse letter if they do not feel like going to school, they are provided tutors if they do not pay attention in class. Sometimes they even expect us to do their projects (even bring them
to school if these are left at home).

In our misguided love, we have made life too convenient and easy for our children, so they grow up not knowing that real life can be difficult and messy.

When we expose them to challenges early, our teens are more likely to understand and appreciate the effort put on tasks: Parents work and children study, and family members contribute to each other’s welfare. If our kids develop a love for learning and value school as a way to improve themselves, then they can more readily understand why we put in much effort to earn a living, and hopefully, they will then do their share of hard work in school.

In our misguided love, we have made life too convenient and easy for our children, so they grow up not knowing that real life can be difficult and messy.

“DO NOT GO OUT LOOKING LIKE THAT … DO NOT POST THAT ON FACEBOOK … BECAUSE I SAID SO”

With their drive to establish their identity, our teens experiment with their looks and try to elicit comments and affirmations through online posts or actual interactions. As self-absorbed as they are, they take the above remarks as personal attacks.

In adolescence, too, parental rules tend to be irrelevant. Teens find it hard to see the connections between things—in their words, “Wala namang kinalaman sa …!” (It doesn’t have anything to do with …) If we just say, “Because I said so,” the more our teens resist rules and find us irrational.

When we establish home rules, we need to consult our teenagers and explain the implications. They may resist (rolling their eyes, for example). Some touchy issues may surface, but do not fret! If matters are discussed openly, rules implemented consistently, and corresponding consequences agreed upon, teens would understand that rules exist for worthwhile reasons.

“GIVE ME ALL YOUR ACCOUNT NAMES AND PASSWORDS”

If we demand this, and our teens resist, then there must be clogged lines of communication that need to be remedied urgently. Depending on agreed-upon family rules, we may or may not have access to our children’s cell phones, e-mails or social-networking accounts.

While we may try to regulate our teens through external means, it is best for them to do internal regulation. When our teens feel respected, heard, and accepted, and when they are given regard and privacy, it is easier for them to share with us the happenings in their lives.

No matter what they engage in digitally, ultimately we need to trust their capacity to do the right thing.
Many of us want to be in the loop of what is happening with our kids, so we try to connect with them through Facebook. So our teens think, “Oh no, Mom is on FB!” Several teens say they prefer to use Twitter because Facebook is already too crowded with their parents and teachers.

Many of us try our best to speak in the jargon of our digital teens, but we need to understand that our teens’ social-networking needs and activities may be far different from our own.

We can be participants in the digital world, but let us establish our own network, without stalking our kids. Instead of digitally spying on them, let us talk with them face to face and ensure that communication lines always remain open.

Nothing can replace true emotional bonds forged by real-world interpersonal exchanges and intimacy, and certainly not lurking online.

Once a mother consulted Ichel when she saw the exchanges of intimate, sexually provocative text messages between her daughter and a male who turned out to be a boyfriend. Sexting does happen.

The mother said, “My daughter is not entitled to her privacy yet, because she is still so young!”

While this may be sometimes true, if we lay down the law, our teens tend not to follow them anyway. While we want access to their online accounts, our teens would find other ways and means to communicate with friends and hide matters from us if we lack faith in them.

What do we do? Guide them early on, and let them earn our trust. We allow our teens to post pictures and create blogs, but discuss with them first why it is not wise to post photos of themselves in swimsuits. We discuss with them when and why posting is done, certainly not just to brag or rant about anything they wish.

We can give them digital power and connections, but we need to discuss together with our teens the appropriate limits and responsibilities. This is part of the process of letting go, and allowing our teens to grow independently.

If they fail, we can re-calibrate and start anew. While we cannot just totally let them do what they want, we need to regulate but train them to have inner discernment and self-regulation.

Nothing can replace true emotional bonds forged by real-world interpersonal exchanges and intimacy, and certainly not lurking online.

“WHY ARE YOU NOT LIKE YOUR SISTER/BROTHER?”

Teens hate being compared to parents, siblings, relatives, and even peers.

“Eh hindi nga ako ganun, eh!” (But I’m different from them!) is a common rejoinder when we start comparing them with others. While it is our intention to motivate, we end
up making the matter worse.

Deeply insecure inside, teens want to be accepted just as they are, without conditions. A line in their song goes, “It’s not easy to be me!”

We have to acknowledge our teens as people, noting their innate gifts and strengths and accepting their limitations. We need to see them for who they are and let them become what they were made to be.

If they do not fit our ideal, we need to get to know their interests. Let us sit with them and connect face-to-face. We can ask questions in a friendly tone, “Why do you like that kind of music so much?” or “What makes studying so hard for you?” or “Why are you going gaga over that pair of pants?”

The whole point is to hear them out, to get to know them, and to finally have an insight as to what makes our teens special. If we know about the whys in their choices, activities, and undertakings, then there is no room to compare them with others, since we fully understand who our children are and who they are growing up to be.

➤“YOUR FRIENDS ARE A BAD INFLUENCE”

Friends and peers are extremely important for teens. Saying the above statement may be welcomed by some teens, but most others may resent and resist them.

The most we can do is instill in our teens the values in choosing real friends. If we micromanage the people our teens hang out with, they will never learn how to choose people they can ultimately depend on.

We can set guidelines early on, regarding friends we prefer our kids to have, and activities we allow them to engage in. Instead of saying “No!” to every request, bit by bit we can widen their world. If we do not want our tweens to hang out in the mall, we can encourage them to invite friends to the house. This sends a signal that we welcome the friends our children choose.

Let them have a movie time, gaming time, chat time in the living room or family room, but not in any bedroom. Prepare light snacks for them. We can take the chance to observe our children’s friends without stalking, prying, or spying on them.

Another way for us to be in tune with our teens’ friends is to attend parent-teacher conferences. Not only do we get to know our children’s academic progress, we can also get feedback from teachers about their friends and dealings in school.

When we sincerely and actively listen to our teens, they feel valued and understood.

➤“I DON’T WANT TO HEAR ANY EXCUSES”

If we talk this way to our teens, chances are we destroy whatever communication lines that still exist between us. We counselors have lost count of the times teenagers plead with us, “I don’t want my parents to know,” “My parents will get mad if they learn about
“Please do not tell my mom!”

When they start talking about friends, school, experiences, or just about anything under the sun, we must resist the urge to comment and interrupt. Let us keep our judgments and “thought bubbles” to ourselves for the time being. We can have our say later.

When we blurt out our opinions and dictate our beliefs, our teens tend to shut their doors. They feel that they cannot share things with us. When they talk, they use us as sounding boards, just like they do with friends. There are times when they are not asking for help or advice; they just want to share and have someone listen.

We can still keep our stance as the authority and consultant on important matters. If they come to us, then we can ask, “Do you need me to listen?” or “Do you want my help?” or “Is it okay for me to share my thoughts about this?” or “Can we go back to our rules on this matter?”

We are not being permissive by being this way. Instead, we are actually establishing better communications and being involved both in the outer and inner world of our children.

When we sincerely and actively listen to our teens, they feel valued and understood. They feel that we prioritize their welfare more than the rules, our beliefs, or what other people might say. If they are listened to, we assist them to validate their feelings and experiences so they can make sense of what is happening to them.

Instead of threats, we become strongholds that they can go to so they feel safe as they explore the world. We can allow them to heal, to be who they are, and to grow from their experiences.

“HAVING A BOYFRIEND WILL JUST MAKE YOU PREGNANT”

We cannot assume that our teens know about sex already, even if they have discussed it in school. If our teens bring up the topic of relationships, it means that they see us as the authority on this matter and our counsel is important for them.

In raising digital teens, we need to talk to them about relationships, both virtual and real.

Sexuality is a crucial aspect of the developing teenager. Our teens are into music videos, movies, and songs with sexual undertones, but we often fail to talk to them about these. When our teens start interacting with friends of the opposite sex, we clam up or shut them down.

Many teen girls like dressing up and posing, then posting photos of them wearing short shorts and plunging necklines. Despite not being allowed to go out of the house, teens can secretly have a boyfriend or girlfriend and communicate through texting and social media.

If we do not talk to our kids about the facts and our family values about sexuality and
relationships, they will eventually try to bungle their way through this, with or without our help. They learn some bits from friends and peers, other bits from the school, and a lot of things online.

In raising digital teens, we need to talk to them about relationships, both virtual and real.
Harnessing Tech’s Fullest Potential

By Regina Jay Garcia

BS Mathematics, University of the Philippines–Diliman

My brothers grew up as naughty kids (they still are), while I was very shy and timid as a child. I made sure to stay out of trouble; rowdiness and rebellion never really appealed to me. I was extremely behaved so there was no need to impose too many restrictions on me. That’s one thing that made growing up easier.

All I remember is that Mom wanted me to sleep early and finish my food. The typical stuff! Back then, though, those rules were big for me. If I failed to nap in the afternoon, I would rub some of my mother’s blush on my cheeks before she gets home. Luckily, I was already a talented makeup artist back then. My mom seldom complained about me not looking rested (and those were during the times I felt too lazy to put on blush because I thought I looked fine even if I had not slept).

When it came to food, I made sure to finish everything on my plate. If there were times that I felt I could not, I divided my leftovers into three parts and slowly consume each part until my plate was empty. It does help to go little by little. Mind over matter!

As I was growing up, I turned from super-shy to super-outgoing, but I still was not a troublemaker. Rules were just about coming home early and going to bed early. I was never a party girl, I never liked drinking, and I kept my grades up and did well in my extracurriculars.

There was no need to be strict on me because I was strict enough on myself.

**GADGETS**

As I was growing up, technology, from being an avenue for leisure, became a necessary tool for communication and information. The first gadget I ever used was a computer. I would play Minesweeper and some other games with my brothers. Then, we had a PlayStation where I played my favorite game, Crash Bandicoot.

I bought my first cell phone because I got envious of my friends who had one. That was around third grade. Eventually this went from accessory to necessity. I could not survive without it. As a class officer, I needed to do text blasts about updates and also to receive news.

The Internet went from entertainment to a means of communicating with people who I do not usually see. I also found a love for music as I was maturing, and technology helped me have access to an array of music.

I got hooked on technology. I became a tech-y person. I spent so much time on the Internet that sometimes my parents would get mad. I gained more friends and I would text till the wee hours of the morning. My parents would reprimand me but
they never banned me from going online and they never confiscated my cell phone. After some time, my addiction petered out because I became more mature.

**CHILDHOOD PURSUITS**

From fifth grade onward, I became more outgoing. I became class vice-president and discovered I had leadership skills and genuinely loved responsibility. ( Weird, right?) Since then, I was constantly elected as president or VP of my class or club.

In sixth grade, I auditioned for the Ateneo Children’s Theater, which was staging *High School Musical* that year. I had a talent for singing and dancing, but I had never displayed these to a lot of people. I decided it was worth a shot. I was not expecting much from it. I did not even expect to pass the first auditions, but I did. After the call-backs and weeks of selection for the cast, lo and behold, I got the lead part. We had rehearsals almost every day and had a number of shows after that.

It was honestly very hard to juggle academics and theater, but in the end, by God’s amazing grace, I was still part of the honor roll that year. Aside from singing and dancing, I soon discovered that I also had a talent for acting and making lots of friends. I joined acting workshops in Trumpets during the summer to hone my skills even more.

The ultimate turning point of my life, though, happened in 2010. I was diagnosed with a chronic, autoimmune disease. At that time, I was an active member of the debate team, I was class president and I was excelling academically and in my other endeavors. Suddenly, everything went downhill because of the disease. I was asked to slow down. It was heartbreaking. It got to the point where I had to disengage from debate and had to be home-schooled. But because God is faithful, I was still in the honor roll that year.

To top it all, that setback made me surrender my whole life to God and accept Him wholeheartedly as my Lord and Savior. Since then, I have been seeing the world in a different light. Excellence is nothing if it is not done for the glory of God. I have learned to put Him in the center of everything I am, and everything I do.

Since then, I have been getting healthier. My grades have skyrocketed and God has granted me the strength to resume my activities. I am a very active member of my church now, a faithful follower and lover of Christ, and everything else in my life is continuously blooming.

Looking back, I believe I have been more than well-equipped for college life. I cannot discount my school that cradled me from kinder to high school, that honed me to be disciplined, critical, and involved.

Of course, my mom, who was my number-one professor, cannot be discounted. She instilled in me a strong passion and love for learning by reading me books while I was still in her belly and by teaching me big words like “dilapidated” at the age of three.

Because of my mom’s efforts, I never had to be forced to study or do my best because it was my natural, automatic default (redundancy for emphasis).
Most of all, I attribute everything to God who so perfectly orchestrates everything in my life to work out for the very best.

**Because I was raised to live in moderation, I do not abuse my time and resources.**

**DEALING WITH PRESSURE**

My interest in technology stemmed from jealousy and pressure. But, as I have mentioned, technology eventually became necessary for gathering and disseminating information, and for keeping up with friends and loved ones.

There was a lot of peer pressure, to be honest. For one, I didn’t really want to have a Twitter account. Facebook served my needs well enough, but because everyone had Twitter, I felt like I needed to create an account as well. Eventually, Twitter benefited me, too. It became a good avenue for me to encourage people with inspiring quotes and Bible passages.

Because I was raised to live in moderation, I do not abuse my time and resources. I do not spend too much time on the Internet anymore. Honestly, I find it a waste of time sometimes; I’d rather read. Unless I’m checking class groups or updates for subjects of events, I do not really stay online.

But I’m still a teenager, so I enjoy tweeting, posting pictures on Instagram, and changing my profile picture once in a while. I don’t spend time stalking other people or visiting different websites. I was also brought up to have strong convictions, so no matter how much pressure I am under, my values do not get easily swayed anymore. There are a multitude of ideas being fed to people through the Internet and I’m happy to be certain of where I stand. I know what to believe in and what not to get into.

I’m now in college, and I have gone through so many things in life. Technology has played a huge part in my life. Though many detriments can come out of gadgets, I’m happy to say that by the way I have been raised by my family and by the examples they set, and by the grace of God, I am able to brave the pressures of society and to use technology to its fullest positive potential.

---

**Bam Aguirre and Family**

TOWARD EXCELLENCE

Coming from a family of achievers worked to Gerard “Gerry” and Ma. Teresa “Bam” Aguirre’s advantage as it provided a template for raising their three sons to be responsible individuals who all excelled in school.

At a very young age, the parents instilled in their children the love of learning by introducing them to toys that are engaging in their simplicity but complex enough to challenge and stimulate their mind into exploring.
Gaming consoles like the Xbox and PlayStation were a no-no in their home. Both Gerry and Bam saw them more as a hindrance to growth than something that would boost their children’s development. Bam observed that these gadgets merely improved children’s motor skills with the hands doing robot-like actions that consisted of pushing buttons to create certain movements. She felt that there was not much room for creative and critical thinking that would sharpen their children’s intelligence.

The only computer games that they encouraged were educational in nature like SimCity, which involved creating their own cities and communities. Toys were limited to Lego, which engaged both minds and hands. Toy guns and plastic superhero figures were discouraged in the house.

Their children’s exposure to gaming was limited to playing with consoles at the homes of neighbors, friends, or cousins. Instead of investing in mindless toys or gadgets, Gerry and Bam gave their boys a monthly allowance for books to foster the love for reading. Rewards for good grades were always a great meal and a book.

TV viewing and computer time were restricted to one hour a day. The computer was placed in the home office, making it accessible for the whole family.

It was easy for Bam to implement this rule until the time came when teachers started giving homework through the Internet. Everything went haywire after that, especially when downloading movies and TV series became a trend that made it difficult for the children to resist.

The parents dealt with this by discussing the content of the films and TV series with the children to make sure that their values remained intact despite the onslaught of diverse and even weird ideas espoused by media.

The boys learned to discern what is of value and what is not, what is trashy and what is worth watching. Open communication within the family is vital so that both parents keep in touch with their sons’ thoughts, feelings, actions, and most importantly their moral compass. Once they sense danger signals, they can take the appropriate measures to guide their sons.

The boys were introduced to gadgets when they were in high school. They received iPods (for music and movies) as gifts on special occasions, or they saved up for these.

The youngest son, Angelo, received a Kindle e-reader, because he garnered second honors in third year. Being an avid reader and budding writer, Angelo loves the Kindle, because it enables him to read on the go.

However, limits are still set with gadget use within the household. No cell phones or other gadgets are allowed at the dinner table. Occasionally, it is Bam who violates this rule and her boys jokingly remind her of it. She admits that adults are just as guilty as teens in allowing gadgets to take over their lives.

One thing that puzzles Bam is when she sees her boys wearing earphones while working on the computer while the TV is on. She cannot understand why they choose to study amid the noise at Starbucks!
Instead of investing in mindless toys or gadgets, Gerry and Bam gave their boys a monthly allowance for books to foster the love for reading.

Much as she would want them to be free from distractions when they are studying, they have always had good grades despite these distractions.

Both alumni of the Ateneo de Manila University, Gerry and Bam live the Jesuit principle “man for others” and impart the same to their sons. Special occasions like Christmas are opportunities for sharing with the less-privileged; spending lavish gifts for one another is discouraged.

The boys’ birthdays start with a visit to a charitable institution, a hospital ward for children, or a correction house/prison where they bring simple treats to cheer up the confined.

Character development is given equal importance with academic success. Simplicity of lifestyle has taught the boys to be prudent. On occasions that Bam could not take them to school, they either took a tricycle or walked the distance.

The achievements that the boys have attained through the years are fruits of Gerry and Bam’s joint efforts at parenting, the inspiration they provide, and their living what they teach.

Eldest son Mick, an Ateneo Business Management graduate, now works at the Department of Finance. In his college junior year, he spent a term in Macau. In 2007, he got a scholarship from JG Summit to study Mandarin and Chinese Culture at the Beijing Language and Culture University for one year. These enriching experiences exposed Mick to a different culture and language, and gave him a taste of independence.

Middle son Kim Patrick (“Kippy”) studied at the Singapore Management University under an ASEAN scholarship. He has a degree in Business Management, major in Marketing and Finance. The decision for Kippy to study abroad involved an arduous family process of weighing the pros and cons. But with his parents’ guidance, encouragement and support throughout his four years away from home, Kippy was able to hurdle the challenges that came his way. He is now a management trainee at Nestlé Philippines.

Like his two elder brothers who were in the honors program at the Ateneo High School, Angelo is now a senior, actively involved in various school organizations. He is currently the secretary-general of the Council of Student Organizations and the head of SEALS (Students of Excellence, Action, Leadership and Service).

Bam left the corporate world and chose to be a full-time mother when Mick was born. She was an active parent representative when the boys were in grade school and is very supportive of school programs.

Gerry is a banker and keeps long working hours. Nevertheless, he makes an effort to be present in the lives of the boys as much as he can and spends his weekends engaged in activities with them.
Now that Mick and Kippy are busy with their careers, and Angelo with school and extracurricular activities, meals are very precious times that the whole family enjoys. Holidays are spent together as often as their time and finances will allow. The Aguirres’ well thought-out approach to parenting which they carried out with firmness and love is indeed worthy of emulation.

DEEPER READING


College of Mass Communications, University of the Philippines. (1999). *Your guide to kiddie TV viewing*. Manila: UNICEF.


about it. NY: Touchstone.


Chapter Two
Fast and Instant,
Bored and Boring
The World Unplugged

IN OUR SURVEY, almost 90 percent of students strongly agree or agree with the statement: “I am bored.” This reflects the results in other surveys, such as the World Unplugged Study. When around 1,000 students from ten countries were asked to refrain from any media use for just one day, many of them found the experiment extremely boring, to say the least.

An American student says, “My twenty-four hours without media was, without a doubt, the most boring day of my life.”

Many students could not even last an hour before boredom set in.

A student from China says, “After fifteen minutes without using media, my sole feeling about this can be expressed in one word: Boring.”

A student from the United Kingdom says, “The journey to meet my classmates was a very boring and long one, a twenty-minute bike ride with no iPod!”

Another student from the United Kingdom says, “Within half an hour of ‘turning myself off’ I had eaten three bits of toast and half a tub of ice cream simply through boredom.”

A student from Lebanon says, “I went to the gym at 6:30 and of course, exercising without my iPod was a bit annoying because I kept getting bored and distracted without any upbeat music to motivate me. I stopped after forty-five minutes and went back home to shower.”

A student from Uganda says, “I will have to admit that it was one of the most boring days—yet interesting—in the recent past I can recall. I remember counting almost every passing hour and trust me … the twenty-four hours really seemed like a whole year!”

A student from Lebanon says, “Yes, I knew it would be boring, but it was a lot more boring than I had actually pictured.”

To exacerbate matters, many students did not know how to alleviate their boredom. They could not think of alternative activities to fill their time. This mirrors our survey findings: More than half of students strongly agree or agree with the statement: “I do not know what to do with my time.”

A student from Chile says, “I kept doing the experiment, and I started to become very bored. Tidying up without music from my iPod or the radio or TV to make [sic] me company was so boring. I started to think about things to do without media, and found out that actually I couldn’t think of many.”

A student from Slovakia says, “I laid [sic] on my bed and realized that I’m very bored. I stared at my laptop for at least [a] quarter of [an] hour, but then I got an idea, that I can use this time to improve myself. I started [to] exercise and after ten minutes I gave it up, and was bored again.”

A student from the United Kingdom says, “I realize now I should have attempted to
spend my time without media doing something quite productive. Instead, I chose to sit on my bed and stare at the ceiling, which was such an awful idea now that I think about it.”

School, of course, was terribly boring. A student from Slovakia says, “School was more boring than I could imagine. Students had their heads in their hands, trying just [to] listen to what the teacher is talking about. I almost slept.”

A student from China says, “During the class, feeling bored, I wanted to take out my cell phone to go online, and watch the news, chat on the QQ. But with no mobile phone I can’t do anything. Only sit there.”

A student from the United States says, “I found myself very bored in class as Facebook via my phone or texting usually keeps me occupied during boring lectures.”

**ALREADY PACKAGED**

“Technology, by its very nature, puts children in a box, a very bright, shiny, and fun box to be sure, but a box nonetheless,” says American psychologist and new-media expert Jim Taylor in his book, *Raising Generation Tech*. “This box is based on technology’s necessity to restrict the options it programs into software.”

We tend to believe that technology opens the doors of the world to us, and to a big extent, it does.

But the packaged shows and games are just that—already packaged, leaving little to our imagination. Thus, our kids tend to become consumers rather than creators.

Their creativity suffers, and eventually, they become bored.

Viewed in this light, even video games, believe it or not, become boring after a time.

A high-school student in a local exclusive boys’ school says, “Last year, I used to play a lot of video games. But now I am also bored with them!”

Why? “Because games are all the same thing. We level up, sure, but after a while, it is the same kind of battles, the same kind of rewards.”

**SHUTTING OUT THE WORLD**

Taylor has interviewed American children and teens who constantly wear earbuds, and found that they do so for various reasons.

One, because everyone else is doing so.

Two, to shut out the world, because they dread auditory overload, especially in cities.

Three, because they depend on earbuds and music for stimulation.

“Because they’ve been connected from a very early age and their parents may have encouraged them to use technology to entertain and placate them,” says Taylor, “this generation of children may have never gained the ability to be bored, to just be alone and unstimulated with themselves, or have learned how to keep themselves occupied without being tethered to technology.”
Once we unplug ourselves, it is possible for us to appreciate and engage the real world more fully.

Four, to block out their confusing thoughts and feelings.

“Music can act as makeshift self-medication, artificially generating positive emotions,” says Taylor, “whether excitement (e.g., heavy metal), contentment (e.g., classical), or inspiration (e.g., theme from Rocky) or even ‘misery loves company’ emotions, such as anger (hip-hop) and melancholy (country).”

Five, to avoid truly interacting with other people.

What can go wrong then?

“Without the ongoing experience of children’s own thoughts and emotions, the self-awareness and self-control that are born from spending time inside of one’s own head aren’t allowed to develop,” says Taylor. “Children simply don’t get to know themselves and, in this absence, are unable to fully gain confidence in who they are or mastery over their inner lives. Without this experience and the accompanying sense of who they are, children may be more vulnerable to external influences on the formation of their self-identity.”

And if children do not know themselves, how can they form lasting bonds with others?

HOOKED ON GAMES

In 2006, a team of Taiwanese psychiatrists and professors, Chih-Hung Ko, Ju-Yu Yen, Cheng-Chung Chen, Sue-Huei Chen, Kuan-yi Wu, and Cheng-Fang Yen, discovered that game-addicted teens have higher scores in novelty seeking endeavors than teens who are not addicted.

Novelty-seeking (NS) is a persistent compulsion to seek out new things.

“Since NS is thought to reflect the brain’s incentive, or behavior activation system and is associated with the dopamine system, individuals with high NS readily engage in new interests and activities but tend to neglect details and are quickly distracted or bored,” the researchers say.

The researchers say that Internet use, especially games, have constantly changing scenes and feedback so much so that adolescents are quickly and highly aroused, and then hooked, on them.

Shockingly, the researchers say, “This is similar to the effect of high NS on substance-use experience,” such as that of drug use.

SIMPLE PLEASURES

The good news is once we unplug ourselves, it is possible for us to appreciate and engage the real world more fully. In the World Unplugged study, many students realized
the value of simpler pleasures.

Such as reading. A student from Uganda says, “The positive of the day was that I actually read a lot of school handouts that I could not have been able to read on a ‘normal’ day.”

Or exercise. A student from China says, “I invited my fellows to play badminton and enjoy the sunshine in our beautiful campus, chatting, laughing, eating, drinking, wandering, etc.”

Or hobbies. A student from Slovakia says, “I dedicated more time to my hobbies and [to my] six-year-old brother, with whom I played cards and other games.”

Or communing with nature. A student from China says, “As soon I got used to it [being without media] I felt happy and unrestrained. I had enough time and space to do what I really like. There was no need to worry about other things. No one to disturb me. I could take a walk along the pathways in my school as much as I like. I could sit beside the lake shore to enjoy the nature and the beauty of the lakes and mountains. [I could] bring a book with me. It couldn’t be better in my heart.”

Or simply, peace. A student from Hong Kong says, “This experiment also gave me an opportunity to live in a more silent world where I could find more peace. I shut down all media devices and stayed away from them so I could enjoy a one-day peace not connected to anyone.”
Life’s Too Short to Be Bored

By Scott Lee Chua

High school student, Xavier School

I have heard this line too many times in more than ten years: “I’m so bored.”

That word has expanded in definition to mean a plethora of emotions.

The real meaning of boredom is having done something that used to be fun over and over again until it has lost its appeal, like checking Facebook every five minutes. (Really, what do you expect to happen in just five minutes?)

The solution is both simple and elegant: Stop. Find something else to do.

But more often than not, “I’m bored” means “I’m too lazy to find something else to do aside from complaining that I’m bored.” The voice in your head pesters, “There are much more exciting things to do than … this.” This can be replaced with “listen to a lecture,” “stay at home,” or “do chores.”

The thing is everything gets boring after a while. When school gets boring, you want summer to hurry up already. But it’s not too long before summer gets boring for you, too.

If you’re really feeling lazy, then sleep. Sleep or watch a movie you enjoy. That’s not boredom, that’s relaxation.

Sometimes boredom covers up for procrastination, like when all you can do for next day’s big test you haven’t studied at all for is putter around and tweet, “I’m so bored. LOL.”

If you really were bored, you would rather study than do nothing. But you’re not. So I still recommend studying.

The last type of boredom is, “There’s nothing to do.” This one does not exist. Literally. How can it even exist? There is always something to do. Bored in class? Try listening or taking notes to wake yourself up. Bored at home? Start reading that novel for the next semester, ride your bike outside, or just sleep.

Bored during summer? How can you be bored during summer? What happened to all those things you wanted to do, all the hobbies you wanted to try?

Do what you really enjoy, be that a sport or an instrument or a craft. You will never get bored with the things you’re truly passionate about. Even if you’re not allowed to go out with friends (for some years, I wasn’t), invite them over to your house.

Or just entertain yourself. “Nothing at home” means you just haven’t looked close enough. Cook, sew, dig, saw, hammer, draw, write, cut, fold, play, sleep.

Life’s too short to be bored.
We Want It Now

INSTANT GRATIFICATION is the rule in cyberspace, for good or for ill.

We can research and access homework aids with the click of a mouse, without having to look things up in the library. Certainly, search engines are often convenient and efficient for learning.

But sites like Wikipedia and those that end in .com, .org, or .net, while popular at best, may not be totally accurate, and at worst, extremely biased. And if we become used to easy answers, we shrug off the chance to really think deeply and analyze issues.

How can we learn to ponder and reflect, for and by ourselves?

We can watch movies and TV shows anytime, anywhere. Again this can be an advantage to those who miss these shows when they are in school or at work.

But watching shows by ourselves is frankly, not as much fun. After all, part of the thrill of going to the cinema, despite the expensive ticket prices, is the chance to rejoice or commiserate with others, to join in a shared experience.

In the past, psychologists used to warn against excessive TV watching (actually, they still do). Now with the accessibility of media, children do not even have to negotiate TV schedules with family, and with each having his or her own gadget, they never really have to learn the give-and-take that is such a crucial part of life.

How can they then learn to wait a while and work things out with others?

As media exponentially expands, paradoxically, the ways to isolate ourselves further increases. A Filipino child therapist says, “At least in the past, when the home only has one TV, the whole family gathers to watch the same show, laughing or crying together. Now Dad has his laptop, Mom her iPhone, brother his iPad, sister her cell—they are all viewing different things!”

DELAYED MATURATION

Our prefrontal cortex (just behind the forehead) is the seat of planning, decision making, weighing choices, and thinking through actions. But this area does not fully develop until well past the teenage years, so it is not surprising that many teens are extremely impulsive. They tend to act before they think.

In pre-technology days, there was a time lapse when children could make decisions more judiciously. For example, when a teenage girl is mad at her friend, she has time to steam, vent, and reflect on the reasons why the friendship has gone sour, and perhaps even change her course of action. Instead of immediately yelling at her friend, which is the instinctive thing to do, she can simmer down and consider an honest but better way of dealing with the problem.
Sixty percent of students strongly agree or agree with the statement: “I am restless, jittery, hyper.”

Things are different today. With the ease of posting on Facebook or online chatting, many children and teens give in to the temptation to vent their anger thoughtlessly, immediately, without concern for the feelings of others.

“Technology discourages children from thinking and deliberation, and it promotes them in acting on their most base impulses, emotions, and needs, such as anger, fear, or need for approval,” says American psychologist and new-media expert Jim Taylor in his book, *Raising Generation Tech*. “Children can make regrettable decisions more quickly, be caught in badly conceived acts more readily, and be publicly humiliated before a far broader audience than ever before.”

Once the damage has swiftly been done, seldom can the hurts or misunderstandings be as easily assuaged.

In our survey, 60 percent of students strongly agree or agree with the statement: “I am restless, jittery, hyper.” Forty percent strongly agree or agree with the statement: “I have a short attention span.”

**MODELING**

Are we good role models for our children? Do we text during family dinners, with the excuse that work cannot wait? Do we complain as we try to download the latest show from BitTorrent (never mind that this may be illegal), grumbling that the Internet connection is too slow?

Children learn best from our actions, not so much from our lectures. Let us show them that we can turn off the cell phone during dinner, family time, and even holidays. Let us engage them in discussing which movie to watch together over the weekend, and help them to manage schedules accordingly.

What about stuffing our kids with electronics “to make them behave”?

Taylor warns us against the “twenty-first century expediency [becoming] the default mode for raising children.”

“Instead of talking to or playing with [our] children or helping them find something to do on their own that might allay their frustration, boredom, or whining,” says Taylor, “[we] just pull out [our] iPhone and hand it to [our] children.”

The result? Children who are prone to technology addiction early, children who are easily bored, children who do not have the initiative to figure out how to deal with negative emotions.

There’s more. Children who cannot delay gratification. The ability to do so has been linked to positive behaviors in teens and adults, such as higher grades, less alcohol and drug use, and less addictive tendencies.

But when we immediately give iPads to our kids in order to placate them, they will
never learn how to delay rewards for a later time.

The saddest of all is when we keep on shoving digital devices to our kids to keep them quiet and still, or entertained, we are raising our kids to not have respect for us.

“Children may not learn that other people’s time is valuable and that parents have other responsibilities beyond their children,” says Taylor. “Children may fail to realize that respecting others can mean sitting and waiting patiently until their parents finish what they’re doing.”

**When we keep on shoving digital devices to our kids to keep them quiet and still, or entertained, we are raising our kids to not have respect for us.**

The next time our children whine, let us encourage them to personally deal with their own feelings for a spell, and calmly take them for a walk, read to them, or cuddle them.

Let us disengage from the virtual world from time to time, and live in the flesh-and-blood real world: ride a bike in the park, visit a museum, or walk the dog around the neighborhood.

**AMPLIFIED EFFECTS**

When we are born, a lot of our brain cells lack an outer covering (myelin) which quickly transmits information through neural impulses among cells in the body and the brain. With myelin, communication is up to fifty times faster than without.

However, the process of myelination of most of the brain cells is not finished until we are in middle adulthood, in our mid- or late twenties. To make matters worse, myelin is especially lacking in the prefrontal cortex, which as we have seen, is the brain’s center for decision making, rational behavior, and to some extent, attention.

**We can fight the deterioration of our brains in simple ways.**

This implies that the brains of children and teens are naturally more distractible, less logical, and more prone to irrational behavior.

To exacerbate matters, since these digital natives are the ones who are most immersed in multimedia today, the effects, such as the need for speed and the tendency to be distracted, are amplified.

**REGAIN LIFE**

To counter all these, research says we can do several things. Neuroscientist Michael Merzenich who is based at the University of California in San Francisco, and has long worked on the plasticity of the brain, has shown with ingenious experiments that we can actually develop new neurons as we age.
When brain cells die out as they regularly do, it does not mean we are doomed. We can fight the deterioration of our brains in simple ways.

Let us maintain an active social life in the real world, communing with people in person. Let us challenge our brains by doing unfamiliar things, such as learning a new language, a new musical instrument, or a new puzzle such as Sudoku. Let us exercise more, not just cardiovascular or strength training, but also meditative ones like yoga. Let us eat better, incorporating fresh fruits, vegetables, essential vitamins and minerals in our meals. Let us unplug ourselves from the wired world from time to time.
BREAKING THE BOREDOM BLUES

We have never introduced the words “bored” and “boring” to our kids, seven-year-old Migo and four-year-old Maia. My husband Koots and I believe that once our kids know the meaning of the words and the power behind them, then we would not hear the end of them, since they would be subject to abuse. We figured that they would learn these words from other people, and so we would discuss them when they were ready to understand and able to do something about them.

True to our estimate, when he was in prep, Migo asked me, “Mom, what do you mean by ‘bored’?”

I said to myself, “Oh, this is it!”

I tried to explain in the simplest terms I could. “‘Bored’ means that you cannot find anything to do and cannot think of anything at the moment!”

So Migo started using the word “bored” from then on. But I explained to him that we really do not use it much, because there are lots of things that we can do. Plus, the truth is that it is okay for kids and even adults to be “bored” once in a while, since we can use the time to relax, recharge the body and mind, and to be more creative and energized.

Migo took our advice well, and when I called home one afternoon, I asked Migo what he was up to. Migo casually replied, “Oh here, just being bored!”

I affirmed him for it, thinking that it takes a mindful kid to say that.

But when summer comes, it’s another story. Being bored has a different dimension as all our children’s energies are just concentrated at home.

One day when I was trying to rest after work, Migo and Maia wanted to chat with me. Then they bounced up and down the bed, chanting, “Mom, we’re bored! We’re bored! We’re bored!”

Call it “pester power.”

As tired as I was, I could not pass up that teaching moment. In a non-threatening manner, I casually asked them why they were bored.

Migo said, “There is nothing to do anymore.”

I collected myself. I knew I had to be really creative, since this was a make-or-break moment. So I walked them through the toys in their rooms, storybooks, board games, art supplies, even the bikes outside, among others, and ended by telling them that “we have each other.”

I said, “You see, we have all those, and we are given minds to think and be creative! Given all that you have, it would be good to look for something you can do. You have so much, you can’t be bored!”

I encouraged Migo and Maia to think of activities they would like to do.

Then and there, I decided to strike an agreement with them. Every time they use the word “bored,” we would take away one toy.
Did this tactic work? Yes! Migo used the forbidden word about twice, in different contexts, but no toy has been kept since then. Instead, they attempt to express in other more constructive ways that they want something or that they seem to lack something to do. Discussing alternatives, even bargaining, work much better.

**GADGET DETOX**

While writing this book in June 2013, I placed my kids on a long gadget-detox period. Since summertime was almost over, I wanted them to establish better routines to start the school year right. So about two weeks prior to Migo starting Grade One and Maia starting preschool, we came up with the gadget-detox period. There were some withdrawals and resistance on the first few days, but then these eventually waned. My in-laws live next door to family, and my kids often visit them and play with their gadgets. But now my in-laws are out of the country during this period—the perfect time to detox—since my kids would not have access anytime to their PC and iPad.

For three weeks, Migo did the non-digital activities he listed for himself. At the end of this period, he asked me when he would be allowed to at least watch videos. I had forgotten altogether that we were still on detox!

I commended my son and affirmed his obedience to the rules. I allowed him to have at least twenty minutes a day with the tablet, but only as a treat. After the gadget-detox period, our kids were allowed to watch one video a day, provided that they agreed on what to watch and they had completed their homework. When my in-laws returned from their trip, I told Migo, “See, you survived three weeks without the computer! You are happy and still breathing!”

In an exasperated voice, Migo said, “Yes, Mom, but I really wanted to use the computer!” I have to hand it to Migo and Maia, though. While the gadgets were there for them to use, they have enough self-discipline to abide by the rules.

After the detox period, it became easier for the children to heed our requests or to respond to us whenever we call or speak to them. They do not whine as much when I tell them they cannot have any gadgets. Migo reads more and spends a lot of time on non-digital toys. He reviews for tests by reading his book and answers drills by himself. Maia spends her time doodling and creating things.

Compared to many Filipino children today, my kids are not extremely plugged in. They do use the desktop computer (with adult supervision) and have DVDs and a few opportunities to play on the tablet.

Yet it is still a struggle to manage my children’s digital use. And I know it would be even more of a problem if they are always in front of the computer or the TV. I am always reminded of Queena’s line in her book with psychologist Honey Carandang, The Filipino Children Surviving the World: “When children get used to speed, anything slower—that’s practically everything in life and in school—becomes BORING!”
Boredom: The Forbidden Word

By Mary Rose Fres Fausto

Do your children always say “I’m bored!”? This is one of the lines I hate to hear from my sons. Several times I’ve said, “Do you know that you are responsible for your own boredom? You are bored because you do not know how to use your time well. So the next time you feel bored, do something about it because I don’t want to hear you whining about boredom!”

I think I finally got the message across after repeatedly saying my piece to them because I do not hear this line anymore. But one Saturday afternoon, my youngest who was having a bad day mindlessly blurted out the forbidden line. Unfortunately for him, I was not having a good day myself so I snapped back and asked, “What did you just say?”

Maybe he was really bored that day because he was not his usual alert self and didn’t notice that I was already reprimanding him. Instead, he even answered, “I have been bored since I woke up this morning!” To that I replied, “Oh, you are bored because the moment you woke up, your breakfast was ready and you did not even have to wash your dishes. Then you were free to do whatever you wanted because it’s a Saturday. Lunch came and it was boringly ready again for you to dig in?” My husband was surprised to hear me talk that way. I saw his reaction but I was not about to end what I started.

I then remembered a friend’s childhood story. Like me, her mom also hated the word “bored” so one day when she heard her children (including my friend) say they were bored, she made them clean their inn! It was a big job for the little ones but they could not complain. After that, they learned their lesson well and never said they were bored again, ever!

I thought maybe my words were not as effective as the consequence given by my friend’s mom. Maybe the pain they felt cleaning the inn was a lot more effective. So I thought, what could I ask my bored son to do? We don’t have an inn. Cleaning our house would also be a big job, but our efficient help were already done with for the day. Think! Think! Then with my stern voice I said, “Okay, go to your room, fix and clean up your cabinets. I always hear you complain that your clothes are always mixed up with your brothers’ clothes. Take out everything and arrange them well. From now on all your ironed clothes will not be returned by Ate (our help) to your cabinet because you yourself will get them and fix them so there won’t be any errors. When you’re done, call me because I want to check. Is that clear?” “Yes, Mommy,” was all my son could reply.

When he left our room, my husband said, “Hon, are you having a bad day? I think you overreacted.” I admitted I did and I tried to shake it off. So when my son called me to check his cabinets, I went with a much better mood and we were friends again. Maybe I really needed to be in a bad mood at that moment when I heard him
complain. If I were in a more pleasant mood, I would not have given him the long overdue chore.

My son actually felt proud to have done something productive that afternoon. Moreover, I do not hear the usual complaints like “My favorite shirt is missing…” and of course the forbidden B word!

Most parents help their children avoid boredom by making sure their summer schedules are full. They enroll them in various summer classes. Our family also did the rounds of summer classes like swimming, tennis, kickboxing (which I even joined!), dancing, etc. But we never overbook activities for them during summer. My husband and I believe in the virtue of allowing our children some “no activity” time. We want them to be comfortable with alone time. They can choose their own activity or choose to do nothing. We have a rather funny and not-so-literal term for this: “oras para tumanga” (time to be idle). They can sleep long hours, walk around the village, play basketball with neighbors, play the piano or guitar, do whatever they want to do. It is during free days that they sometimes get creative and end up composing a song, painting on canvas, or writing on their journals. A light summer schedule is very important because it allows children to recharge and fuel up for the challenges of the coming school year.

Teach your children that being alone and not having a structured activity is sometimes good. At a certain age, we can impart to them that not being bored is their own business. Show them that you yourself are comfortable and can be very productive during alone time.

---

The original version of this piece first appeared on Fausto’s blog (www.raisingpinoyboys.com) on March 17, 2011.
How to Manage Boredom

»MINIMIZE EXPOSURE TO UNREALISTIC, EXCESSIVE SPEED

The rule of thumb to consider in addressing our kids’ boredom is that if they become used to the fast-paced media we have exposed them to at earlier ages, this will most likely contribute to the amount of boredom they feel, since real life is not as fast as that on screen.

Many children are used to viewing screens with speedy, almost dizzying scenes and content. And they, consciously or not, look for similar experiences in real life. How many times do our kids and teens say they want “something to happen” right away?

We eventually become our children’s victims with their “I’m bored” chants, since we are, after all, the ones who exposed them to having too much too soon. We need to consider our children’s developmental stages to truly understand what activities are appropriate for them at certain ages.

»PACK A BOREDOM-BUSTING KIT

These days, when we go out with our children, they almost always automatically ask for gadgets so they can stay put. Worse, we even offer gadgets to pacify them even if they do not ask.

Now, this is a chicken-and-egg situation. If we hand over gadgets to our kids while waiting for food when dining out, queuing for hours in the doctor’s clinic, or even listening to the homily during mass, our kids will never learn how to stay put, to keep quiet on their own, or to show respect for others without reminder.

Also, what happens next when the gadget gets lost or broken? Do we solve it with another gadget?

Worst of all, if we try to alleviate our children’s boredom with physical things like gadgets, they will never learn to manage a situation internally. In this sense, being bored can be a positive opportunity to think, to be creative, and to use one’s skills and resources accordingly.

When Ichel’s children Migo and Maia leave the house, she makes sure they have a kit with them. The kids have a bag with small items that can help them pass the time “in case there is nothing for me to do,” as Migo says.

Migo and Maia choose what to pack in their bags, based on their current interests. The staple items in the bags are writing materials. Of course, the parents also check the kits to make sure that the items are not too heavy or can disturb other people.

The usual contents of Migo and Maia’s boredom-busting kits are:

• Small drawing book (5” x 8”) that cost around Php10 in bookstores
• Notepad for them to write on, doodle, or play tic-tac-toe
• Books
• Pens, crayons, pencils
• Small toys, such as Hot Wheels cars for Migo, Lego pieces for Migo and Maia, Strawberry Shortcake dolls with combs and accessories for Maia, magnetic dolls, mini flashlights from party loot bags, bubbles
• Card games
• Binoculars

OFFER ALTERNATIVES TO DIGITAL MEDIA

Aside from or instead of digital media, children need to come up with other ways and means to busy themselves, learn things, have fun, and forget that they are bored. While having screen time is the easiest way to not get bored (at least for a while), our kids can come up with more creative ways of managing their time.

Once, Ichel instituted a gadget-detox program for Migo for a week. It was difficult for him, of course. Ichel’s reasons for this were two-fold: One, school had just started and Migo needed to start the school year on the right track. Two, Ichel and her husband Toots wanted Migo to be more focused and in tune with their wishes, instructions, and concerns.

Mother and son sat down together to list the alternative things to do if he cannot play with any gadget for a week.

Migo listed the following options that the could do to busy himself, learn from, and enjoy:
• Draw
• Read books
• Play with non-digital toys
• Play with Maia
• Ride the bike or scooter
• Listen to music (on CD or radio) which can be shared with Maia, rather than alone on iPod
• Cut paper, or do other arts and crafts
• Water the plants
• Play board games and cards

As a family, we need to discover our children’s interests other than computer games or watching the tube. Exposing them to different activities can nurture innate skills and let them be a more balanced human being.

ENCOURAGE READING

At an early age, Migo and Maia were exposed to board and soft books apt for babies
and toddlers. They soon graduated to storybooks that interest them.

At night, storytelling is a must. When Migo was three years old, he would hold a book and pretend to be telling the story, since he was familiar with what happened on each page. He would do this for us and baby Maia, and then, he eventually did this in front of the class.

At this time, Migo and Maia still like Stage One or Two (basic) storybooks (simple words with pictures). Migo can now read the story by himself, but both kids still like their parents to read to them.

Migo brings books when the family goes out. His favorite books are 100 Questions Filipino Kids Ask and Kids’ World Almanac 2013. Maia prefers books on fairies and princesses, Arthur, and Winnie the Pooh.

Reading is not an activity just for the young.

“Storytelling shouldn’t stop at bedtime for tots,” says Inquirer Lifestyle editor Thelma Sison-San Juan in her article, “With Computers, Smart Phones, and Videogames, Today’s Kids Are Still Bored—So What To Do Now?” “Storytelling between parent and child should go on and on. When a child or even a young adult reads or listens to stories, his/her mind works, the sense of values comes to light and is reinforced. He/she learns of different types of characters, and of the difference between right and wrong, good and evil.”

HELP KIDS DISCOVER THEIR PASSION

Children will not be children if they have not experienced the magic of play, probably the most important psychological need of kids. Play, for kids, is as essential as work is for adults.

In her counseling cases, Ichel has noted that many parents do not allow their children to play much in the backyard, with neighbors, or even with other children outside school. This avoidance might be due to security, safety, or any number of reasons.

Unfortunately, while these children are provided with closets full of toys, parents often lament that their kids would rather play with the PlayStation or the iPad. Almost always, parents give in.

We need to think about our children’s real needs. If our young boys have a lot of pent-up, unused energy, then gaming is not the answer. But running, biking, garage basketball, or street badminton will mostly likely do wonders.

For our girls who love to follow us around the kitchen, then why not ask them to play with their kitchen set, while we give them real uncooked pasta, vegetables, or chocolates to be used in their play? Better still, let them help us in simple cooking, measuring ingredients, kneading dough, or cutting cookies into shapes. Do not fret if they will make a mess. Just make rules for them to clean up whatever mess they have created.

When our children are young, we can sit down with them and play with building blocks, creating dinosaurs, trains, villages. When they are older, we can encourage independent, imaginary play so they can tap into their inner world and gain insights from them. Non-digital play can also help them realize that they can busy themselves, without
being dependent on someone or something.

When kids are older, sports can be a lifesaver.

Sioson-San Juan says, “I enrolled my boys in sports or summer activities that would fill their time, develop their skills and self-confidence—and just as important, leave them exhausted at the end of the day. Perhaps that must be why, to this day, they are fitness junkies, and each has his own sport/fitness obsession.”

In our survey, 27 percent of students say they never play sports. Sixteen percent say they never exercise.

**ENCOURAGE NON-DIGITAL INTERACTION WITH OTHERS**

Playing with friends can never replace virtual time. If our kids have playmates nearby, then set play dates. Not only will our children not be bored, but they will also learn the ins and outs of playing by the rules and socializing with others.

Migo and Maia are blessed to have six active and playful De Guzman girls as cousins. With ages ranging from three to nine, the cousins live just three houses away from Migo and Maia. During school days, they mark Fridays as play date, 3 to 6 p.m., since all of them do not have homework.

During summer vacation, Migo and the girls play together almost every day. Ichel’s friend Nina De Guzman-Aseron, mom to three of the girls, says that her kids have toys, but that they prefer interactive play, “since they have each other to play with.”

Even if Migo is the only boy in the group, he is not conscious of this fact, since the activities the girls engage in are the ones that interest him too. Their play ranges from tag (*mataya-taya*), hide-and-seek, *patintero*, Ice-Ice Water, card games, doing origami, biking in the streets (while the *yayas* watch over them), swimming in the inflatable pool. Mommy Nina even taught everybody to play *tumbang-preso* and *piko*!

The only gadget used is the Xbox Kinect in the family room so they can move, dance, and race with each other.

**PROVIDE OPPORTUNITIES FOR CREATIVITY**

While many children say that arts and crafts are boring, it is when they see our own inhibitions about allowing creativity to flourish that they unconsciously feel impeded to engage in these activities. Some parents are very particular about keeping the house clean, so they do not let their kids get messy, and insist that coloring and art materials should be used properly.

Ichel confesses that at first, she was one of those parents. But then she saw the delight on her kids’ faces as they busied themselves molding clay, using crayons and paints in coloring books, cutting colored paper, drawing, or creating something out of cardboard boxes or old paper bags.

So she asked her kids to put on a kiddie apron and gave them placemats if the activity would be extremely messy. She learned to ignore the pieces of molding clay on the floor
and the excess paper strips near the trash bin. Later on though, everyone had to help clean up.

Migo likes doing crafts related to transportation, while Maia can turn anything at home into something else like wrapping ribbons as a belt or props for dancing, coffee cup sleeves as socks, old baby headbands as bracelets.

Our children will not expand their creativity if we are too stringent with order and cleanliness. Ichel would rather have the mess from her kids’ explorations and creativity, rather than a house that is spick-and-span because her kids are glued to the tube, doing nothing else.

“I would rather see the wonder and awe in their eyes as they play and create,” Ichel says, “rather than spaced-out eyes when they are too wired.”

Inquirer writer Pam Pastor has interviewed Filipino parents regarding ways to help their kids manage boredom. A mother encourages her son to ride the school bus to meet friends he can interact and play with, in games such as patintero and shato.

Another mom endorses outside activities such as volleyball and skateboarding, which the whole family can enjoy. Several moms mention art, music, and reading.

**DEVELOP SELF-HELP AND HOUSEHOLD SKILLS**

In our rush to hone only the academic skills, and in our desire to indulge our children, we tend to overlook two important skills for children to learn: self-help and household skills.

These two areas are included in Ichel’s interview questions for parents who are having problems with their preschool and grade-school kids. Are your children able to tend to themselves in terms of grooming, eating, and fixing toys and schoolbags? Do you ask your children to do appropriate house chores? Consider again the developmental stages and what children can be expected to do at certain stages. These will be your guide in figuring out whether you are doing too much for them or overlooking tasks that they can already do themselves.

These tasks not only alleviate boredom, but they are useful and essential. For instance, for young kids during bath time, allow them to play with some toys in the tub, such as a bucket and a dipper *(timba at tabo)*. Stay on the side to ensure safety. After play, train the kids, little by little, to bathe by themselves.

In their daily routine, encourage them to do small tasks: fixing the bed, putting away clothes and shoes, watering plants, sweeping leaves, filling the water pitcher, or setting the table. Let them help out in the small tasks you do, like baking, folding laundry, or sorting through files. Not only are these teaching moments, but also a chance for you to chat and bond while doing house chores.

Sioson-San Juan suggests taking care of pets. “Who can resist a lovable pup? Use a pet to teach your kids responsibility. House-training, feeding, bathing a puppy can keep the kids occupied. Just make sure they don’t pass on the chores to the yaya.

“The pet can teach your kids compassion and empathy in a way you can’t, believe it
or not,” Sioson-San Juan continues. “A pet taps into your kid’s nurturing side. Pets and plants. I remember what a prominent mother once said—she does gardening with her sons sometimes to teach them how to nurture.”

Pastor mentions a mom of three who has only one answer when her kids complain of boredom. “You’re bored? Clean your room.” Now the kids never complain that they are bored.

If children are allowed to live at the speed of real life rather than the screen, then it would be easier for them to ease their boredom. If we tap into their inner potential and creativity and they understand the value of the world around them, then they will know how to engage themselves, and there will be no chance for them to be bored.

Before we give in to the convenient sitter—the screen—we need to gauge the value of activity they wish to do, and see if this will genuinely address their boredom and frustration. If they are antsy, perhaps we can calm them with a snack, a nap, soothing music, or a hot bath.

**LAST RESORT: DEAL WITH IT**

According to Filipino child psychologist Ma. Lourdes “Honey” Carandang, perhaps the ultimate way to deal with the boredom is to let children stay with the experience, in the hopes that they can learn something from it.

“Once, when a child told me he was bored, I asked him to stay (feeling ‘bored’), for thirty minutes,” says Carandang. “Eventually, he came to a realization that alleviated his boredom.

“Our world today leaves us little space to think and to be,” Carandang continues. “Much of our interaction is shallow and superficial. Our youth get bored a lot, and to escape boredom, they turn to doing a myriad of things. But what they really need is being, not doing. They need to reflect on what is meaningful for them. All of us need depth and meaning in our lives. And we can start by finding quiet time to reflect on our own.”

Sioson-San Juan says, “As far as I know, no child has died of boredom. Today’s parents—feeling guilty perhaps because they’re too busy—can be ‘over-nurturing.’ They pamper, spoil, and overcompensate for their lack of time.”

Ateneo psychologist Lota Teh agrees. “Today’s parents think that providing everything for their children is the way to show that they love them. But such indulgence can be harmful to growth.”

“Life brings blessings and deprivations,” says Sioson-San Juan. “Life can be thrilling. Sometimes life sucks. So, deal with it, we should tell our kids. Tweens and teens should be made to face boredom, whether they like it or not. Why should we shield them from it? That should be their early experience of life. Life is not a video game. You can’t zap away what you don’t like.”

Boredom is a state of mind. “Only when we rely on shallow and superficial things do we get bored,” says Carandang.

Our youth need to know that the world is theirs to hold and mold, and that there is no
room for boredom.
BEYOND THE SELF

“For kids born into privileged families, perhaps the only way for them to overcome boredom would be to find their passion,” says National Scientist Fr. Bienvenido F. Nebres, former Ateneo president who has taught high school and now teaches in college.

“What experiences make sense to them? What do they love? New things such as gadgets, clothes, games, or even travel may not satisfy them, because they can always have them whenever they want.”

Nebres speaks of the grandchildren of his friend and former assistant Vina Relucio who have found activities they are passionate about.

“One granddaughter spends hours dancing ballet, and certainly she is not bored at all,” says Nebres.

NOT NEW

The problem of boredom is not new, says Ateneo philosophy professor Eduardo Calasanz.

More than a century ago, the French sociologist Emile Durkheim had already echoed the German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer, warning that “even when the will is satisfied, the satiation is temporary and fleeting, for humans will suffer boredom until a new longing sets in,” as Texas A & M University sociologist Stjepan Meštrović puts it in his book Durkheim and Postmodern Culture.

For kids born into privileged families, perhaps the only way for them to overcome boredom would be to find their passion.

In 1893, in his book, The Division of Labor in Society, Durkheim wrote with great perceptiveness about the problem of satiation in the modern world of that era: “There is a host of pleasures open to us today that more simple natures knew nothing about. But … we are exposed to a host of sufferings spared them, and it is not all certain that the balance is to our advantage…. Indeed, if the savage knows nothing of the pleasures of bustling life, in return he is immune to boredom, that monster of cultivated minds … if we are open to more pleasures, we are also open to more pain.”

According to Meštrović, “boredom and a blasé indifference” are the usual reactions to media, particularly, in those times, advertisements.

“The mental, representational life of humans may well possess certain limits for withstanding stimulation, beyond which pain, boredom, and pathology will result,” Meštrović says.

What would Durkheim make of our world today, filled not just with advertisements and old media but also the tumultuous cacophony of the online world?
REACH OUT TO OTHERS

Ultimately, the most genuine and effective cure for boredom is to truly reach out to others, to go beyond the self.

Ateneo Grade School has partnered with the Blue Plate for Better Learning Feeding Program of the Ateneo Center for Educational Development, which feeds the most malnourished students in four Quezon City public schools.

Primary students in the Ateneo are encouraged to make little sacrifices such as giving up snacks during recess in order to contribute funds to feed their less-privileged counterparts in the public schools. Some Ateneo boys volunteer to serve in the central kitchen of Blue Plate when they do not have class.

Many Ateneans continue to interact with the public-school students and are moved to do whatever they can to help more.

Ateneo High School requires its seniors to participate in the Tulong Dunong program, where every week they tutor public-school students. This is a win-win situation, where both parties benefit. The Ateneo boys help the public-school students deal with academic matters, but the former also learn to put themselves in the latter’s shoes, finding meaning and satisfaction in truly going beyond themselves.

Ultimately, the most genuine and effective cure for boredom is to truly reach out to others, to go beyond the self.

The same happens in Xavier School’s Para Kay Kiko summer program, open to any high-school student willing to give up a month of summer vacation (May) toward helping public-school students in San Juan.

Going beyond self-absorption is also one reason why at the university level, Ateneo requires all students to immerse themselves in the lives of the disadvantaged for a while, before they can graduate.

OPEN OUR CHILDREN’S EYES

As parents, we can do our part to not just open our children’s eyes to the realities of an inequitable society, but also in the process to eradicate any inclination toward anomie (personal unrest or alienation) or boredom.


Scott gives his share of the royalties from his travel books directly to Erda. He does not stop there. He has interacted with the students, from watching a play with them to convincing Tsinoy TV to sponsor a Christmas party for them. With foreign and local students in an Ignatian Leadership Program, Scott has tried out some of the courses Erda
offers (his favorite is learning how to fix a car).

Nesy’s son Ged is currently teaching at the Ateneo Grade School, and has found so much fulfillment in his mission that he intends to take a master’s program in education. Maribel’s children Raph, Dav, and Gica accompany her on parenting talks, disclosing their own experiences in the hope of inspiring their fellow young people.

Our children are seldom, if ever, bored. They have too many things to do, and too many people to help.
Why Gaming Gets Boring

By Kester T. D. G. Ng Wee

High school student, Xavier School

It all starts with the realization that we can do so much more with our time than just play video games. The thing is, it’s not something that we can just tell other kids and expect them to understand. We have to realize it for ourselves. We have to develop our own sense of responsibility for our life.

Sometimes when we play, it feels so robotic, like we’re doing the same thing every time, shooting or tapping or whatever, so of course, it gets boring.

I think parents have to be strict once in a while to avoid what happened to dumb kids who tell their mothers “I hate you” just because they want the kids to stop playing. If kids are forced to stop, for like five days, as in no computer use at all, they will realize that they can live without it, although they won’t admit anything to their parents and other people. But they will realize it for themselves, which is more important.

So parents, this is what I can say: Just adjust to whatever you think is right until your kid plays less.
In a Nestlé short film entitled *Unplugged*, a blazing yellow sun shines brightly in the middle of a blue sky, a typical summer day. Something tells the kids: Get up, get out of your seat, enjoy the things waiting out there for us to discover.

We teenagers tend to overlook things. We take things for granted and always ask for what’s new and what’s hip, even though we have been blessed with so much already.

The film shows three simple steps for us to try and get rid of boredom without the use of gadgets.

**You must disconnect to reconnect.**

Step 1: Disconnect. In a life full of Twitter mentions and Instagram likes, it is easy to miss out on what is happening around us. Look around you, learn more about yourself, your family, and friends, without gadgets.

Step 2: Reconnect. No, do not get out the gadgets again, but to reconnect with nature. About twenty years ago, the iPhone was not yet invented, so kids chased each other under the warmth of the sun or took cover under the tallest narra tree when it became too hot.

“You must disconnect to reconnect,” an old man says in the film. Sometimes taking a leap backward can teach us the most valuable lessons in life.

Step 3: Love. In the film, God’s creation is still visible even in the dark, as the fireflies flit around the kids. Not only should we admire the Earth’s splendor, but we should treasure every moment.

Creation hiding in plain sight is the most beautiful thing in this world.

The best things in life are just under our noses, waiting to be discovered. Who knows what new adventures hold for us? As long as we disconnect, reconnect, and love like we’re supposed to do.
Active, Not Passive Learning

MANY OF US believe that only computers can hold student attention and motivation.

On the contrary, research has shown that digital technologies tend to fragment our attention, and even if kids initially get excited with computers, such enthusiasm wanes when they do not receive even more stimulation.

Without even more entertaining digital technologies, kids tend to find the world boring.

We need to “cultivate the notion that learning is inherently interesting, rather than something so boring that one must be externally rewarded to do it,” says Healy. “‘Skill development’ rewards, such as giving more advanced problems or assignments once the student has mastered easier ones, tend to increase motivation. They are likely to increase confidence and help a student learn to take constructive intellectual risks.”

If we really must use computers for learning, then we need to ensure that the child is active rather than passive. Instead of just pushing buttons for trivial choices (such as “Which color dress will you wear for the game?”), children are better off with options that target critical thinking (such as “What ending do you prefer for this story?”).

It would be best to refrain from computer programs that give trivial rewards for trivial tasks (such as “dancing and singing stars” for clicking on a button to make a figure smile). Psychology research has shown that when children find a task innately pleasing, they would be turned off if we insist on providing them with external rewards.

WHAT COMPUTERS CAN’T DO

In her book Failure to Connect, American educational psychologist Jane Healy lists the misconceptions about the power of the computer. There are many things the computer cannot do.

Computers cannot automatically make us smarter. And just because kids seem to find computer use very easy does not mean that they are intelligent, because programs are not hard to learn.

We tend to believe that kids should be exposed to technology early, lest they fall behind in some nebulous way. But according to Healy, using computers now does not prepare kids for radically different technologies in the future.

Traditional and simple activities such as board games, reading books, engaging in hobbies “have a solid research track record for improving academic skills,” Healy says.

Unfortunately, in our survey, 65 percent of respondents say they never play board games such as Scrabble, Jeopardy, and the like.

Using computers is definitely more expensive, and research is mixed regarding their effectiveness. What ultimately counts is the quality of human interaction, between parent and child, teacher and pupil.
STEVE JOBS OF THE FUTURE

Education professor Mark Warschauer of the University of California at Irvine is a technology enthusiast and the author of the book, *Laptops and Literacy: Learning in the Wireless Classroom*. Warschauer studied ten schools in California and Maine (Maine is one of the first to embrace laptops for its schools) from 2003 to 2005.

Even Warschauer has not discovered any evidence that laptops can increase test scores. Two of the schools in his study have since given up on laptops, after finding out that they cause more problems without improving student performance.

However, Warschauer is not giving up. He believes laptops can help when students are more mature in learning.

“Where laptops and Internet use make a difference are in innovation, creativity, autonomy and independent research,” Warschauer tells *The New York Times*. “If the goal is to get kids up to basic standard levels, then maybe laptops are not the tool. But if the goal is to create the George Lucas and the Steve Jobs of the future, then laptops are extremely useful.”

GAP TIME

If we are constantly immersed in technology, creativity suffers. According to Joe Kraus, a partner at Google Ventures who specializes in mobiles and games, the number-one place that we get insight is in the shower.

Why? “In the shower, there’s not much else to do,” Kraus says. “We’re relaxed. Our mind wanders but it’s not constantly being bombarded with new information (at least until we can take our phones in the shower which I’m sure is being worked on). The shower time is *gap* time. Time for our minds to make subtle connections and insights. Creativity requires *gap* time.”

If we are connected 24/7, *gap* time is lost.

Kraus gives everyday examples. “You’re eating lunch with a friend and they excuse themselves to the restroom. A gap. Now, you pull out your phone because being unstimulated makes you feel anxious. Waiting time in a line at the bank? Used to be a gap. Now it’s an opportunity to send an e-mail or a text.”

Kraus concludes, “We didn’t think *gap* time and ‘boredom’ were valuable. Now that we’re losing it, we get a sense of just how valuable it was.”

Twitter super-user Angela Clarke describes a typical day to former UK journalist-turned-technology-consultant Frances Booth, included in the latter’s book *The Distraction Trap*: “I tweet 28 times a day, on average, on my personal Twitter account (so a phone app tells me). I’m a writer, and I also have a work account, which I set up to promote my latest book. Here, I tweet 11 times a day … There’s no repetition between the two accounts, so I post 39 times a day in total. The average tweet contains 15 words, which means I write … 585 words per day on Twitter. That’s a quarter of a whole book chapter. That’s a whole newspaper column. I have a problem.”
Clarke says that her Twitter use is invaluable, especially when she comments on historical events such as the 2012 London Olympics.

But Clarke concludes, “The problem is, while I was posting 140-character comments on historical events, I wasn’t working. Think of all the things my imaginary friends and I could have done if we weren’t mucking about on Twitter! Instead of commenting on history, we could have made it.”

ENGAGE THE REAL WORLD

We have no choice. We have to ensure that our children engage the real world. Instead of banning media, we need to counteract it with a dose of reality.

We need to “balance sensory stimulation with heavy work, to increase attention and reduce sensory overload (fright, flight, fight),” says American pediatric-occupational therapist Cris Rowan in her article, “The Need to Move—The Impact of Sedentary Technology Use on Children.”

For instance, as parents, we can allow our kids one hour of computer gaming for every two hours of heavy work (biking, gardening, cleaning the house). Schools can ask students to do resistance exercises in class, such as hand pushing or pulling on desks, or playing tug-of-war in gym class.

Sensory overload can be reduced by decreasing visual and auditory clutter at home and in school, creating quiet places for children to think.
During the October 2013 semestral break, more than thirty boys, with seven parents, went to a campsite beside Pantabangan Lake in Nueva Ecija. For most, it was their first real venture into the natural world.

“The boys’ jaws dropped,” says Vicky Tantoco, whose son Paco is president of Ateneo de Manila High School’s Section 4-B. “They gazed at the lake, the grass, the trees, in awe.”

“Some boys literally gasped in delight,” says Mari Delfin, whose son Julian is Paco’s classmate. “They rolled around on the grass. Some boys walked barefoot, wanting to feel the grass on their feet.”

“We discouraged all forms of electronic entertainment which promote isolation,” says Tantoco. “Laptop computers, portable DVD players, game consoles, iPads, iPods, MP3 players.”

Before the trip, some boys had asked, “What are we going to do if we don’t have video games?”

Many things, it turned out. The boys ran, swam, kayaked, threw Frisbees. They slid down a hill on a giant canvas slide, held an archery-versus-slingshot competition, played Capture the Flag. School cliques (jocks, nerds, shy ones) dissolved as the boys “found themselves in seamless play,” says Tantoco.

“I’m so happy!” yelled one boy, running with abandon on the grass.

The boys hiked in the forest, their footsteps uncertain. “We parents led the way, showing that nature was nothing to fear,” says Delfin. “Some boys asked if there were piranha in the lake,” says Tantoco. “They had watched too many movies.”

In between activities, the boys would just sit, taking in the land, water, sky. They rocked in the hammock, read paperbacks, played cards, went for a massage under the trees. They talked for hours with each other, face to face, creating bonds to last a lifetime.

At night, they toasted hotdogs and marshmallows over the fire, to the strums of the guitar and the ukulele. At first, some boys did not want to go to sleep. “We don’t want to miss any second,” said one. But then they would sleep for hours, side by side, under the stars.

At Mass in a grassy amphitheater, all the boys hugged the parent chaperones, thanking them fervently for the experience. “It’s the parents’ choice,” says Tantoco, “whether to leave their kids with gadgets or bring them out to nature, where they can appreciate things bigger than themselves, something our young people should learn.”

“No one complained, no one was bored,” adds Delfin. “Parents don’t believe that their children can survive without gadgets. But we have proven that it is possible to go for days without electronics. The Philippines is so beautiful, it’s just waiting to be explored.
Trips can be quite cheap—even cheaper than many gadgets!”
Adventures of a Blogger Mom

By Jennifer Joy C. Ong
Mother of two, blogger

When our daughter Naima Clarisse was younger, I was quite strict about her access to digital media and TV. Before she turned two, my husband Stanley and I allowed her a maximum of fifteen minutes of TV a day. This was easier to manage because Naima was then an only child.

Now that Naima is five, she has started to watch more TV. She plays with iPads and smart phones. It doesn’t help that her dad is a TV addict.

Moreover, gadgets are essential in Stanley’s line of work: photography. Stanley relies on his smart phone and computer to track appointments and communicate with clients.

So with our second child, Erik Raem, who turns two in December 2013, things are more difficult to control because his older sister already watches TV and plays with smart phones.

We cannot totally avoid digital media. I myself have tried—for a screen-free week campaign—but failed. I guess it also is a hindrance that I’m online most of the time. As a breastfeeding advocate, I have a blog called “Chronicles of a Nursing Mom,” and I am a member of the Mommy Mundi’s Social Media Moms. I use gadgets to do my side projects, and to do my actual work as a lawyer (my boss prefers to read digital reports).

What do we do then? We keep our kids busy to lessen their screen time. Naima is more prone to immerse herself in TV viewing, or iPad or smart-phone use if she is at home doing nothing. But if she is busy, she forgets the TV. So over the summer, we enrolled Naima in various classes to keep her occupied.

Meanwhile, we have a lot of books, and happily at five, Naima knows how to read on her own. Stanley also makes up games with her.

We put Erik in school early. I work out of the home full time. I leave at 6:30 a.m. to bring Naima to school and don’t get home until 6 p.m. So Erik spends the day mostly with his nanny Tata. Tata tries to make up activities with him, but he has learned how to operate the remote control and sneaks off to turn on the TV.

At eighteen months, Erik is enrolled in a progressive school near our house. There are no formal lessons in school. Our son engages in singing, crafts, reading, and outdoor play with three other classmates.

When Erik is busy, he forgets about the TV. He tries to turn on the TV in the morning when everything is quiet since Naima is in school and Stanley and I are out. However, when we are all at home or even if it is just Naima at home, Erik doesn’t look for the TV and instead engages his sister in play.
RESILIENCE HAS BECOME a hazy word for a lot of our youth today. Used to getting results quickly and easily through the Internet, they own gadgets that enable networking, social and otherwise, with the click of a mouse or at the tap of the screen.

Their is the generation of impatience, entitlement, and narcissism resulting in their being dubbed by *Time* magazine columnist Joel Stein in May 2013 as the “Me Me Me Generation.” More self-absorbed and lacking in empathy, our youth seek materialism and the easy life. With their penchant for the dramatic, trivial things like not getting the “shoes of my dreams” elicits an “I am totally dying” comment on Facebook and Twitter.

**BOUNCE BACK**

“Resilient” in *Roget’s Thesaurus* means “rapidly recovering.” Resilience is the ability to rebound from setbacks without being discouraged by external circumstances. In the real world, problems and challenges abound, and for most people, everyday life is a struggle.

We can learn much from the inspiring stories shared by the public-school student achievers we studied in Marikina and Bulacan in 2005. The resulting book, *Magaling ang Pinoy*, is a testament of the resilience or *katatagang-loob* of Filipinos in the midst of adversity.

Daily tests for these student achievers are not in the classroom but in the school of life. Letty Pasion’s son Lord Alec had to move from a private to a public high school because of high tuition, but this did not hinder him from striving to perform well. He continued to have faith in himself and trust in his ability to succeed in whatever school he was enrolled in. After high school, he received a scholarship at the Ateneo de Manila University and graduated with a degree in Chemistry with Applied Computer Systems.

Jake Ogana had issues as a child about not having a father to support their family. Often hungry and envious of classmates who were able to eat during recess, he would relieve his hunger with a sip of water from the canteen, telling himself, “This is just a test I should be able to pass.”

Ogana said, “Often, we are hindered by tragic things beyond our control, but I believe that we can transform bad experiences into positive ones.” Because of his fighting spirit, Jake graduated valedictorian from Marikina High School and was a Dean’s Lister as a scholar at the Ateneo.

These children have to do chores like laundry and house cleaning when they get home from school, walk to and from school when short of money, celebrate academic achievements with home-cooked meals (pretending they are eating in Jollibee) and make National Book Store their library when they cannot afford to buy books for leisure reading. They have to scrimp on food to save twenty pesos from their baon to pay for an hour’s use of the computer for homework.

The circumstances of the difficult lives they lead have created a situation wherein
these young people became highly self-motivated and equipped to face challenges big and small.

**INNER TENACITY**

Resilience is not about external sturdiness. It has more to do with developing internal tenacity cultivated from good values, having the right direction, and strong character that will enable us to face adversity head on without flinching.

In his treatise “The Filipino Philosophy of Resiliency,” educator Joseph Z. Tiangco defines *katatagang-loob* as “the spirit of undying resiliency reflected upon acts of self-endurance and self-durability amidst challenges and adversities.”

*Katatagang-loob* is seen in OFWs (overseas Filipino workers) who leave their families behind to work abroad in order to provide for their children. They endure the loneliness of being alienated from family for years.

Devastation brought about by natural calamities have wiped out homes but as long as the family is complete, life goes on for Pinoys, washing the mud from their abodes and drying out in the sun whatever was left of their belongings.

Losing a parent or being abandoned by one is literally like being lost at sea as the directions become muddled for the fractured nuclear family. But with *katatagang-loob*, single parents inspire children to rally behind them through their industriousness and *pagtitiis* (patience and perseverance) in providing for them as best they can.

**PATIENCE**

Michael McQueen, an Australian speaker, social researcher, and best-selling author, considers patience as one of the foundations of resilience. In his paper on “Raising Resilient Kids,” he wrote that children born in the 1980s (and probably afterward)—whom he named Gen Y—“tend to see patience as a frustrating waste of time rather than a virtue necessary for success.”

Our youth have to get immediate results from their effort and when they encounter a setback, they are easily discouraged to the point of surrendering. In the age of technology, “fast” is the operative word: finding answers is as easy as typing in a key word in Google search and friends can be tracked down through the cell phone or on Facebook any time of the day. Everything has to be fast: cars, the Internet, food, and job promotions!

Working our way up the ladder in the corporate world is a challenge that many young people eschew because it needs a lot patience and hard work. Ford Myers, an American career coach and author of the book *Get the Job You Want, Even When No One’s Hiring* says, “The culture has changed and people no longer stay at one firm for the entirety of the career. In the 1970s or 1980s, it was assumed you’d join a company, work hard, pay your dues, and climb up the ladder at the firm. Those were the unwritten rules of the game. But the world has changed.”
Allowing children to be disappointed occasionally will help keep them grounded.

Patience is learning to wait and accepting that some processes cannot be rushed. It is also about establishing realistic expectations and the awareness that plans do fail but we can try again. Forbearance in accepting people as they are, with their frailties, is an asset to maintaining good relationships.

**SELF-ESTEEM**

Building resilience is a difficult task in this age of permissiveness, indulgence, and immediate gratification. Pediatric cardiologist Anna Marie S. Cabaero, who practices at Cebu University Doctors Hospital, believes that the culprit behind the lack of resilience of many of today’s youth is lack of self-worth.

Ironically, we are afraid of saying no to our kids because we think rejection is bad for their self-esteem.

Furthermore, we compensate for our lack of time with our kids by giving in to their whims, material and otherwise. Chances are they end up weak, irresponsible, egoistic, spoiled.

McQueen offers creative solutions to this problem such as practicing “intelligent neglect,” the use of stories to model resilience, and encouraging engagement in community activities and mentoring.

Hovering parents or what is popularly known as “helicopter” moms and dads feel that it is their duty as good parents to protect their child from skinning their knees from a fall, disappointments from failing in school, or as they reach their teens, shielding them from relationships that go bad.

In fact, in our survey, 75 percent of students say that finishing a hard task makes them feel good.

**GROUNDED**

“Intelligent neglect” means allowing our children to have the space they need to make mistakes because it is in falling down that they will learn how to get up. It is the pain from being hurt from an experience that makes them strong and discover, in the process, how to deal with a situation.

Allowing children to be disappointed occasionally will help keep them grounded.

Gavin, Michael, and Matt (not their real names) are Ateneo high-school students. They shared their experiences regarding disappointments with us.

It was a big letdown for Matt when he was banned from using the personal computer (except for academic reasons) because his grades went down. He felt alienated from friends and was not updated on the latest trends.
But now, Matt acknowledges that his parents’ decision was a very good one because if not for their firmness, he would not be studying at the Ateneo.

Michael was banned from playing the game console for the summer when he was in grade school. What was initially a frustration turned out to be a blessing because he rediscovered the joy of hanging out with friends.

In Gavin’s case, his brother was addicted to video games, which prompted their dad to lock up the PlayStation console. His brother got depressed and begged for it every day, but their father did not give in. Gavin felt sorry for his brother but eventually his brother’s academic standing improved. He admired his dad for being resolute in spite of his brother’s feeling of dejection at being grounded from gaming.

**STORIES**

Using stories to model resilience is an excellent method in inspiring and influencing behavior and mindset than mere sermons. Principles are better absorbed through stories, more than just plain rhetoric that goes out in one ear and out of the other.

Moreover, communicating stories enhances the relationship between our children and ourselves, since storytelling encourages exchange of thoughts. Stories need not be tales of epic proportions: Snippets of ordinary encounters or episodes in our lives can leave their mark on young people’s minds.

Cin Bruzo, the mother of a scholar, made storytelling a daily activity that her children had looked forward to since they were very young.

As they matured, Bruzo shared with us her family’s difficult journey to “oneness” with the children: from their separation to their reconciliation, from the hardship her husband underwent to support the family to the eventual bearing of fruit of all their efforts.

**Developing resilience requires a lifetime of mentoring. Inner strength cannot be developed in a day.**

Bruzo uses “pangaral” to point out to her children that their father continues to this day to drive tricycles to earn a living to sustain the family. These stories encouraged their children to persevere in the face of difficulties.

Her stories left a deep imprint in their son, Aaron, a Pathways to Higher Education scholar who went to the University of the Philippines to major in Chemical Engineering. Aaron apportioned part of the stipend that he received from the Commission on Higher Education for household groceries and utilities to help the family.

RJ is an Ateneo high-school student whose dad often had to work out of town. Father and son would only see each other twice a month, but they would talk on the cell phone every evening.

His mom, a physician, would try to pick him up as often as she could so that they could talk in the car. Their conversations were replete with stories about life, including the mother’s experiences with her patients.
RJ’s family wanted one of their children to take up medicine, but RJ’s two older siblings took other paths. RJ was ambivalent about going to medical school but his mom would often ask him to help her out in the clinic. He witnessed how his mom helped the sick who could not afford medical treatment by waiving her fee. Through his mother’s stories and example, RJ was inspired to follow in her footsteps.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

McQueen believes that resilience can be developed by being engaged in community work.

“Resilience, like any virtue, is not something that can be developed in isolation,” he says. “Just like the virtues of patience, compassion, and forgiveness, resilience is developed and sharpened only in community.”

Involvement in activities that demand real-world interaction with people help our youth develop empathy, whether in rescue operations, social work, religious groups, or sports.

The Ateneo’s Tulong Dunong program for senior high-school students is one such program that has impacted the lives of many. The program has its roots in the seventies when the late Jim O’Brien, SJ, was in search of a way to expose the students to poverty in the country.

Once a week, high-school seniors are required to tutor elementary students in public schools in Marikina and Quezon City. Aside from teaching, they also made house visits and planned field trips for their charges.

These activities instilled good values in the Ateneo students while sharing their knowledge with the less fortunate. Both sides benefited from this endeavor, since the Ateneo students showed genuine concern and compassion that left a lasting impression on their less-privileged counterparts.

The influence of Tulong Dunong can be seen in the career paths chosen by some of the Ateneo students who, after graduating from high school, go into education or development work.

The responsibilities that go with the journey to maturity can be overwhelming for those who have been shielded from the hard facts of life, not through their own fault but by the circumstance of their birth.

We do not have to deny our children the comfort and blessings that come with abundance, but we have to temper our indulgence, provide proper guidance, and set good examples. Developing resilience requires a lifetime of mentoring. Inner strength cannot be developed in a day.

Eden Acosta’s husband Rodel fondly calls their children “deprived”
because of the “mind conditioning” they used as the foundation of their distinctive parenting technique. It was with a lot of thought that they developed the rules that served as guideposts for their two children who are both consistent honor students.

Belle is a senior under the Program of Excellence for Math, Science and English in Miriam High School and aspires to take up a course related to creative writing when she goes to college. Belle is a voracious reader, a certified bookworm but prefers to call herself a “book serpent.” She writes and draws as a hobby and she submits her work online to fanfiction.net and deviantart.com. She also takes voice lessons.

Carlo is a sophomore in the semi-honors section of the Ateneo High School. He plays chess and is a member of a dance organization. Aside from playing drums, he is learning to play the guitar and the ukulele with the help of the Internet.

The fruits do not fall far from the tree, for Rodel graduated cum laude from the Polytechnic University of the Philippines, while Eden has a bachelor’s degree in Statistics, a master’s in Computer Science and a career in Information Technology.

Eden decided to be a full-time wife and mother when Belle and Carlo were in primary school. Her career in IT was a big influence in the way she dealt with her children’s exposure to media and technology.

Eden admits to being an obsessive-compulsive (OC) mom. When both children were in primary school, Eden saw to it that they followed a detailed daily schedule. A different schedule was made specifically for exam week.

In between the detailed study schedule was a “walking break” where she took the kids around their village to release energy and refresh them for the next half of the study period.

Belle and Carlo were never tutored: What Eden did was guide their thought processes when faced with difficult problems until they were able to discover the solution. Eden avoided spoon-feeding them with answers.

When the children were in grade school, early dinner was served at 5 p.m. and strict bedtime at 7 p.m. was set in preparation for the 5 a.m. wake-up call the following day.

Belle wrote in an essay:

Back then, our household had many rules—no TV on weekdays, no sleepovers in other people’s houses, bedtime at 7. We weren’t allowed any gadgets like Game Boy either. Even up to now, we don’t have cable TV or air-conditioning in the house. Compared to my classmates, I felt like I had drawn the short straw and would often vocally express it.

But after a few years, I learned to accept it, even became proud of it. I associated my academic success to the fact that I had less room for distraction in my house and more sleep than those who stayed up late, allowing me to study and focus better.

So I learned that I didn’t have to be like everybody else and that it was perfectly fine to be different.
Eden is elated that her daughter realized the value of their family rules. This is what she calls “mind conditioning”: the importance of creating their world for them in a manner that would serve them well in the future.

She believes that if you let them get away with everything they want, they would start thinking that *ganoon lang talaga ang mundo* (that’s how the world turns) and they will have no direction in life.

As it is, the rules have empowered the children into being the best that they can be. They now sleep a little bit later because of the academic demands of high school, combined with the lure of the Internet.

But Carlo still manages to often go to bed at 9 p.m., quite early compared to other kids his age. According to Eden, it seems that her son’s body clock has an automatic switch that goes off when it reaches a certain time.

The Acostas are a closely knit family. Belle is open with her feelings. Eden knows that one of the things that affect her is encountering difficulties in school. So Eden discourages negative feelings and encourages her daughter with inspiring words. She advises Belle that if she doesn’t understand the topic, she has to find a way to learn the lesson on her own.

Eden has taught both of her children not to be afraid of Math. Her mind conditioning comes into play as she puts them back on track when they feel discouraged. Geometry was Eden’s favorite subject as a student so when Belle was apprehensive about the subject, Eden reminded her that once she got the basics, everything would fall into place. She also shared with both of them how she enjoyed Chemistry and Physics back in school.

The Acosta household has never had cable TV. When their children reasoned out that everyone has cable TV, Eden replied, “You don’t have to be like them,” hoping that eventually this will teach them not to succumb to peer pressure.

One time, when almost two-year-old Carlo ran a high fever, his parents rushed him to the emergency room with three-year-old Belle in tow. After Carlo was cleared and was sent home, Belle started to cry and exclaimed, “But Carlo has to be confined!”

When the puzzled parents asked her why, Belle said, “I haven’t watched cable (TV) in a long time.” Being confined meant getting to watch cable TV in the hospital room.

**Belle and Carlo were never tutored. Eden avoided spoon-feeding them with answers.**

Eden wanted to minimize the children’s exposure to media because of MTV and cartoon programs like *SpongeBob SquarePants* which she observed had violent undertones in the guise of wholesome humour.

During primary school, the children had a lot of books and board games. Books were piled in different areas of the house where it would be easy for the children to reach for them. Eden read bedtime stories to them from the age of six months up to around nine years old. During the toddler years when they ran around while eating, Eden read to them
so they would stay put at the dining table.

When the children were younger, their laptop computers were in a common area in the house so that the parents could supervise the use of the computer. Now that the children are in their teens, they are allowed to use their computers in their own rooms but they have to follow another house rule: no locked doors.

Eden discourages them from always staying in their rooms, saying, “We did not build this house to be a dormitory.” Their house is open to her children’s friends, but Belle and Carlo are not allowed to go to sleepovers in other houses.

Gadget ownership for her children was delayed till they were mature enough. They were allowed to own gaming consoles and the PlayStation Portable (PSP) only when Belle was in middle school. Playing games on their consoles were allowed only on weekends. The children used to be so eager to end their “deprivation” that they would ask Eden to bring along the gadgets when she picked them up on Friday afternoons.

Carlo sometimes engages in online gaming with friends and goes to the Internet café occasionally, like after the end of a summer chess program or after exams. Lapses are not frequent, but one of the consequences was suspension of the gadget, like locking up the PSP console for a month.

The cell phones that the children have used through the years were mostly hand-me-downs from their father. It was only recently that Belle got herself a locally branded smart phone, while Carlo inherited his dad’s BlackBerry. Their cell phone lines are prepaid, with a weekly budget of fifty to one hundred pesos. Belle and Carlo share an iPad tablet, but they each have their own laptops. Eden discourages them from using passwords for their computers and cell phones and checks them occasionally when they are studying in their rooms.

Gadgets (and even books) are not allowed on the dining table at home or when they are eating out. Family holidays, whether out of town or out of the country, are to be savored without any gadgets, except for the cell phone.

Both Carlo and Belle are into social networking (Facebook, Twitter, Tumblr) both for school updates and social purposes. Eden updates herself by logging in as a “lurker” and is very amused at the witiness of the exchanges when she reads online threads. She shares the posts with her husband which she says are more entertaining than watching TV.

Eden never adds her comments or “likes” the posts her children make so that she won’t embarrass them. When she sees inappropriate posts, she calls their attention privately. The aunts also send a private message to the children when they see inappropriate posts.

Now that the children are in high school, Eden and Rodel share the dilemma of most parents: that of children staying online for long periods of time. Discussions about homework and group projects are done through Facebook, so sometimes it’s difficult to tell if their online activity is related to school or not.

It’s an ongoing source of arguments. The parents bug their children when they stay up late in front of the computer. The children, on the other hand, assure them that they can regulate their time and that staying online acts as a stress reliever for them.
Taking care of pets can also be a stress reliever, aside from keeping kids away from the computer, according to the pediatrician-pulmonologist that Eden has talked to. Studies show that even kids with allergies can be safely exposed to certain breeds, such as the Maltese and the poodle that do not shed hair.

Boredom is not a big issue, even if the children occasionally complain about it. Eden does not take this matter seriously. She ignores it and lets the children deal with it. Sure enough, they find a way to occupy their time. Belle always has a book with her to fill in the gaps when she does not have an activity.

Eden is very close to Belle and shares mostly everything with her. Carlo is more of the quiet type, like Rodel. The parents take turns in driving their children to school, a chore that they both take delight in. Dad brings them to school in the morning and Mom picks them up in the afternoon. The morning drive is normally quiet as the kids are not too communicative at the start of the day, but it is precious time spent together.

Eden was quite wary when Belle and her friends joined a Facebook group of mostly Ateneo boys who were fans of a certain TV show. She allowed Belle to meet up with them in a restaurant but she also went to the same venue. She was glad she did because she was able to meet them and she saw that they were decent young men.

Belle has a good relationship with her dad which Eden hopes is a good indicator of how she would be in her future relationship with the opposite sex. Still, she counsels Belle to wait until she graduates from college before having a boyfriend. She also advises Belle to be productive even after she gets married. She believes that children need the right kind of mentoring at an early age to prepare them for the future.

Eden is best remembered by her former officemates for “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star.” When they would meet up for reunions, they would tease her to sing it.

The nursery rhyme brings back memories of how life was like for her as a career woman. Belle was a toddler then, left in the care of a yaya (nanny) but under the supervision of Eden’s mother.

Every day, Eden would call Belle from her cubicle at the office at exactly 6 p.m. and sing “Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star” over the phone. At the other end of the line, Belle’s grandmother and yaya would see Belle’s hands opening and closing in a “twinkling” motion.

Mind conditioning is still at work as the stars continue to shine brightly on Eden’s family and the promising future that awaits her children.

DEEPER READING


Chapter Three
Information Overload,
Attention Deficit
Much Ado Over Multitasking

A STUDENT TYPES on her laptop, balancing papers on her knees, a mug of coffee to her right. She wears a headset, nodding from time to time to the beat. Beside her sits her cell phone, vibrating and flashing every time a message appears. The TV plays in front of her.

Somehow the student manages to finish her paper, listen to Lady Gaga, answer her cell phone, and tune in to *Glee* simultaneously.

At least that’s what she claims to parents who command her to turn off the TV, to teachers who tell her to remove the headphones, to counselors who try to help her develop study habits.

“There is no way you can study with all those things happening at once!” they say.

“Oh yes, I can,” she replies. “I belong to the multitasking generation.”

**CHAOS OF A WIRED WORLD**

It is no coincidence that the multitasking generation is also the attention-deficit generation.

Many of our primary, high school, and even college students say that they have grown up with (and grown used to) the chaos of a wired world, where forwarded e-mail, pop songs, and reference websites—necessary and superfluous things alike—exert equal demands on their time and attention.

In fact, some students even claim that they cannot, for example, complete their homework unless rap songs blare in the background and TV shows shimmer in the foreground.

Of course, last we heard, rap songs and TV shows are not exactly staple fare in the classroom or in the workplace, but this does not prevent parents from believing their children’s claims and giving in to their demands.

In our survey, more than 50 percent of students say that while they are studying, they also engage in the following activities at the same time: surf the Internet, watch TV, listen to music, play video games, and text.

More than 60 percent also say they find it hard to concentrate on assignments.

When Queena’s students tell her that wearing headphones tuned to their music helps them to concentrate in class, she counters, “Do you think your boss will allow you to do so a few years from now?”

All of us, when needed, can attend to more than one thing at the same time, especially when the tasks are easy to do, most so simple we can do them unconsciously.

For instance, we can simultaneously talk and walk. We may need to think about what we say, but we certainly don’t need to think about walking. Crossing a busy street while talking to each other, though, or worse, talking on the cell, can cost us our lives.
We can watch the action in the movie and at the same time listen to what the characters are saying. We can run on the treadmill and watch CNN at the same time. Running is the unconscious activity.

**DEMANDS ON ATTENTION**

When we try to do more than one demanding activity at the same time, then most likely, we will fail. In class, if students try to listen to the lecture, while secretly texting their friends (under the table, and unknown to them, in full view of the teacher), they may think they are succeeding at both tasks.

But what is really happening is that they are switching back and forth between the two tasks. The effort expended in doing these two things simultaneously is greater than trying to do the two things one after the other.

**When we try to do more than one demanding activity at the same time, then most likely, we will fail.**

What’s worse, when they multitask, students become more error-prone. They will more likely miss important points of the lecture, and at the same time, misspell their message or even send it to the wrong person.

In her book, *Rapt: Attention and the Focused Life*, American behavioral science writer Winifred Gallagher says, “Multitasking’s obvious drawback is inefficiency. In many cases, your ability to do two things simultaneously is impaired because both tasks draw on one or more of the same information-processing systems in the brain. For activities that involve language, such as conversing, watching TV, or simply thinking, for example, there’s just one major channel through which you send input and receive output.”

Gallagher quotes David Meyer, a cognitive scientist at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, who says, “If you’re, say, trying to listen to someone on the phone while typing an e-mail, something has to give.”

Using tests such as magnetic resonance imaging, psychologists from the University of California in Los Angeles have discovered that when we focus on a demanding task, we primarily rely on our brain’s hippocampus (which governs memory).

But when we are distracted by things such as text messages blinking on the cell phone, we unconsciously switch to another part of the brain, the striatum (which governs routine activities).

“As a result,” says Gallagher, “even if you get the job done, your recollection of it will be more fragmented, less adaptable, and harder to retrieve than it would be if you had given it your undivided attention.”

To make things worse, multitasking requires more time than doing things one at a time.

Yes, you read it right.
The reason we multitask is to save time, but in reality, we end up consuming more time doing the same things. Gallagher interviews an attention expert who, after writing a book, says, “If your train of thought is interrupted even for a second, you have to go back and say, ‘Where was I?’ There are start-up costs each time you reload everything into memory. Multitasking exacts a price, and people aren’t as good at it as they think they are.”

»IMPOSSIBLE TO LEARN

Multitasking is dangerous for learning. Research five years ago shows that American youth spend an average of six and a half hours a day in the electronic world. Most likely, many of them spend much more time now.

Filipino youth are increasingly following in their footsteps, to the detriment of their capacity to learn. The cases of students with attention-deficit disorders are increasing, and students find it difficult to pay sustained attention in class. What is worth doing requires focus and attention, and many of our children cannot sustain these.

According to Gallagher, Meyer says that “kids need to work at developing the capacity for the concentrated, sustained attention required to succeed in many endeavors, not just the skill of flitting among them. Einstein didn’t invent the theory of relativity while he was multitasking at the Swiss patent office.”

To students who call themselves the multitasking generation, Gallagher has this to say: “If you grow up assuming that you can pay attention to several things at once, you may not realize that the way in which you process such information is superficial at best. When you’re finally forced to confront intellectually demanding situations in high school or college, you may find that you’ve traded depth of knowledge for breadth and stunted your capacity for serious thought.”

No wonder our children find it difficult to read good books, solve Math problems, or even understand Science concepts. They are not lazy—rather, because of their shallow multitasking habits, they have found it extremely difficult to think about more complex matters.

Gallagher also laments the toll that hours spent multitasking on machines exerts on our youth’s relationships with real human beings. Our kids boast about the millions of friends they have online, but they seldom have real-world interactions with them. “The young in particular might fail to consider how many people in their electronic address book really know them and would be there for them if they needed help,” Gallagher warns.

What is worth doing requires focus and attention, and many of our children cannot sustain these.

»DANGEROUS

Of all that hullabaloo on cell phones (whether they cause brain cancer, whether they
emit harmful radiation, whether they blow up gas stations), I believe that the biggest danger involves cell phones and driving a vehicle.

Many accidents have occurred because the driver is either chatting on the cell phone or even worse, texting with one eye on the road while the other is on the phone.

In the United States, statistics show that hundreds of thousands of traffic accidents are due to cell phone use alone, and while there are as yet no studies done in the Philippines, all of us have heard of accidents (or near-accidents) involving cell phones and driving.

Except for exceptional cases (such as ambulance drivers, perhaps), driving while chatting or texting should be banned outright, and abusers punished.

Let us live the focused life. Let us learn to pay attention.
How Distracted Are You?

In her book, *The Distraction Trap: How to Focus in a Digital World*, former British journalist turned digital distraction consultant Frances Booth presents criteria for us to assess how distracted we really are.

**ARE WE EXTREMELY DISTRACTED?**

- We rarely, if ever, switch off our smart phone.
- We spend most of the day switched on to devices rather than off.
- We often use different devices at the same time (multitask).
- We often lose track of time when online.
- We rarely talk face to face or even through phone calls.
- We routinely bring the phone to the table, even if we are supposed to be interacting with others.
- We only half-listen to other people when we text while they talk.
- We blame our “bad memory” when we constantly forget things.
- We immediately check our phone or e-mail when we hear a ping.
- We talk about stories learned from social media rather than from talking to people face-to-face.

**ARE WE DISTRACTED?**

- If it is a company phone, we rarely switch it off.
- We sometimes do two or three things at the same time.
- We sometimes lose track of time when online.
- We often get distracted from important tasks because of demands from others via e-mail or smart phone.
- We do social media without a time limit or without screening out certain feeds.
- We more often than not check our phone or e-mail when we hear a ping.
- When we are with others, we try to not be distracted when a text comes in, but we succumb to the text anyway.

**ARE WE FOCUSED?**

- We regularly switch off our smart phone, laptop, computer, etc.
• We prefer to do one task at a time (singletasking).
• We are aware of how much time we spend online on every task.
• We rarely get distracted from any task.
• We go long periods of time disconnected.
• We are more productive than other people. We finish things on time. We leave the office on time.
• We remember most things, including the small details.
• We are irritated by unnecessary interruptions.

Because distraction is tied to lack of awareness, Booth advises us to do a Digital Distraction Diary, noting when, how, and where we experience distractions. Only when we get a handle on reality can we start focusing better.

**APPS**

Ironically, several apps (software applications) are now available to help us concentrate better and become more productive. In his free e-book, *Focus: A Simplicity Manifesto in the Age of Distraction*, American zen advocate Leo Babauta lists his favorites.

Many of these apps are pioneered by and for the Mac.

• The *Freedom* app can disable our Internet connection for a specified time, set by us. This is helpful when we really need to concentrate for an hour, or two, or three.

• *Selfcontrol* can block access to websites that distract us. We can deny ourselves access to Facebook or Twitter for ninety minutes, but we can still surf the rest of the web. We cannot visit our blocked sites till the time runs out. In Chrome, the equivalent app is called *StayFocusd*.

• *WriteRoom* helps us focus on writing. It goes full screen so all we have is text, with no formats, no proofreads, no distractions. In Chrome, the equivalent app is *Readability*. In Windows, they are *Dark Room* and *Write Monkey*.

• The *Think* app can fade out everything but the task we are focusing on at one time. This app does away with all other distractions so we can singletask.
Why Multitasking Does Not Work

MANY NEWS CHANNELS, such as CNN and ANC, have tried to ape the web by providing scrolling info lines at the bottom of the screen. Some channels even divide the screen into quarters, with different snippets of news at each angle.

For information that is not particularly relevant for us in its entirety, this type of presentation may be fine. In most instances, we are attracted to at most one piece of information among the four or five bits competing for our attention.

But the crucial question remains: How effective is this multitasking presentation?

CACOPHONY

In 2005, researchers Lori Bergen and Tom Grimes of Kansas State University and Deborah Potter of NewsLab studied two groups of students. One group watched a sample CNN Headline News broadcast in the typical format, while a second group did the same without the graphics.

The result? The first group recalled significantly fewer facts from the broadcast than the second. Young people are more attracted to the multimessage format and, at first, the researchers posit that perhaps this is because the youth can juggle many messages more efficiently. But after doing their experiments, the researchers find that there is no cognitive difference.

“There is no indication to suggest that young people … allocate their attentional resources in a way that is more efficient … than the general population processes information,” say the researchers in the Journal of Communication Research.

They continue, “Indeed, the data replicate the results obtained by other investigators who have found that parallel processing of competing semantic messages does not take place efficiently—or does not take place at all.”

The competition to hold viewers is considerable, and the researchers recognize that fact. However, they conclude their findings by describing the format as “cacophonous” and reiterate that “there seems to be no explanation that justifies using a presentational format that seems to make it more difficult for viewers to learn from the news than it already is.”

LESS LEARNING

The online world is even more cacophonous than news media. If such dismal results already materialize in an experiment, think about the effects on us as we spend hours in cyberspace.

And what about the effects on our children?

In our survey, 45 percent of students say have one to three (digital) windows open at any one time; 40 percent, four to seven windows; 15 percent, eight or more.
Even if our children are digital natives, kids have “less patience, scepticism, tenacity, and skill, studies show” than adults in navigating the Web, all while overestimating their prowess,” says American journalist Maggie Jackson in her book, *Distracted*.

“The online world of entertainment, distraction, and sensory overload can weaken [our] kids’ ability to become fully absorbed in an idea, experience, or work of art,” say American adolescent counselors Barbara Melton and Susan Shankle in their book *What in the World Are Your Kids Doing Online?*

Psychology professor Russell Poldrack at the University of California, Los Angeles, deals a blow to the multitasking myth: “Multitasking adversely affects how you learn. Even if you learn while multitasking, that learning is less flexible and more specialized, so you cannot retrieve the information as easily.”

In an experiment published in the *Proceedings of the US National Academy of Sciences* in 2006, with colleagues Karin Foerde and Barbara Knowlton, Poldrack scanned the brains of subjects doing tasks with and without distractions. (Subjects were distracted by listening to different tones.)

Poldrack and his team found that we use different areas of our brain to make sense of and to store new information when we multitask or singletask.

When we are not distracted, our hippocampus, responsible for storing and retrieving information, is active. When we multitask, our striatum, responsible for learning new skills, lights up.

What is the problem then? The striatum just happens to be the area damaged in people with Parkinson’s disease, who find it difficult to learn new motor skills even if they can recall past ones.

The researchers caution against multitasking when we are in the process of learning new things that we want to remember.

For instance, listening to certain types of music can energize us, making us alert. Music then can help us in, say, exercising. But when we listen to music as we try to memorize vocabulary words is distracting.

“Tasks that distract you while you try to learn something new are likely to adversely affect your learning,” the UCLA Psychology Department says in a summary of Poldrack’s work.

**DRUG HIGH**

To make matters more complicated, when we multitask, we often feel physically good. Why? Our bodies reward us with chemicals that induce a multitasking high, practically akin to that of drugs.

“The high deceives multitaskers into thinking that they are being especially productive,” says Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) clinical psychologist Sherry Turkle in her book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*. 
“In search of the high, they want to do even more,” Turkle says. “We fell in love with what technology made easy. Our bodies colluded.”

Turkle talks about her own experience trying to hold the attention of multitaskers. Even in such an intellectual atmosphere as MIT’s, students tend to revert to their hobbies rather than listen in class. Some professors feel that since their college students are grownups, it is not their duty to dictate how they should learn.

But Turkle has observed that when students’ laptops are open in class, they are more often than not on Facebook, YouTube, or shopping for music. So she suggested that her students use notebooks (the traditional one, from trees) to, well, take notes.

Some students were relieved, but others were surly, saying that now they would have to write by hand and then transfer their notes to the computer later.

“While they were complaining about this two-step process, I was secretly thinking what a good learning strategy this might be,” says Turkle. “I maintained my resolve, but the following year, I bowed to common practice and allowed students to do what they wished.”

The cost? “I notice, along with several of my colleagues, that the students whose laptops are open in class do not do as well as the others.”

HEAVY VERSUS LIGHT MULTITASKERS

The ironic thing is that people who multitask more think they are better at it, but they perform worse than those who multitask less. In 2009, Stanford University researchers Eyal Ophir, Clifford Nass, and Anthony Wagner compared light and heavy multitaskers to determine differences, if any, in the way they process information.

After each group was shown alternately letters and numbers, they were asked what were supposedly simple questions: Are the letters consonants or vowels? Are the numbers odd or even?

The surprising finding was the heavy media multitaskers did not perform as well as those who multitasked less often. Heavy multitaskers, whom we would expect would be better at juggling more than one task, were more distracted and less adept at task switching.

“Heavy media multitaskers are more susceptible to interference from irrelevant environmental stimuli and from irrelevant representations in memory,” the researchers say in the Proceedings of the US National Academy of Sciences.

“This led to the surprising result that heavy media multitaskers performed worse on a test of task-switching ability, likely due to reduced ability to filter out interference from the irrelevant task set,” the researchers say.

When we are interrupted, it is often difficult to return to our original task immediately. A study of computer programmers, whose work requires precise focus to detail, showed that it takes them five minutes (or even a whopping twenty-five minutes) to continue their tasks once interrupted.
Even if we sometimes succeed at juggling several tasks, we are more stressed out. Informatics researcher Gloria Mark of the University of California in Irvine, with psychologists Daniela Gudith and Ulrich Klock of Humboldt University in Germany found that when we compensate for interruptions, we experience more stress and frustration, because our change of work rhythms requires more effort.

“When people are constantly interrupted, they develop a mode of working faster (and writing less) to compensate for the time they know they will lose by being interrupted,” the researchers say in the article “The Cost of Interrupted Work: More Speed and Stress.”

The costs are high: “A higher workload, more stress, higher frustration, more time pressure, and effort.”

“Interrupted work may be done faster,” the researchers conclude, “but at a price.”

**ATTENTION DEFICIT TRAIT**

American psychiatrist Edward Hallowell, a specialist in the treatment of attention deficit disorder (ADD), has come up with a new condition he calls “attention deficit trait” (ADT).

Employees come to him complaining of ADD, but when they go on vacation or take a break, the symptoms go away, only to return when they go back to work.

Real ADD does not disappear. People are born with ADD, but Hallowell believes that ADT is induced by the ceaseless hubbub of modern life.

“You’ve become so busy attending to so many inputs and outputs that you become increasingly distracted, irritable, impulsive, restless and, over the long term, underachieving,” Hallowell tells CNet News in 2005.

“It costs you efficiency because you’re doing so much or trying to do so much, it’s as if you’re juggling one more ball than you possibly can,” he continues.

Hallowell lists the symptoms of ADT:

- When people find that they’re not working to their full potential; when they know that they could be producing more but in fact they’re producing less; when they know they’re smarter than their output shows; when they start answering questions in ways that are more superficial, more hurried than they usually would; when their reservoir of new ideas starts to run dry; when they find themselves working ever-longer hours and sleeping less, exercising less, spending free time with friends less and in general putting in more hours but getting less production overall.

Hallowell describes many of the corporate employees he sees. “They’re all running around, working their tails off … They think they’re working hard, and they think they’re being productive, but they’re not. They’re busy, but they’re not thoughtful.”

Some of us may feel we juggle many things well, but Hallowell says this is because of the adrenaline rush we get when we switch focus from one task to the other.
But he says, “No one really multitasks. You just spend less time on any one thing.”

Jackson likens multitasking to multiple diving, where we dive into focus, resurface to reassess the conditions, and then dive again to resume focus.

But so-called switch costs occur when our brain takes time to reassess goals or resources.

In his book CrazyBusy, Hallowell says that to combat ADT, we need to take control over ourselves and our environment in order to preserve our emotional and physical health.
When Multimedia Works

When multimessage formats are designed well, such as diagrams and pictures embedded in text, or audio and visual explanations, these can help in learning.

Diagrams and text both utilize the sense of sight, but they activate different areas of the brain (one for spatial learning, the other for verbal learning), which do not interfere with one another.

As for audio and visual explanations, the brain areas for processing auditory or visual information are different, and again, do not seem to interfere with each other. They may even work in tandem to increase working memory, resulting in better learning. So if the Internet can combine sounds and words in these kinds of ways, learning can take place well.

An example is the Khan Academy website, cited by several Ateneo de Manila high school and college students as the site to visit when they want to comprehend the intricacies of math and science. In his globally popular site, American learning aficionado Salman Khan uses mostly diagrams to supplement his lectures. He does not employ the usual scrolls and graphics, and in fact, his site has often been compared to a standard blackboard, with the most telling difference being that students can pause, download, play videos of his lectures, and learn at their own pace.

The Khan Academy has found a way to utilize the Internet for good. Hopefully, Khan can resist the temptation of jazzing up the videos with the typical bells and whistles, especially since his site now enjoys broad financial and popular support.

GEOMETER’S SKETCHPAD

Some research has shown that gadgets, when properly used, can improve visual-spatial skills. In the college problem-solving class taught by National Scientist Fr. Bienvenido Nebres and math professor Queena Lee-Chua, technology is utilized when it can most prove conducive to learning.

In a chapter on geometry, instead of simply relying on pen and paper, Nebres, assisted by Vivencio “Jun-jun” Oracion of the Ateneo High School, utilizes Geometer’s Sketchpad to demonstrate various figures and diagrams.

Freed from the task of drawing the tasks by hand (which students can do, but which would detract from the valuable class tasks of analysis and reflection), teachers and students are able to delve deeper into the intricacies of geometry and proofs.

When students submit their problem sets, though, many still choose to draw figures by hand, though others use software to draw by computer. In whatever case,
students do not outsource the task of learning to the computer. They still learn, and learn well.
How to Counter Multitasking

BALANCE AND common sense.

Educational psychologist Patricia Greenfield of the University of California in Los Angeles believes that we need to develop the higherorder skills that have been harmed by digital immersion: “Abstract vocabulary, mindfulness, reflection, inductive problem solving, critical thinking, and imagination.”

To this end, she advocates that children balance computer use with reading and listening to the radio, which stimulate understanding and imagination.

“It is difficult for schools to teach the reflective habits of mind to children whose informal education and cognitive socialization have not prepared them for this kind of learning,” Greenfield writes in the journal *Science* in 2009.

“Yet society needs [higher thinking skills] more than ever,” she continues. “The developing human mind still needs a balanced media diet, one that is not only virtual, but also allows ample time for the reading and auditory media experiences that lead to these important qualities of mind.”

When cyberspace keeps our children distracted and entertained at all times, how can they learn to rely on their imagination and tap the creativity within?

» COMMUNE WITH NATURE

In 2008, University of Michigan psychologists Marc Berman, John Jonides, and Stephen Kaplan studied if environments affect cognition. They compared natural against urban environments, in terms of possible restorative effects on attention.

When participants took a walk in a natural setting, or even just viewed pictures of nature scenes, their attention scores on tasks improved significantly.

Why? It turns out that nature stimulates us in a different way than urban artificial environments.

“Nature, which is filled with intriguing stimuli, modestly grabs attention in a bottom-up fashion, allowing top-down directed-attention abilities a chance to replenish,” say the researchers in the journal *Psychological Science*.

“Unlike natural environments, urban environments are filled with stimulation that captures attention dramatically and additionally requires directed attention (e.g., to avoid being hit by a car), making them less restorative.”

Apparently, when we minimize our media-saturated surroundings, we give our brains time to restore areas associated with attention, which can help us focus more.

» TAKE TECH BREAKS

According to California State University psychologist Larry Rosen, if we prefer to
multitask, we tend to show more signs of manic behavior. He suggests that we take personal tech breaks, when we focus on a single task for fifteen to thirty minutes, and then, allow ourselves a minute or two to check in on our cell phones or Facebook, before returning to a prolonged period of focusing on one task.

Of course, tech breaks are only effective if we mute our phones and log out completely from social networks, during the focus periods.

**Use technology to its fullest, but don’t allow it to overtake you.**

**KEEP ON TRACK**

Ultimately, we need to get a handle on the frenzy, as Margaret Moore and Paul Hammerness suggest. Moore is director of the Institute of Coaching at McLean Hospital, an affiliate of Harvard Medical School, where Hammerness is a psychiatry professor and an expert on ADHD.

In the article “Five Ways to Conquer Distraction in Our Technology-Crazed World,” for *Brain World Magazine* in 2012, they suggest that we ask ourselves, “What is the goal of the moment, what does your attention need to be focused on?”

“Keep your thinking on track and your plans in place before engaging with the vast possibilities our devices serve up,” they say. “Take charge of using technology to its fullest, but don’t allow it to overtake you. You can then begin to maintain your uni-focus, one task at a time, and successfully ignore the many distractions around you.”

Easier said than done. Perhaps talking to ourselves can help. Moore and Hammerness contend that our brain can hold multiple bits of information in memory, even after they are out of sight.

“This brain skill of gathering and holding your working memory allows you to simultaneously concentrate on the larger important task while accumulating the data needed to better inform what you decide to do next,” they say.

They give a common example of what may happen when we study or work on a task. We may be thinking, “I was doing X, then came across Y, but outcome Z didn’t look good, so I want to return to X.”

Self-talk can enable us to run through the different alternatives in mind, so we can shift and determine which works best.

We can even start by breathing deep and well. Many of us who stay online without stopping, report errors in our work. Afterward, we feel exhausted, as if we were in a digital fog, what *Brain World Magazine* calls “techno-brain burnout.”

**BREATHE DEEPLY**

Linda Stone, a former software executive who has worked with Apple and Microsoft, has now shifted her focus to studying how we interact with technology.
Stone has characterized our state as “continuous partial attention,” where we attend to all things partially but continuously.

The reason? We want to always be connected and to connect to others, whether people, activities, or opportunities.

“To be busy, to be connected, is to be alive, to be recognized, and to matter,” Stone says in her blog.

But continuous partial attention keeps us constantly on alert. It “involves an artificial sense of constant crisis” that is extremely taxing.

One way for us to counter this is to deliberately relax. And a good way to do this is to breathe.

“Notice what happens to your breath as you pull down and check your e-mail or video mail,” says Stone. “Most of us hold our breath. Some of us tighten our upper body. If we’re aware of what we’re doing and we are able to manage our breath—that is, keep breathing—the stress response is minimized.”
Philippine Daily Inquirer columnist Conrado de Quiros said that if ever one were to be caught plagiarizing, it might as well be from Harold Pinter, Salman Rushdie, or Martin Luther King. I agree wholeheartedly.

Sadly, I am certain that most young people do not know that Pinter was a British playwright who received a Nobel for Literature, and probably, the most they would know about Rushdie is the fact that he got a fatwa for The Satanic Verses. Hopefully, students can recite passages from King’s “I Have a Dream,” but I cannot really be sure.

A few years ago, I asked my college students, who were complaining about their midterm marks in English, about the last book they read. Harry Potter was the most common answer. Nowadays, it would probably be the Twilight series, which unfortunately, is not written as well.

There is certainly nothing wrong with Harry Potter, but when I suggested, “Try Tolkien; Lord of the Rings is excellent,” many of them answered politely, “But he’s boring! He takes many pages to describe a single thing. Even the first chapter, which is full of description, is hard to read.”

Since this was a Math and not an English class, I told myself not to press the issue. First mistake.

The majority seemed content with mediocre papers, which they are used to doing at the last minute for practically all their classes, with few consequences.

**REFLECTION PAPERS**

Another time, in Psychology class, I asked students to submit reflection papers about their childhood. Some students wrote well, with insights bolstered by well-thought-out examples.

But a significant number of students wrote badly, with papers I am sure they crammed hurriedly the day before, riddled with syntactic errors, and little or no reflective thought. At the fifth such paper, I stopped correcting their mistakes, and instead announced that hopefully, their low marks would spur them to do better. A couple of students privately asked for pointers to improve their writing, and their subsequent marks did increase.

But the majority seemed content with mediocre papers, which they are used to doing at the last minute for practically all their classes, with few consequences. Again, since this was a Psychology, not a Writing, class, I told myself not to press the issue. Second mistake.
Of course, some students of yesterday also used to plagiarize, but as Inquirer columnist Rina Jimenez-David pointed out, with the proliferation of the Internet, it is so much easier to do so today.

Add this to the fact that, as my Ateneo colleague Marichi Guevarra puts it, “Students find it hard to think these days,” plagiarism and other forms of shortcuts will occur again and again.

Anytime we are satisfied with mediocre work (and all of us are guilty of this at some point), we contribute to a culture of plagiarism, cheating, and shortcuts.

But how can students learn to think? In this cacophonous age, information is easily accessible, yet with such access comes a lot of junk, which many students do not filter, and various pointless activities, which they cannot resist.

How can they have time to read good books, if they spend hours blogging or texting (in mangled language) every day? If they don’t read, how can they write well? How can they learn to reflect on their lives, if they are uncomfortable with silence?

Who is at fault then? All of us.

Teachers who do not expect excellence from students, who give bonus points for average work, who themselves have stopped learning.

Parents who hire tutors to do their children’s assignments, who latch on to educational fads rather than helping their kids develop solid study habits, who fear that steady work is too much pressure on their offspring.

Students who cheat rather than study, who cut and paste others’ work and pass them off as their own, who go to review centers to cram what is supposed to be many years’ worth of learning into a few sessions.

Anytime we are satisfied with mediocre work (and all of us are guilty of this at some point), we contribute to a culture of plagiarism, cheating, and shortcuts.
The Power of the Router

OUR CHILDREN NEED computers to do homework, yes. They write essays, they create presentations, they do artwork. We are not so much concerned with the hours they spend doing these activities, but rather on the lengthy time wasted on mindless surfing, entertaining themselves, and social networking for non-educational purposes.

One solution that Ichel suggests to parents, which she thinks they find bizarre, is to unplug the routers, not the computers. Many of us are baffled because we don’t know what routers are.

A router is the little machine connected to the phone line via cable, and is responsible for sending out Wi-Fi signals in a particular area. The router can be plugged in and unplugged.

Frankly, our children are not entirely doing research or school-related matters online, a lot of the time.

Our children and teens often give us the excuse that they need to use the computer for school work. Fine, but we can regulate their Internet use.

How about research, they ask? Google produces results in seconds. Sure, it will take time to read the material. But if our children have a concrete idea on what specific topics or images to look for, and discipline themselves not to click on unrelated links, then they do not need to spend more than an hour or two on research.

»FILTER FAILURE

New York University new-media professor Clay Shirky says that the problem is not so much information overload as it is filter failure.

While ostensibly studying, many kids and teens just cruise, surf, and just go through one link after another in the web until they lose track of what they are looking for in the first place. The culprit? While attempting to research, they also log onto chats, Facebook or Twitter, read other blogs, upload photos or download music, and even do online gaming.

Frankly, our children are not entirely doing research or school-related matters online, a lot of the time.

We lament that our children often do not follow our rules. Nagging seldom works, but when academic and behavioral concerns already exist, then external measures need to be set. One measure is to unplug the router.

Let us discuss with our children reasonable limits for them to go online to research, check messages, and download personal materials. Our children are expected to make full use of this time to work on tasks they need for school and for social communication.
The Internet is not needed for word processing, editing photos, preparing presentations, or compiling spreadsheets.

If our children go past the agreed-upon time, whether or not they are finished with what they have set out to do, then we unplug or even take away the router, thus severing Internet connection.

If they complete their tasks earlier, then they have more free time to surf for entertainment or social networking.

Again, the Internet is not needed for word processing, editing photos, preparing presentations, or compiling spreadsheets.

If our children insist that they need more time online, then we can first check their work to see what they have done so far. Based on our judgment, we can either plug in the router or let them live with the consequences. Or we can extend online time one day but cut back their allowed time the next day.

The router is the gateway to the World Wide Web. Unplugging the router instills in our children the discipline of managing their time and resources properly. Unplugging also encourages them to focus on the tasks at hand, and not to be dependent on cutting, pasting, or searching for something on Google.

Unplugging the router gives us more time to attend to more substantial matters.
Children with growing-up concerns increasingly seek the help of developmental and behavioral pediatricians. Due to the huge number of cases, coupled by the fact that there are not many professionals in the field, it usually takes a few months to get an appointment for initial screening and assessment.

According to Jacqueline Navarro of the Medical City’s Center for Developmental Pediatrics, when screening children at risk, pediatricians discuss with the family about the severity of children’s exposure to multimedia and gadget use. They follow the 2011 policy statement of the American Academy of Pediatrics: no screen time for kids below two years, and a maximum of two hours a day for older children.

Navarro commonly encounters children with poor eye contact and delayed language. Many have difficulty with hand-eye coordination: Children who are already using pencils and crayons have difficulty holding them because their early exposure to digital media has made them used to using their fingers to tap on tablets.

One of the things we ask during history taking is how many gadgets the child is involved with.

During initial screening, Navarro asks about possible innate disabilities, developmental lags, and intelligence levels. Screen time and gadget use is also scrutinized when evaluating behavioral or other developmental problems.

“One of the things we ask during history taking is how many gadgets the child is involved with,” Navarro says. Parents would often say, “It is hard to take them (the gadgets) away!”

Once diagnosis has been made, Navarro strongly recommends that parents take away screen time in favor of healthier alternatives.

“Parents should do other stimulating activities and follow the recommended interventions to address the child’s concerns,” Dr. Navarro says. She talks about a number of successful cases, where the parents have followed her recommendations. Upon returning to the clinic a month or two after initial diagnosis, “The problems the child presented upon screening have already improved.”

Navarro says, “We know, for a fact, that digital media use has affected the language development, particularly the focus of the children.” Some kids who are exposed to digital media have regression of skills. Instead of developing their
abilities, they regress to more childish behavior.

“Children get bored easily with so many things,” Navarro says. “Entertainment is so complex. Kids can watch videos for about one minute, and then shift to the next. Definitely, they have less attention, less focus, given the amount of information [that comes at them even within] a span of five minutes!”

Both the content of the information and the speed it can be obtained can both be harmful for children, as their brains are wired differently.

“Is gadget use really good or is it really bad?” Navarro asks. “I have been introduced to the system but for our children, it’s their lifestyle. We do not know what will happen in the future.”

**There are no excuses: Parents need to be involved!**

Nevertheless, Navarro urges us to have strict regulation on gadgets and multimedia use. If gadgets and screens are already part of a kid’s routine, then there should be a plan on how to manage them.

“When parents take out digital media from their kids’ routines, they should be a plan on what to replace the freed-up time,” Navarro says. “They should be involved in the care of their children. There are no excuses: Parents need to be involved!”

Navarro considers multimedia as a two-edged sword. While it has improved our lives in many ways, Navarro says, “We have to be responsible in using it. We need to take care of the young brains as we do not yet know the extent of the effects it has on our children.

---

*Jacqueline O. Navarro, MD, DPPS, FPSDBP is a developmental and behavioral pediatrician. Her clinic is located at Unit 907 of the Medical Arts Tower in The Medical City in Pasig City. Contact numbers are 636-2818 and 635-6789 local 5104.*
Battling Distraction in Schools

AMERICAN TEENS spend only 65 percent of their time studying, according to educational psychologist Larry Rosen, who observed children purportedly studying in classrooms. After just two minutes, they gravitated from reading and writing to going on Facebook and gaming, even if they knew they were being observed.

In our survey, 45 percent of students say they find it hard to focus on their teachers’ lectures.

According to Anya Kamenetz of Teacher’s College in Columbia University, schools try to stem the tide of distraction by doing any of three methods.

**EXTERNAL CONTROL**

The first two methods presuppose external control: either wielded by authorities or done through computers.

Control by authorities means that the teacher and the school are in charge. One school bans cell phones. Another bans the use of iPhones to get screen shots of the blackboard. A teacher bans her students from texting while in class.

External controls are not just done in basic education; they extend all the way to college and even graduate school. According to pediatrician Emmalyn L. Reveldez, who teaches at the Cebu Institute of Medicine, the school has a policy of banning cell phones, particularly during exams (among other reasons, smart phones increase the risk of student cheating). When found, cell phones are confiscated and kept in school for a whole semester.

When teachers are passionate, lively, and engaging, they can catch and hold student attention. Several students in our focus group discussions say that if the teacher is masterful, then they pay attention.

Teachers need to become the best mentors they can be.

Control through technology means designing tools in such a way as to encourage students to use them well. An iPad can be programmed to run just one app at a time. The Freedom app can shut down the Internet for eight hours at a time.

Other devices include “analytics that can tell when a student’s attention is wandering, user interfaces that deliver gentle reminders, feedback loops like timers, scoreboards, or musical cues to help students focus and stay on task,” say Kamenetz.

A word about PowerPoint presentations. Many students say that when teachers use text and photos that are not interesting, then PowerPoint slides are as boring as Manila paper. It would be helpful for each slide to show points one by one, instead of showing everything at once. When students see a barrage of material crammed onto a slide, then they are inclined to just copy everything they see and not listen to the lecture anymore.

Teachers need to be trained on how to make lectures interesting (such as avoiding a
monotonous voice). Good teachers can also give workshops to share how they manage to capture student attention.

Moreover, many parents tell us that they hope teachers will not disseminate reminders and reviewers through Facebook or e-mail. Instead, these should properly be done in class, since not everyone has Internet access.

**INTERNAL CONTROL**

Of course, the holy grail is internal control, where students learn to monitor themselves effectively to ensure they stay on task.

Strategies such as goal-setting, getting an “accountability buddy,” or even timing tech breaks can help students focus. The aim is to have them learn to fight distractions by themselves.

Parents also recommend that sessions with the guidance counselor include discussing ways for students to regulate themselves when using the Internet, together with the consequences of oversharing or inappropriate use. Parents fear that when their children apply for jobs, inappropriate posts may hinder their chances in this regard.

External controls can help structure students in their fight against distraction, but in the final analysis, the only ones who can really ensure that they learn well are the students themselves.
ICHHEL SPEAKS
In school year 2012–2013, Miriam College High School (MCHS) introduced the use of the tablet to its first year students. This is in line with the school’s e-learning tool project—regarding the tablet as a learning tool.

Each student has her own tablet, and each is held responsible for its use, maintenance, and upkeep. For example, recharging of batteries is the student’s responsibility. In case the tablet runs out of power, the student must be prepared for alternative ways to learn, and is expected to participate in class and be responsible for her work.

Along with the gadget, each student is given the Policy Guidebook on the Use of the Tablet Personal Computers. This is a concrete way for the school to let students use technology, but still remain at the helm of guiding them on proper usage.

**Even the use of wallpaper and screensavers is regulated by certain guidelines.**

The guidebook has clear rules in place, such as the following:

- The tablet is used to assist learning in the classroom, to complete academic requirements, and to aid in school-related endeavors.
- The tablet cannot be used to access inappropriate sites and materials.
- Only software approved by the MCHS Communication Technology Office and the Academic Committee can be installed on the tablet. This means that entertainment sites, electronic games, and unlicensed software are not allowed on the tablet.
- Each student is the sole user of her own tablet. Tablets are not to be loaned to anyone else.

Interestingly, even the use of wallpaper and screensavers is regulated by certain guidelines.

The school is very clear in stating the possible violations regarding tablet use.

Major infractions include illegal downloading, accessing, storing, or using of the tablet in line with entertainment materials (music, movies, videos, games, etc.); unacceptable wallpapers; pornographic or offensive materials; unauthorized recording and distributing of photos or videos of people in the school community, including faculty and administrators.

Minor infractions include unattended or lost tablets, missing accessories; unauthorized use of e-mail during class or study hall, gaming during class time; unnecessary loaning of tablet peripherals, and “over-personalization” of the tablet.

A schedule of corrective measures for each infraction is published in the guidebook. They may include withholding the student’s use of the tablet for a particular duration.
Furthermore, in order to facilitate e-learning, MCHS maximizes the Genyo Learning Management System and other online learning platforms such as Edmodo where the teachers upload the learning materials which students can access in school or at home. The use of e-mails and social-networking sites is strictly disallowed during school contact time. Moreover, both students and teachers are discouraged to use them for academic purposes.

**The use of e-mails and social-networking sites is strictly disallowed during school contact time.**

**GRADUATE SCHOOL**

As a graduate student, I applaud Miriam College for being technologically adept yet having the proper restrictions for the use of technology.

We are given our username and password for Wi-Fi access to the Internet, and we are only allowed to have one gadget per user to log in. It means that I can only connect to the Wi-Fi using my tablet, but if I’m logged in, I cannot use my phone or laptop to access it. I usually access my e-mails and search online for journals through Google Scholar.

This is helpful for me, as I try to balance family, work, and studies. Most of the places inside the campus I go to have Wi-Fi access so I am able to maximize my time on campus.

I am relieved that Miriam College has site restrictions regarding social-networking sites. Whenever I attempt going to some sites that the system prohibits, the Cyberoam screen pops up, as if saying, “Oops, you’re not allowed in here!” However, between 12 to 1 p.m. and after 5 p.m., the system allows the use of Facebook and other sites.

Just like a mom regulating her child’s use of gadgets. Do your work first. Go online after.
No Cable TV, More Time for Other Things

By David Francisco S. Dionisio
AB Communications, Ateneo de Manila University

We never had cable TV at home. This was something which I resented a bit when I was younger, because I liked watching TV.

At times, friends would talk about particular TV shows which I didn’t know, because free TV programming didn’t carry those shows. I was also jealous of those who got to watch advanced episodes of my favorite TV show, *Mighty Morphin Power Rangers*, while I had to wait for the program to air every Friday.

But looking back, I’m actually thankful we didn’t have cable TV, as it would have probably caused me to watch more television. Not having cable also encouraged me to take up other hobbies like playing the guitar, singing, acting in school theater, and playing basketball.

**No cable TV made me take up other hobbies.**

If it was already difficult to get us kids off the television then, I bet it is much harder to do so now. If in the past there was only the television and the radio to contend with, these days kids have so many other devices to spend their time on: game consoles, the PC, iPads, iPods, cell phones, and so on.

Spending too much time on these things may cause children to become reclusive and to lack people skills.

How can parents prevent their children from spending their entire day on their gadgets?

Get children interested in other hobbies or interests. Let them try out a sport or a musical instrument. Encourage them to leave the house and teach them to enjoy outdoor games: play Frisbee, shoot balls, swim, go on a picnic in a nearby park or field.

Get friends involved so that kids would be more interested and willing to put their gadgets down and explore other activities.

Set house rules with regard the use of gadgets. Strike a deal with kids on how long they can use their gadgets every day.

When we were younger, our parents set a one-hour rule on how long we could watch TV in a day. And although it was difficult for them to always monitor us and we ended up watching a little more TV than this, the rule served as a guide and we could have easily watched so much more if there weren’t any restrictions. Don’t buy
gadgets for kids until they are mature enough to use them well. Perhaps mid-teens would be a good starting time. Exposing them to gadgets at a later age will not only prevent them from getting addicted to gadgets early, but they will also enjoy the gadgets more because they will appreciate them more, especially if teens were asked to pay in some way for their own gadgets.

**Teens will enjoy gadgets more if they were asked to pay in some way for their own gadgets.**

Hopefully, kids will also be better prepared to moderate their gadget use because they are more mature and responsible at this point.

---

**Marge Acosta and Family**

**GADGET CENTRAL**

Margarita “Marge” Acosta is a paragon of a working parent who definitely has her act together when it comes to guiding her children. She has been able to do this in spite of the additional challenge of having a very mobile husband.

Currently, George’s occupation as a pilot based overseas enables him to visit his family on a monthly basis. During their children’s early years, he was based locally but had a very erratic schedule, so much of the parenting of their son and daughter fell onto Marge’s lap.

Son Marc is now in the Ateneo School of Medicine and Public Health, while daughter seventeen-year-old Arielis taking up Fine Arts–Information Design at the Ateneo de Manila University.

Marge considers her profession as an educator as a huge blessing, because it allowed her to have a career with a flexible schedule. This enabled her to devote time to her children, especially during the crucial childhood years.

Early on, Marge had explained to her children the nature of their father’s work and how it actually benefits them. Ariel misses her dad a lot, but she knows that he has to work abroad, especially now that her brother is in medical school and she is in college.

When the children write notes to their father, they make it a point to thank him for working very hard for them. George has a good relationship with the children and has faithfully kept in touch with them on a daily basis. He used to call them over the phone three times a day and now they connect through FaceTime.

George’s monthly visits are a special bonding time with the kids when he engages them in deep conversation.

Since Marge is an educator, she really watched and checked her children closely (made *tutok*). When the children were in grade school, Marge told them that their primary
role is to study.

Her own diligence at studying for her master’s and doctor’s degrees while teaching, served as a model for her own children. Both children would see her busy at research and typing on the computer for long hours. She had no difficulty sitting them down to study for three hours straight, without complaint. Schedules were set for the children and time for technology was a reward for accomplishments.

Marge admits she has high expectations of her children, but tries hard not to pressure them. George tries to tame down her high standards by saying, “Your mom is very grade-conscious, but what I ask is for you to give me an A in decorum, good behavior, conduct, and social skills. Be good people.”

Marge used to have strict rules, but as her children matured and she saw that they were responsible, she eased up on the rules, including original guidelines of “No TV or computer in the bedroom.”

However, Marge frequently reminds her children to always be on guard with the things they read on the Internet. They should be able to determine whether the information they are taking is authentic or bogus.

Marge takes pride in not ever having been called to school for disciplinary action. As a little girl, Ariel was a bit headstrong and loved to explore.

“You tell her not to step on something, and the more she will do it at least once, because she wants to know what will happen if she steps on it,” Marge says. Marge jokes that her daughter takes after her.

Ariel had sworn that she was not going to imitate her mother, but now admits, “I’m getting to be more like my mom!”

Marc, on the other hand, is very sweet. The children are both achievers, and in fact, Marge was chosen to participate in our 2004 Ateneo Best Practices Survey because Marc did well in school.

Ariel had a bit of a struggle with Math, but she was weaned from Marge’s supervision at an earlier age because she showed more independence and maturity. In contrast, Marge sat down with her son until he was in Grade Seven for study time.

The Acosta household is like a gadget hub. Name the gadget and they have it: tablets, laptops, gaming consoles, and more. The children are digital natives, but Marge just has an ordinary cell phone for communicating. Lately, she has become a digital migrant as she is now attached to her iPad.

George indulges their children with the latest gadget as he is exposed to them in his travels. He does not think he is spoiling them because he just wants them to learn and be updated. He himself is a gamer, an interest that he shares with his son. They also go online for movies and the news which they talk about at the dinner table.

As children, Marc and Ariel played with non-digital toys, but it cannot be denied that they are a techie family. At a young age, their grandfather gifted them with VTech and the latest techie toys that he considered educational, but Marge made sure that she was always there to guide them.
At four years old, Marc started playing games on the family computer. Marge has set rules but admits that her son has a slight addiction to gaming. But since she had laid down the rules clearly, he knew he had to study before he was allowed computer time.

One rule is: “If you want perks, study and give me good grades. You also need to sleep.” Marge never tires of admonishing Marc, “Please, honey, you have to take care of your eyes, get some sleep.”

Marge is very concerned with sleep because she hears of mothers who talk about their children staying up till early morning on the computer. Now that Marc is an adult, he is still into gaming which remains a concern for Marge. But she acknowledges that gaming is his “me time” and he himself asserts that it is his way of de-stressing.

Since Marc is in medical school, he has a very heavy schedule, so on his free day, he chooses to spend his time gaming.

Ariel had her own phone when she was in Grade Three. She was given her own laptop when she graduated from grade school. But she is a natural bookworm and prefers reading.

Ariel is a techie, but is definitely not addicted to technology. She watches movies and content for females on YouTube (such as putting on make-up), but after spending time on this, she stops.

Ariel cannot leave the house without a book. Given a choice between a Kindle e-reader or a tablet, she insists on reading a paper book.

Communication lines are open in the family. Mother and daughter have a close relationship which they have sustained up to the present. Marge lets her daughter ramble on, even if the topic does not really interest her. Ariel appreciates her mother’s patience, saying, “I don’t think I can even listen to myself, but you still do.” Marge goes along with the stories but “pulls her back down to earth” at a certain point.

Ariel’s friends appreciate Marge, because she does not judge what they do, and her house is always open to them. Ariel is able to share stories of her friends’ problems because she knows that her mother can keep secrets.

Marge considers their home a halfway house for her children’s friends, especially for those who are going through a difficult time. Her counsel is very much appreciated by her daughter’s friends.

When the children were younger, they would sometimes complain of boredom. Marge would reply, “How can you be bored when you have everything here in the house? Don’t say that you’re bored! Go out, stare at the sky and appreciate the beauty around you. Find something new to do.”

Ariel is creative. She writes, paints, and was on the debate team in Miriam College High School. She excelled at debate, but fell ill due to the rigorous training schedule. At first, her mother urged her to continue because she saw how good Ariel was at it. But when Ariel decided not to pursue debate, Marge respected her decision.

According to Marge, wisdom does not necessarily come with age because we can help share with our children or supply them with much-needed wisdom.
Ariel has learned to think for herself when she encounters a problem by asking herself these questions: “What will I do? What would Mom do?”

As a parent, Marge is aware of the challenges that go with technology especially since her son is a gamer and their family is surrounded by the latest gadgets. She believes that parents need to constantly re-tool themselves in order to manage the development that children go through.

“One day you are parents of three-year-olds. Before you know it, they have turned fifteen,” Marge says.

The temptation to overprotect is always there, but we have to learn to let go of our children and trust them.

As an educator, Marge has observed the influence of social media on her own students. As soon as they wake up, they log on to Facebook. Accessible Wi-Fi connection in many areas has made it possible for them to easily use their gadgets for social networking. They get immediate gratification at the press or tap of a button or an icon.

Marge considers gadgets as distractions. When she gives her students assignments to bring certain things, at least three of the twenty students will be sure to forget to bring them.

Today’s young parents are blessed with a lot of parenting books and seminars that provide information to help them in raising their children well. These are advantages, but Marge believes that what is essential in raising good children is to spend time with them, trust them, and engage them in conversation.

Sometimes there are sacrifices to be made careerwise, but these will all be worth it. Marge advises parents to not let technology babysit our children. The nanny is still a better caregiver because she at least provides human interaction with the child.

“Control the gadgets,” says Marge, “do not let them control you.”

DEEPER READING


Chapter Four
Real Friends,
Facebook Friends
Lack of Empathy in a Wired World

“YOUNG PEOPLE ARE so rude these days,” says a teacher in a co-ed school. “They are so loud and noisy in cafés, not caring for those working on their laptops. In school, no one volunteers to erase the board or carry my bag, unlike in the past. When they rush past on their way to nowhere and happen to bump into you, they do not even apologize. In the movies, they keep on texting, and even talk on the phone, not caring if they are spoiling the experience for other people. They are so used to characters being killed left and right on screen that they do not seem to care anymore. “Our youth,” he concludes, “lack empathy.”

Several Ateneo de Manila college students say that their relationships start online. Though not ideal, there is nothing inherently wrong with this. But then, their relationships also tend to end as abruptly, and publicly.

A male student angrily bashes his ex-girlfriend because she broke up with him through text. “When I confronted her, she would not even talk to me!” he fumes.

Another student found out he was dumped only when his ex’s Facebook status reverted to “Single.” “The whole world knew we were no longer together, except me,” he said. “She doesn’t have a heart.”

»GENERATION ME

In 2011, psychologists Sara Konrath, Edward O’Brien, and Courtney Hsing of the University of Michigan analyzed seventy-two different studies of 14,000 college students in the United States for the last thirty years, from 1979 to 2009.

They found that college students today score 40 percent lower in empathy than those of the past decades, with the biggest drop coming at the turn of the millennium.

Students today do not agree as much with statements such as “I sometimes try to understand my friends better by imagining how things look from their perspective,” and “I often have tender, concerned feelings for people less fortunate than me.”

Various reasons have been advanced for the lack of empathy of Generation Me. Violent media can be a factor, since it can numb sensitivity to others’ pain.

But the rise of social media can also contribute to this decrease in empathy.

“The ease of having ‘friends’ online might make people more likely to just tune out when they don’t feel like responding to others’ problems, a behavior that could carry over offline,” O’Brien says.

According to the University of Michigan News, “Add in the hypercompetitive atmosphere and inflated expectations of success … and you have a social environment that works against slowing down and listening to someone who needs a bit of sympathy.”

“College students today may be so busy worrying about themselves and their own issues that they don’t have time to spend empathizing with others, or at least perceive such
time to be limited,” O’Brien adds.

It may seem easier to start relationships online, but this may not necessarily transfer over to maintaining a stable one in real life.

“There have been significant declines in the number of organizations and meetings people are involved in as well as in the number of average family dinners and friendly visits,” the researchers say. “Indeed, people today have a significantly lower number of close others to whom they can express their private thoughts and feelings.”

If we throw in the easy accessibility and lightning speeds of technologies, we tend to get more frustrated or even bored when things do not go as we want them to, resulting in less empathic interactions.

To top it off, technologies now are fragmented. Think of a family with each member on his or her own iPad, iPhone, laptop, and so forth, channelled to his or her own personal interests and self-expression.

In a world of fragmentation, it would be less easy for many of us to reach out to other people and practice empathy in our dealings with them.

**VIOLENT GAMES**

Video gaming may be an especially troubling culprit.

In 2007, psychologists Steven Kirsh and Jeffrey Mounts of State University of New York–Geneseo studied young people before and after they played a violent video game. Usually we are able to identify happy faces faster than sad or angry ones.

Before the game, the participants were a lot faster at identifying a happy face compared with an angry one, but afterward, they were significantly slower.

These findings are consistent with other researches that links violent media exposure to aggression in social information processing, and even psychopathology, such as panic disorder, anxiety disorder, and depression.

Not all video games are equal. The violent ones are, not surprisingly, more worrisome.

“Reported levels of weekly violent media consumption, but not nonviolent media consumption, appear to induce a negative processing bias in the recognition of emotional expressions,” say Kirsh and Mounts.

“Violent video game play may predispose … [us]… to perceive anger rapidly, when anger is present, indicating an attentional bias toward threatening affect,” they continue. “This … may then increase the likelihood of acting aggressively.”

If we are primed to react more aggressively, due to a steady diet of violent media, then it comes as no surprise that we are also primed to show less empathy toward others.

**Not all video games are equal. The violent ones are, not surprisingly, more worrisome.**
NO INHIBITIONS

Rider University psychologist John Suler describes what he calls the online disinhibition effect, when we are more prone to be less empathetic when we communicate with each other through technology.

When we talk to each other face to face, we can see facial expressions, hear tones of voice, and watch postures, so we have continuing feedback on what the other thinks and feels. Then we can more accurately and readily perceive what the other is trying to convey.

But online, the most we can rely on is emoticons, and these are poor substitutes for the real thing. That is why misunderstandings often occur when we just text, chat, or post online.

It is easier for us to “run away after posting a message that is personal, emotional, or hostile,” says Suler in the journal Cyberpsychology and Behavior. “It feels safe putting it ‘out there’ where it can be left behind.”

Suler quotes Kali Munro, an online psychotherapist, who describes the situation as an “emotional hit-and-run.”

Now we refuse to believe that our young people choose to be less empathetic. When they are asked to take the time to truly reflect on the consequences of their actions, many of them do care.

Lack of empathy is linked to a distracted life, plain and simple.

BRAIN SCANS

In 2009, a study associating certain areas of the brain with empathy was presented at the US National Academy of Sciences by neuroscientists Mary Helen Immordino-Yang, Andrea McColl, Hanna Damasio, and Antonio Damasio of the University of Southern California (USC) in Los Angeles. The researchers directed subjects to listen to stories of people experiencing pain, either physical (e.g., from sports injuries) or psychological (e.g., grief, social rejection). Afterward, subjects’ brains were scanned as they attempted to recall the stories. The results were intriguing. Subjects’ brains reacted very quickly to physical pain, but not as fast to psychological pain.

Physical pain is a low-level emotion, and the primitive areas of our brain respond almost immediately to physical pain. But empathy and compassion are higher-order emotions, and our brains are slower to respond to psychological pain. In short, we respond quickly when we see someone grimacing in pain, but more slowly when he looks sad. So in order for us to be more compassionate and empathetic, we need time to process our thoughts and emotions.

“For some kinds of thought, especially moral decision-making about other people’s social and psychological situations, we need to allow for adequate time and reflection,” says Immordino-Yang in USC News.

“If things are happening too fast, you may not ever fully experience emotions about
other people’s psychological states and that would have implications for your morality,” she adds.

**COGNITIVE LOAD**

In 2013, neuroscientist Sylvia Morelli of Stanford University and psychologist Matthew Lieberman of the University of California in Los Angeles scanned the brains of thirty-two people to study how empathically they responded as they looked at happy, sad, or anxious images of others.

Researchers found a “core set” of brain areas involved in empathy. These regions include the dorsomedial prefrontal cortex (DMPFC), the medial prefrontal cortex (MPFC), the temporoparietal junction (TPJ), the amygdala, the ventral anterior insula, and the septal area.

The prefrontal cortex is the seat of human reasoning, and does not fully develop until we are in our mid- or late twenties. The amygdala is the more primitive area responsible for basic emotions like fear. The anterior insula helps us pay attention to events. The septal area has long been implicated in empathy.

Aside from studying the brain areas in empathy, Morelli and Lieberman also wanted to discover whether paying attention would help engender empathy. The participants then watched the pictures of other people, with varying facial expressions, either naturally or when they were forced not to pay full attention. In the latter case, they had to memorize an eight-digit number as they looked at the pictures. This additional task increased what psychologists called their “cognitive load.”

The results were not surprising. The more distracted the participants were, the less empathy they felt.

“Cognitive load reduces the subjective experience of empathy, as well as decreasing neural response in several core empathy-related regions (i.e., DMPFC, MPFC, TPJ, amygdala)and social cognition-related regions,” say Morelli and Lieberman in the journal *Frontiers of Neuroscience*.

“Empathy for various emotions is not entirely automatic,” the researchers say. When we are distracted, our empathy levels go down.

“People with uncluttered brains processed—and felt—things more deeply,” says science writer Jeffrey Kluger, who investigated the phenomenon of happiness in *Time* magazine in July 2013.

The more distracted we are, the less happier we probably get. Kluger quotes Morelli who says, “Being distracted reduces our empathy for others and blunts responses in the brain. So it’s possible that being distracted may also reduce our own happiness.”

Happiness aside, these findings have deeper ramifications.

“These findings indicate that attention impacts empathic processing and may play a role in empathic dysfunction in mental disorders such as autism,” the researchers conclude in the journal.
STILLNESS

Developmental psychologist pioneer Erik Erikson believes that an essential component of our teens’ search for identity is stillness, when they can take a step back from the world, reflect on what changes are happening in their lives, and basically to hear themselves think.

But in our teens’ digital lives, stillness is almost impossible to come by.

“Today’s adolescents have no less need than those of previous generations to learn empathic skills, to think about their values and identity, and to manage and express feelings,” says Massachusetts Institute of Technology clinical psychologist Sherry Turkle in her book Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other.

Our children and our teens need time to reflect, to think, to discover themselves, others, and the world around them.

But with intrusive technology, “when is downtime, when is stillness?” Turkle asks.

We are not saying that text messaging and social networking make reflection and thought impossible. But these “do little to cultivate” them.

AT THE DROP OF A HAT

In our wired world, where instant gratification is the norm, how can empathy thrive?

For example, since starting relationships seem so easy and smooth online, these seem not to be prized as much. Therefore, ending relationships is treated as easily.

“How [can] … children … develop empathy and compassion when the electronic world allows them to meet and discard people at the drop of a hat?” say teen counselors Barbara Melton and Susan Shankle in their book, What in the World Are Your Kids Doing Online?

“The rapidity and parallel processing of attention-requiring information, which hallmark the digital age, might reduce the frequency of full experience of such emotions, with potentially negative consequences,” say Immordino-Yang and her team.


Is this why our youth seem to be so insensitive and clueless nowadays?

Not so fast. Immordino-Yang and her team’s study does not pinpoint a direct cause-and-effect. “It would be rash to jump to the conclusion that the Internet is undermining our moral sense,” says journalist Nicholas Carr in his book, The Shallows. But Carr continues, “It would not be rash to suggest that as the Net reroutes our vital paths and diminishes our capacity for contemplation, it is altering the depth of our emotions as well as our thoughts.”

NARCISSISM
“Children have a hard enough time learning empathy without being actively pushed away from it,” says psychologist and new-media expert Jim Taylor in his book, *Raising Generation Tech*, where he cites studies showing that kids often find it difficult to recognize the emotions of other people.

When children spend hours in front of a screen, things get worse. Taylor describes the “triple whammy when it comes to learning how to develop positive relationships.”

First, children are inundated with messages from popular culture that promote entitlement and self-centeredness (think about celebrity reality shows).

Second, children do not have enough exposure to messages that promote selflessness and empathy, since so much of what they see on screen revolves around violence, aggression, selfishness, materialism, and so forth.

Third, whatever time they spend online immersed in popular culture is “time not spent experiencing selflessness and empathy as both the giver and the receiver.”

**DEPRESSION**

“Technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities,” says Turkle. “And as it turns out, we are very vulnerable indeed.”

“We are lonely but fearful of intimacy,” Turkle continues. “Digital connections … may offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other. We’d rather text than talk.”

In 2009, researchers Tiong-Thye Goh and Yen-Pei Huang of Victoria University in Wellington, New Zealand, studied more than 15,000 teens who regularly blog on MySpace. These teens hail from Australia, New Zealand, and the United Kingdom. Using a computer program, the researchers looked for key words that are associated with depression, including suicidal thoughts and tendencies. The shocking result? One in six teens was at risk.

One upside to this unfortunate phenomenon would be the use of technology, such as data-mining strategies, to monitor those at risk for depression and suicide.

“Social-networking sites have in recent years become an increasingly popular avenue for young people to express and to share their thoughts, views, and emotions,” they say in the journal *Vine*.

“When young people are emotionally distressed, for instance, instead of the traditional channel of consulting friends, parents or specialists, social-networking blogs may provide a channel to share and release their emotions and intentions,” they say. “The use of text-mining and data-warehousing technologies [can] identify and monitor bloggers who are depressed and may be at risk of suicide, self-harm or harming others.”

In 2011, University of Wisconsin-Madison researchers Megan Moreno, Lauren Jelenchick, Katie Egan, Elizabeth Cox, Henry Young, Kerry Gannon, and Tara Becker studied 200 college student Facebook profiles. This time they zeroed in on status updates to investigate whether there were potential signs of depression. The results were also
shocking. Twenty-five percent of Facebook profiles displayed depression symptoms, with 2.5 percent possibly experiencing major depression.

Now called “Facebook depression,” this develops when preteens and teens spend an inordinate amount of time on Facebook, and start to have classic signs of depression.

“The intensity of the online world is thought to be a factor that may trigger depression in some adolescents,” says the American Academy of Pediatrics in a 2011 Clinical Report entitled “The Impact of Social Media on Children, Adolescents, and Families.”

The report continues, “As with offline depression, preadolescents and adolescents who suffer from Facebook depression are at risk for social isolation and sometimes turn to risky Internet sites and blogs for ‘help’ that may promote substance abuse, unsafe sexual practices, or aggressive or self-destructive behaviors.”

Again there are upsides to even this trend. Students who receive positive comments and support from peers, after posting depressive thoughts on Facebook, are more likely to open up and disclose their thoughts and feelings.

“Given the frequency of depression symptom displays on public profiles, SNSs could be an innovative avenue for combating stigma surrounding mental-health conditions, or for identifying students at risk for depression,” the researchers conclude in their article “Feeling Bad on Facebook” in the journal Depression and Anxiety.

**COMBATING DEPRESSION**

Depression is not to be taken lightly, since in the worst cases, it can lead to suicide (or even homicide, when negative emotions are directed outward). We need to monitor how our children and teens use media. Are the TV shows they are watching depressing? How about their music? Are they receiving undue criticism or catty comments online? For young children, we can view TV shows or videos with them, in order to observe the effects of such media on them. This means no devices should be available to children or preteens in the privacy of their bedrooms.

These safeguards also apply to video games. Rosen’s research reveals that preteens who use more technology and play more video games tend to be more depressed. So he believes that parents need to be proactive, instead of reactive, when it comes to moderating gaming for kids.

If our teens are depressed, playing online games with dialogue that can be intense may further upset them. If we let our teens play these games, we need to discuss proper conduct.

We need to be vigilant about signs of existing, or even impending depression. For example, if our children tend to withdraw from real social interactions (especially if they did not used to be shy or withdrawn) or previously liked activities, then this can be a sign. At this point, we need to help our children seek help, preferably from a trained professional. We also need to help our children incorporate physical and real-world activities to balance their digital time.
LOST HUMANITY

“Not only do millennials lack the empathy that allows them to feel concerned for others, but they also have trouble even intellectually understanding others’ points of view,” says *Time* columnist Joel Stein in his article, “The Me Me Me Generation” in May 2013.

Even President Barack Obama, who credits his victories partially to the powers of technology, has this to say during a commencement address at Hampton University in Virginia in 2010:

You’re coming of age in a 24/7 media environment that bombards us with all kinds of content and exposes us to all kinds of arguments, some of which don’t always rank that high on the truth meter. And with iPods and iPads, and Xboxes and PlayStations—none of which I know how to work—information becomes a distraction, a diversion, a form of entertainment, rather than a tool of empowerment, rather than the means of emancipation. So all of this is not only putting pressure on you; it’s putting new pressure on our country and on our democracy.

In her book, Distracted, American journalist Maggie Jackson puts it poignantly:

What stories are we weaving as we look to the machine to comfort and transform us—indeed, to be a part of us? Within this messy convergence, we are on the brink of redefining humanity, but in ways that ultimately may impoverish us. In a distracted time, our virtual, split-screen, and nomadic lives nurture diffusion, fragmentation, and detachment. We begin to forget how to pay attention to one another deeply and begin to attend more to fallacy and artifice. Trust, depth of thought, and finally a certain spirit of humanity begin to be lost.
THE STORY OF JABEZ RODRIGUEZ

Active, mature and vibrant, Jabez Rodriguez is the eldest of three kids. Dad works full-time in the office, while Mom is an entrepreneur who works at home.

Since Jabez was in Grade Two, he has displayed behaviors such as disobedience of classroom rules. He would disrupt the class and fail to cooperate in activities. Jabez would often stand, do other things during class encounters, go around the classroom, or even outside when he cannot keep to his tasks.

This lack of focus has affected his academic performance. When his attention would be called to complete his tasks, he exclaimed, “Hindi ko kaya!” (I can’t do it!)

In Grade Three, Jabez was noted to have difficulty handling feelings and would get into squabbles with classmates. On occasion, he was physically offensive with his classmates. His attention has been called many times by the teacher and the school director.

I have conducted sessions with Jabez and his parents a number of times. We learned that Jabez had been using the PlayStation heavily when he was in Grade Two.

Aside from being too much into gaming, he was exposed to games that have more mature content. He and his neighborhood friends would play video games with violent undertones.

Jabez’s parents have different ways of regulating their son’s gadget use. Jabez sometimes gets away with using gadgets when Mom is out of the house.

Some of Jabez’s behavioral concerns persisted when he was in Grade Three. Together with Karla De Guzman, Director of Early Childhood Department of Colegio Santo Domingo in Cainta, Rizal, I conducted several sessions with Jabez. These were followed by conferences with Jabez’s parents, where we discussed with them their son’s behavior and sought their partnership in helping him improve.

With the discipline issues the boy had, Teacher Karla believed that giving negative sanctions would not address his problems. We put our heads together on how we could help the child and ensure that the parents work on intervention strategies for Jabez at home. Teacher Karla and I strongly recommended that screen time for Jabez be removed, to be replaced with other activities such as physical play, sports, and appropriate house chores so that the child could spend his energies productively.

We urged the parents to be consistent in enforcing this, as well as other house rules and discipline styles. We knew that Jabez’s issues would be best addressed by increasing the family’s emotional connections with one another.

In an interview with Jabez’s mom Charlene, she relayed that she needs to ascertain that both she and her husband do their part in helping Jabez. When she was receiving one misconduct report after another, she got exasperated on what to do and how to make her son obey house and school rules.

Jabez had apparently gotten hooked into playing video games, including Grand Theft
Auto which is for a mature audience. At one point, Jabez’s mom even threw out the gaming console, as it appeared that Jabez was no longer heeding her authority.

Charlene went through great lengths in discussing with her husband the value of being on the same page in relating and disciplining their child. Being a hands-on mother, Charlene knows it is important to take time to talk to her son, to find out his reasons for doing things, and to know his insights and feelings. She also believes in the value of praying and asking the Lord for grace in helping her son. Finally, Charlene regulated Jabez’s gaming and TV use during school days, and monitored his school work. During vacation, Charlene tries to keep Jabez busy by involving him in taekwondo, in order to channel his pent-up energy. In a taekwondo summer provincial meet, Jabez bagged a gold medal. Aside from putting his energy to good use, Jabez slowly learned the discipline and focus needed in the sport, and gained self-confidence as well. Charlene was delighted.

While Jabez is still given screen time (on the iPad), he balances this with other activities. For example, he has started playing with neighbors in the front yard, where Charlene can keep an eye on them. As a result, Jabez started showing of maturity in his behavior at home, Charlene notes. While there are occasions that he still wants to use gadgets, the opportunity to spend his energies on other activities has made him busy and more focused.

Jabez has become more mature in dealing with his siblings, and is now able to control his emotions better. Early on, Jabez would be quite aggressive in playing with his two younger sisters. Now when he gets frustrated with them, he sighs to express his feelings, but can stop himself from hurting them.

Toward the end of third grade, Teacher Karla reports that Jabez has become more sociable. He participates more in class encounters. He appears happier and shows excitement during activities. His awareness of his tasks and sense of responsibility have also increased.

Charlene says that it was not easy to manage all these concerns. She has exerted much effort to get the cooperation of her husband, and to ensure that other activities are provided for her kids. She constantly engages Jabez in dialogue and constantly tries to connect with him, in order to understand his deeper insights and feelings.

But the efforts were all worthwhile. Now Charlene invokes the power of prayer, believing that God will take care of her kids, as she tries her best to do what is right for her children.
Talking Face to face, Talking Online

FOR EMERGENCIES, texting works wonders. To read and comment on documents as a group, Google Docs is fine. To get constant updates from friends, Facebook is a good medium. But for genuine communication, nothing beats talking to each other face-to-face.

Only by talking face to face can we see each other’s facial expressions and bodily gestures, hear each other’s tone of voice, even the pauses between words. These nonverbal cues are essential for genuine communication to take place, and for relationships to take root. They also minimize the risks of misinterpretation, with all the attendant pain and suffering these cause.

In contrast, communicating online is what psychologist and new-media expert Jim Taylor dubs “social lite,” because we can’t experience the genuine richness and textures of social interactions.

Studies done by Facebook sociologist Cameron Marlow reveal that the average male Facebook user with 120 Facebook friends uses two-way communication (such as e-mails or chats) with only four of them; the average female user, with only six. Male users with 500 Facebook friends will do so with only 10 of them; female users, only 16. Social lite, indeed.

Ironically, Marlow finds that even if we have a lot of Facebook friends, we tend to interact with only a small number of people.

“The more ‘active’ or intimate the interaction, the smaller and more stable the group,” says the Economist.

▶ NO CONSEQUENCES

Texting by its very nature relies on short and fast spurts of abbreviated thought, rather than longer and more nuanced sentences.

This “has the potential to narrow children’s communication skills and diminish their emotional life,” say teen counselors Barbara Melton and Susan Shankle in their book, What in the World Are Your Kids Doing Online?

Two college students are in the cafeteria, seated at the same table, a couple of feet from each other. Their fingers fly as they dexterously text on their phones, without even looking. When the pings from each phone start alternating, Queena asks them, “Why are you texting each other?”

They look at Queena as if she were from another planet. “We need to keep up to date on what’s happening with each other and with our friends.”

The conversation is taking a bizarre turn. “So why don’t you just talk to each other?”

“Well,” they say slowly, “there are things which are easier to text rather than to talk about verbally.”
Yes, other students agree, it is often easier to break up with someone through text or Facebook. Facebook is great, they say, for commiserating with each other. So students lambast a teacher on Facebook, without realizing that they are hurting a real person, or without realizing that their posts will inevitably reach the teacher. Many online posts are hurtful, especially the anonymous ones, with people calling each other names and acting in ways they do not dare to in the real world. After all, there are no consequences.

“Are we losing our willingness to wade down into the painful, soulful depths of human relations?” asks journalist Maggie Jackson in her book *Distracted*.

“These days, whether you are online or not,” wryly observes Massachusetts Institute of Technology clinical psychologist Sherry Turkle in her book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*, “it is easy for people to end up unsure if they are closer together or further apart.”

**RUDE**

Texting is frankly, rude, when done in the company of others. It sends a message that we would rather focus on something else and be somewhere else. The present reality is so boring, or unappetizing, or just plain torturous, that our attention is better served elsewhere.

The same goes for people who prefer to chat on cell phones rather than communicate with the people in front of them. In his book *Always On*, technology reporter Brian Chen suggests a solution, almost tongue-in-cheek: “Technology manufacturers should be sensitive to our compulsive tendencies and start building features to help us regulate usage: Apple, Google, and Microsoft, for example, should begin shipping phones with a tool that allows us to ban checking text messages or receiving calls or e-mails at dinner time.”

“When media are always there, waiting to be wanted, people lose a sense of choosing to communicate,” says Turkle.

What a paradox! “We insist that our world is increasingly complex, yet we have created a communications culture that has decreased the time available for us to sit and think uninterrupted,” adds Turkle.

Worst of all, “as we communicate in ways that ask for almost instantaneous responses, we don’t allow sufficient space to consider complicated problems,” she continues.

Turkle describes what has come to seem normal: “Teenagers who will only ‘speak’ online, who rigorously avoid face-to-face encounters, who are in text contact … fifteen or twenty times a day, who deem even a telephone call ‘too much’ exposure and say that they will ‘text, not talk.’ Since many of us seem to be acting this way, does this make such behaviors normal?

“What once seemed ‘ill’ can come to seem normal … What once we might have seen as a problem becomes how we do things,” says Turkle.

But she firmly believes that just because a behavior has become commonplace does
not make it normal or healthy.

“A behavior that has become typical may still express the problems that once caused us to see it as pathological,” Turkle says.

Joe Kraus, a partner at Google Ventures, specializes in mobile and gaming. He says that the average number of texts an American thirteen- to seventeen-year-old girl sends and receives every month is 4,000, which comes out to one in every six minutes that she is awake. For boys, the number is 3,000, one in every seven minutes.

By the way, before the smart-phone era, we used to check our phones an average of five times a day. Now we check it twenty-seven times.

“What kind of culture is that creating? What kind of mind training is that doing?” Kraus asks.

He answers his own question: “We’re radically over-developing the parts of quick thinking, distractible brain and letting the long-form-thinking, creative, contemplative, solitude-seeking, thought-consolidating pieces of our brain atrophy by not using them. And, to me, that’s both sad and dangerous.”

NO NUANCES

We are not born with social skills; we learn as we grow, in interaction with other people. It is not very easy to decipher nonverbal cues at first.

Take eye contact. Usually, it is a friendly sign of focus, or at least of respect, but when held too long, it can become unsettling, conveying intentions dark or conveying varying intentions.

How can typing a message, even with numerous emoticons, ever convey the depth and emotionality behind it? Melton and Shankle describe a helpful exercise which we can share with children to drive home this point. Take the question: “What do you mean by that?”

By varying voice inflection, facial expression, and body posture, the question can be asked in frustration (because we really don’t know what something means). Or it can be asked with hurt (that someone can think such a thought). Or it can be asked with anger (because we are insulted by someone’s behavior or actions).

With this wealth of options, typing the statement on the computer feels restrictive, and lame, by comparison. To make things worse, it can easily be misinterpreted, causing more trouble.

In the journal Cyberpsychology and Behavior, John Suler, a psychologist at Rider University in New Jersey, describes what he calls “online disinhibition” this way:

People don’t have to worry about how they look or sound when they type a message. They don’t have to worry about how others look or sound in response to what they say. Seeing a frown, a shaking head, a sigh, a bored expression, and many other subtle and not-so-subtle signs of disapproval or indifference can inhibit what people are willing to express.
According to Suler, when we talk face to face, we tend to be more socially inhibited. We are more attuned to the feelings of other people.

On the other hand, when we do not see other people or even hear their voice, we are less empathic to what they may be thinking or feeling. We tend to be less disinhibited, at times to the point of causing pain to others without our knowing it.

Online communication provides a “built-in- opportunity to keep one’s eyes averted,” Suler says.

Since we can separate our online behavior from our real one, we tend to feel more open and less vulnerable about disclosing private information, and even acting out in a way which would normally have been unacceptable in society.

Psychologists call this process “dissociation.” We don’t have to take responsibility for our online behavior, because anyway, we do not even acknowledge it as part of our real identity.

“The online self becomes a compartmentalized self,” Suler says. “In the case of expressed hostilities or other deviant actions, the person can avert responsibility for those behaviors, almost as if superego restrictions and moral cognitive processes have been temporarily suspended from the online psyche. “People might even convince themselves that those online behaviors ‘aren’t me at all,’” he concludes.

FEARSOME PHONE

Talking face-to-face makes it harder for us to hide what we think and feel, so it is no surprise that children and teens prefer to talk online. But to complicate matters further, many of them also do not like to talk on the phone. In our survey, one-third of students say they never talk on the phone; they prefer to text or chat online.

Actually, the idea of hiding so that we can more easily open up is at the heart of classical psychoanalysis. The founder of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, asked patients to lie on a couch, away from the therapist’s gaze, so that they could more easily share whatever they thought.

So it makes some sense that when we are before a screen, we are “less burdened by expectations,” in Turkle’s words.

“At the screen, you have a chance to write yourself into the person you want to be and to imagine others as you wish them to be, constructing them for your purposes,” says Turkle. “It is a seductive but dangerous habit of mind. When you cultivate this sensibility, a telephone call can seem fearsome because it reveals too much.”

E-MAIL HAZARDS

Many respondents prefer not to do e-mail, saying that this is too slow. They would rather do Facebook. If Facebook is deemed too slow, then there is always Instagram. But the dangers of e-mail already give us an idea of how these can be magnified through the instantaneous medium of Facebook. Most of us have fallen prey to a hastily, not-thought-
out e-mail, sent to the wrong people. Or to an e-mail we later regret, because we typed it when angry or panicky.

Melton and Shankle list other emotional issues associated with electronic communication.

What happens when you conduct an argument through e-mail at various hours of the day, rather than face-to-face in real time? Does the time lag give both parties a chance to make cool, well-reasoned replies or simply prolong and intensify a quarrel? Does e-mail take on a life of its own, creating a constant need for communication, reassurance, response? If you can get an e-mail from a friend, teacher, or sworn enemy at any hour of the day or night, then when are you no longer ‘open for business’?

Take the case of wired apologies. Many apologies do happen on Facebook, but according to research done by Turkle, many of these do not seem to count.

A real apology is supposed to lay the foundations for healing a damaged or broken relationship. For an apology to be potent, the offender needs to know that he has done something wrong, then he needs to acknowledge such to the other, and finally, to request if there is something that can be done to patch things up.

But social media makes it harder to apologize with conviction. “Technology makes it easy … to lose sight of what an apology is, not only because online spaces offer themselves as ‘cheap’ alternatives to confronting other people but because we may come to the challenge of an apology already feeling disconnected from other people,” says Turkle. “In that state, we forget that what we do affects others.”

All these are tied again to empathy. Turkle says, “Forgiveness follows from the experience of empathy … When we live a large part of our personal lives online, these complex empathetic transactions become more elusive.”

The downside? “We get used to getting less.”

**ADRENALINE RUSH**

Why is the real world sometimes, well, boring?

“Real people have consistency, so if things are going well in our relationships, change is gradual, worked through slowly,” says Turkle.

This is not the case with online relationships.

“In online life, the pace of relationships speeds up,” Turkle says.

One quickly moves from infatuation to disillusionment and back. And the moment one grows even slightly bored, there is easy access to someone new. One races through e-mail and learns to attend to the ‘highlights.’ Subject lines are exaggerated to get attention. In online games, the action often reduces to a pattern of moving from scary to safe and back again. A frightening encounter presents itself. It is dealt with. You regroup, and then there is another. The adrenaline rush is
continual.

**ISOLATION**

“In a world of real virtuality, is face-to-face nevertheless becoming an antiquated luxury we don’t really have time for?” asks Jackson.

What happens when we are forced to deal with others face to face?

When around 1,000 students from ten countries were asked to unplug from media use for just twenty-four hours, many of them felt disoriented, isolated, and disconnected, even in the company of other people.

An American student says, “When I was alone I felt disconnected and even when I was with people I felt disconnected—all because I couldn’t use media.”

A student from Slovakia says, “The majority of the day I spent sleeping, doing household chores, and helping my mum in the kitchen. I cooked and prepared a delicious salad. My mum was proud of me. But I still felt isolated, without information and limited to the people around me.”

**Loneliness is failed solitude.**

A student from the U.K. says, “Without being able to access the Internet, read a newspaper, or listen to the radio I felt completely cut off from the world. I was edgy and irritated for most of the day and couldn’t even listen to my music to calm me down. I tried to preoccupy myself with written work and a trip into town—but all I wanted to do was pick up my phone and become a part of the human race again.”

Tellingly, some students have realized the social costs of constantly being tethered to media.

A student from Slovakia says, “We live too quickly and we just don’t have time to wait for someone. We call them or chat with them when we need them—that is the way we have gotten used to relationships.”

A student from China says, “Normally, I like to watch movies and TV in the bedroom, and [I feel] a temporary release and relief from pressures. Instead of communicating with other people, I have always indulged in my own media world.”

A student from Lebanon says, “Everything grows from this ‘need’ to communicate with each other faster and with less compromise than talking face to face.”

**FAILED SOLITUDE**

“Loneliness is failed solitude,” says Turkle. “To experience solitude you must be able to summon yourself by yourself; otherwise, you will only know how to be lonely.”

There is nothing inherently wrong with gaming or social media. They can be entertaining and useful. “But looking … for amusement is one thing,” says Turkle. “Looking to them for a life is another.”
Some students in the World Unplugged Study decided to engage the real world. A student from the U.K. says, “I didn’t really mind that I was missing out on the news. In fact, the feeling of not knowing what was happening was liberating—suddenly the conversations and discussions I had with other people seemed far more important.”

A student from Mexico says, “I interacted with my parents more than the usual. I fully heard what they said to me without being distracted with my BlackBerry. I helped to cook and even to wash the dishes.”

A student from the U.S. says: “I’ve lived with the same people for three years now, they’re my best friends, and I think that this is one of the best days we’ve spent together. I was able to really see them, without any distractions, and we were able to revert to simple pleasures.”

A student from Mexico sums up the paradox of wired communication: “Media put us close to the people who are far away but they separate us from the ones who are nearby.”

A student from Slovakia puts it poignantly, “Without media, I found out that there are people around me.”

WHAT TO DO

“Because we grew up with the Net, we assume that the Net is grown up,” says Turkle. “We tend to see it as a technology in its maturity. But in fact, we are in (the) early days … Attendants at its birth, we threw ourselves into its adventure. This is human. But these days, our problems with the Net are becoming too distracting to ignore.”

What do we do? Not reject, disparage, or avoid technology altogether. That is impossible to do. “We need to put [technology] in its place,” says Turkle. The digital natives, our children, can do this, but “we must be their partners.”

Begin with the simple things. Get up from the computer and seek out friends, chatting with them face to face. Play real rather than computer basketball. Turn off cell phones at dinner, in the theater, in church. Be conscious of and practice Netiquette.

For painful issues, discuss face to face. Avoid texting, e-mailing, or chatting about them online.

Learn to be grateful. The most effective trigger for empathy is to share the plight of others less fortunate than us.
Teens and Electronics
By Ysabel Acosta,
High school student, Miriam College

If there’s one thing I’ve heard again and again from my parents in this age of communication and technology, it’s this: “Get off the Internet!” Or other variations, like “Stop playing with your [Nintendo] DS!” or “Text na lang nang text!”, and endless other complaints about the gadgets I would always have in my hands.

It’s not just me. Many other teenagers experience this endless tirade of scolding, irritation, and arguments.

It’s not like parents are doing it for no reason. There are lots of negative effects that gadgets have on people, like obesity and nearsightedness.

But we teenagers don’t go online for no reason. A common misconception of parents is that spending time with a gadget means we’re wasting our time doing unimportant, unproductive stuff. That’s not true.

**Forcing teens usually just leads to both parties getting angry. Then we just go back to our gadgets as soon as we aren’t grounded anymore.**

There are four main reasons why we teenagers spend so much time with our gadgets:

First of these are our friends. Nowadays, with communication devices that can link us to the other side of the world, people can have two types of friends: those they know in person, and those they rarely get to see. Granted, if the only people we talk to on Facebook are the classmates we see every day, it’s probably time to say, “See you tomorrow!” and go do something else. But some of us have friends who live far away. The only time we get to spend with them is on Skype late at night, especially for those who live in different time zones.

Second, we need gadgets for homework. “Go to the library, there are plenty of resources there! And valid ones, too.” Sure, but when the paper is due tomorrow and you only have the night to finish it, there isn’t exactly time to go to the library. Finding sources on Google is a lot faster. But it isn’t instant either. Finding reliable sources on Google is like digging for a baseball in a sand pit. It’s faster than the library, but it still takes a while.

Third, we use gadgets for recreation. Back in the old days, hobbies equaled crocheting, knitting, or baking, among others. Not that nobody does that anymore, but with the birth of technology came the a whole new range of hobbies that involve using a gadget or computer.
Pen tablets let artists create beautiful and intricate art on the computer, all without the bother of paints and canvas. (We can erase our mistakes too!) Budding singers and composers record or synthesize songs and remix music via Garage Band and Audacity. Some people like piecing together bits of videos to create a full-length visual masterpiece. I have a friend who likes creating her own visual novels using a computer program and coding. Better yet, it’s a lot easier to share our work and get feedback nowadays, which makes it even more appealing.

Last but not the least, there’s the entertainment component. It’s what parents think we do all the time. But you’ve got to admit there’s a reason gadgets can be more interesting than playing basketball outside. Video games let us enter worlds we could have never dreamed of entering, control the characters and the story as if we were living it ourselves. There are millions of books, articles, and stories to be found online that can’t be found in a bookstore. Not to mention all the shows and videos we can download and watch from YouTube alone.

So with all these valid reasons for teenagers to keep their gadgets, how can parents cut down their child’s gadget time without starting World War III? I’m not offering foolproof plans, but here are some tips that might work:

**Restrict our time**

Teenagers can’t be stopped from using gadgets completely. That’s equivalent to “telling somebody to stop using the bed,” as a friend puts it. Parents can, however, lessen the amount of time their children can spend with their gadgets. Give them a time limit, and define everything explicitly. Teenagers have a well-developed skill of finding loopholes in family rules, like using the iPad when banned from using the computer, for example.

**Compromise**

Forcing teens usually just leads to both parties getting angry. Then we just go back to our gadgets as soon as we aren’t grounded anymore. We have a tendency to get stubborn and rebel (quietly) when pushed too hard. Communication is important. If (or should I say when?) the teens protest that one hour online a day is too little, it’s better to sit down and discuss why, than for parents to close their ears and put their foot down. Then maybe both parties can reach a sensible agreement.

**Give us other things to do**

Hand us a book, send us on errands, shove us out the door to exercise, and let us hang out with our friends. Eliminating the reasons we use gadgets and giving us other things to do is a great way to cut down our gadget time. We mostly use gadgets when we have nothing else to do anyway. Plus, less gadget time gives the family more time to bond with each other.

**Lay down some house rules**

Mark the times and places gadgets are absolutely not allowed. One of our family
rules is no gadgets on the dinner table, even when we eat out. With nothing to distract us, we are now “forced to interact”, as Mom puts it. It’s actually a pretty nice way to bond with people. Now I get uncomfortable when I eat out with my friends and some keep their noses in their gadgets while everyone else is having fun. (Parents shouldn’t be exempted, of course. That just wouldn’t be fair. And it won’t convince the kids either.)

**Nagging is counterproductive.**

**DON’T NAG US!**

Nagging is counterproductive. Not only does it irritate us, but do it often enough and we learn how to drown it out. It’s good to remind us of family agreements every so often. But parents hanging over our shoulders and yelling at us every time they see Facebook on will only result in more yelling and arguments. In the end, we’ll just spend more time on Facebook; only we’ll learn how to hide it better. (I can’t count the number of times I told my mother I was “researching” or “doing homework,” when the only reason I was still awake was because of the engaging conversation I was having with my friends.)

Gadgets are important. People use them for communication, research, recreation, and, yes, entertainment. Hopefully though this list will help lessen our need for gadgets and the time we spend on them.
WHEN QUEENA confronts a student Roy (not his real name) about his failing mark, he shrugs. “It’s okay, Ma’am.”

“No, you can certainly do better than this. Don’t you also want a good job later on?” Queena asks.

“It’s not really what you know but whom you know that counts. My dad has a lot of contacts, and I will work for one of them after college,” Roy replies.

While we wonder how he can perform well with just a few skills, Roy says, “Don’t worry. I will get by.”

THE ENTITLEMENT GENERATION

What shocks is not so much Roy’s reply as the matter-of-fact manner he says it. Fortunately, many students still work hard and excel in their chosen fields. However, in the past decade, Queena and her professor colleagues have observed an increasing number of young people like Roy.

A 2005 Associated Press article calls these young people “The Entitlement Generation.” They believe that they deserve their “fair share,” even without working too hard for it. For instance, employers complain that many young employees expect too much too soon, and expect unrealistically high salaries and quick promotions.

Indeed, after a couple of years in the work force, several former students request recommendation letters from Queena. They have grown tired of their “dream jobs.”

“Work has become boring, and I don’t feel fulfilled anymore,” is a constant refrain. Or “I work like a slave for the older bosses, who don’t give us much respect. Grad school is more appealing.”

Sometimes professors try not to laugh when they remember how eager these kids once were to finish school and enter the real world.

Young people “want and expect everything that the twenty- or thirty-year veteran has—the first week they’re there,” says Associated Press. If they don’t get what they desire, they have no qualms about leaving the company.

THE GREATEST LOVE OF ALL

It is tempting to call such young people spoiled, but we beg to differ. Roy’s statements may seem rude on the surface, but he is perfectly polite. He talks without irony.

Besides the Entitlement Generation, Roy belongs to what San Diego State University psychologist Jean Twenge (in her book of the same name) calls “Generation Me.”

Born in the 1970s, and especially 1980s and 1990s, Gen Me’ers have been raised on lavish praise and high self-esteem, unrealistic hopes and constant self-congratulation.
They have extreme confidence in their own worth and focus mainly on themselves. After all, Whitney Houston’s hit song says that “learning to love yourself is the greatest love of all.”

Using data from 1.3 million American adolescents spanning six decades, Twenge analyzes intergenerational results to make sense of today’s youth. Herself a member of Generation Me, Twenge uses personality tests, and even TV shows and movies.

When asked about her priorities in 2004, the singer-actress Britney Spears said, “Myself, my husband and starting a family”—in this order. Britney is now divorced from her husband, who had left his then-seven-month-pregnant girlfriend for Britney. Since then a court has ruled that Britney was not fit to take care of her kids, and gave custody to the husband.

Gen Me’ers want to do things their way and do not necessarily seek the approval of authority, which they tend to distrust and disdain anyway. Many Filipino students do not trust the government and “the system.” They dream of going abroad, since they have lost hope in our country.

Many of them, like Roy, are cynical. Once, while discussing the issue of cheating in class, a student said, “Honestly, adults tell us not to cheat, but there is a lot of corruption around. Students are not the only ones who cheat.”

ME, ME, ME

“Me and Carlo will go to the movies.” “Me and Ana like Japanese food.” “Me and Maria will take that part.”

Aside from being grammatically wrong, when did “Carlo and I” morph into “Me and Carlo”? This is the way the young (and even some of the older generation) speak today, with the emphasis on their own selves first.

*Time* magazine columnist Joel Stein, who happens to have high hopes for this millennial generation, has researched on narcissism rates in the United States, with dismal results. National Institutes of Health statistics show that narcissistic personality disorder is almost three times more for twentysomethings than sixtysomethings. Fifty-eight percent more college students have higher scores on a narcissism scale in 2009 than in 1982.

“Millennials got so many participation trophies growing up that a recent study showed that 40 percent believe they should be promoted every two years, regardless of performance,” Stein says in his article “The Me Me Me Generation” in 2013.

Stein details the phenomenon:

They are fame-obsessed: Three times as many middle-school girls want to grow up to be a personal assistant to a famous person as want to be a Senator, according to a 2007 survey; four times as many would pick the assistant job over CEO of a major corporation. They’re so convinced of their own greatness that the National Study of Youth and Religion found the guiding morality of 60 percent of millennials in any situation is that they’ll just be able to feel what’s right. Their development is stunted … And they are lazy. In 1992, the nonprofit Families and
Work Institute reported that 80 percent of people under twenty-three wanted to one day have a job with greater responsibility; ten years later, only 60 percent did.

Additionally, millennials have lower political participation rates (such as in elections) and less passion for civic-minded activities.

In our survey, the top three answers to the question “What makes me feel good?” are: enjoy hobbies (87 percent), get good grades (84 percent), relate well with friends (83 percent). The bottom three answers? Have lots of cool gadgets (43 percent), serve/help others (49 percent), pray/relate well to God (50 percent).

EVERYONE IS SPECIAL

Is it only the wealthy who are prone to entitlement? Not really.

Marides Fernando, the dynamic former mayor of Marikina City, says that when she visits low-income families, she would at times be shocked and disappointed to see the children with their feet on the sofa, munching on junk food, glued to the TV or the computer, with few of the courtesies their elders used to have.

Stein says, “Poor millennials have even higher rates of narcissism, materialism, and technology addiction in their ghetto-fabulous lives.”

No wonder Wellesley High English teacher David McCullough, Jr. had to pointedly address his own school’s graduating class of 2012 not with a rousing paean to their greatness, but a speech revolving around the theme “You are Not Special.”

“If everyone is special, then no one is,” McCullough says.

If everyone gets a trophy, trophies become meaningless … We have … to our detriment, come to love accolades more than genuine achievement. We have come to see them as the point—and we’re happy to compromise standards, or ignore reality, if we suspect that’s the quickest way, or only way, to have something to put on the mantelpiece, something to pose with, crow about, something with which to leverage ourselves into a better spot on the social totem pole.

No longer is it how you play the game, no longer is it even whether you win or lose, or learn or grow, or enjoy yourself doing it. Now it’s ‘So what does this get me?’ As a consequence, we cheapen worthy endeavors … [A] B is the new C, and the mid-level curriculum is called Advanced College Placement.

What should we do then? Try and learn to think about others, not just about ourselves.

“Climb the mountain not to plant your flag, but to embrace the challenge, enjoy the air and behold the view,” McCullough exhorts. “Climb it so you can see the world, not so the world can see you.”

The earlier our kids immerse themselves in social media, the greater the risk for narcissistic tendencies.
In 2011, California State University psychology professor Larry Rosen and his colleagues examined the relationship among psychological orders and media use. They found that frequent multimedia use correlates with narcissism.

In his book, *iDisorder*, Rosen describes the three main results.

First, those people of all generations who spent more hours a day using certain media, including being online, sending and receiving e-mail, instant messaging, texting, listening to music, and watching television, were more narcissistic.

Second, those young people of the iGeneration who used social networks more were far more narcissistic than those who used them less or not at all.

Third, those (of all generations) who were more anxious when not checking in with their text messages, cell-phone calls, and Facebook were more narcissistic than those who were less anxious about continually looking at their phones or jumping on Facebook to read posts and status updates.

To make matters worse, the earlier our kids immerse themselves in social media, the greater the risk for narcissistic tendencies.

In 2010, psychologists Sander Thomaes, Albert Reijntjes, Bram Orobio de Castro, Astrid Poorthuis from Utrecht University, together with Brad Bushman of University of Michigan and VU University in Amsterdam, and Michael Telch from University of Texas at Austin, studied the Facebook pages of preteens, who ranged from eight to twelve years old.

The preteens got fake feedback from peer judges about their pages. Not surprisingly, those who heard positive feedback got a boost in self-esteem, while the self-esteem of those who got negative comments sank.

But these results are amplified in narcissists. The preteens who scored high in narcissism felt a bigger blow to their self-esteem than those who scored lower.

“Children who showed marked state of self-esteem losses following disapproval were high on narcissism—a trait that reflects children’s preoccupation with being valued and admired by others,” the researchers say in their article “I Like Me If You Like Me” in the journal *Child Development*.

“Narcissists constantly seek external self-affirmation, possibly in order to create desired self-views or to meet self-evaluative needs,” the researchers say. “When they do not succeed, they immediately lose their self-esteem.”

Moreover, the status of their peers influences how preteens feel about the feedback. When a popular peer gives positive feedback, that is a big boost to their self-esteem, as compared to when a less popular peer praises them.

“Being approved by a popular peer is significant, because it implicitly conveys the prospect that one is likely to be valued by peers in the future,” the researchers say. “Being approved by an unpopular peer is much less significant, because it tells little about how
one will be valued by peers in the future.”

Peer disapproval also matters more than approval, with 50 percent more impact on self-esteem, particularly for narcissists. For narcissistic kids, disapproval has more impact than approval.

**THE NARCISSISTIC BRAIN**

Narcissism affects the brain.

In 2010, researchers Tong Sheng, Anahita Gheytanchi, and Lisa Aziz-Zadeh of the University of Southern California scanned the brains of subjects and discovered that narcissists had more activity in the posteromedial cortex (PMC), which is involved when we think thoughts about ourselves.

“Activity during periods of rest in the PMC, a region previously implicated in self-referential processing, is positively correlated with egocentricity and self-absorption,” the researchers say in the online journal *PLOS ONE*.

“Hence, these regional deactivations may provide a clue to the neural platform for stable self-referential processes associated with narcissism,” the researchers continue. “This result is consistent with previous reports of PMC involvement in the representation of self and self-referential processing.

“This finding adds to the growing body of evidence implicating the PMC as a key region supporting the representation of self (though it might do so outside of conscious awareness),” the researchers conclude.

Another region which is active in the narcissistic brain is the medial prefrontal cortex (mPFC), which is linked to decision making and rational thought. Defects in this area are associated with impulsive tendencies, leading us to behave without much thought of consequences.

“Individuals with less mPFC recruitment during active tasks are also more likely to exhibit impulsive traits,” the researchers say.

With the online world assuming, and even encouraging, instant gratification and impulsivity, and also self-promotion and glorification, it is no wonder that when we are constantly tethered to the Internet, all of us eventually may become narcissists.

**FRAGILE PERSONALITY**

There is an alternative view of narcissism, one proposed by Massachusetts Institute of Technology clinical professor Sherry Turkle. Instead of viewing narcissists as those who love only themselves, Turkle views them as being so fragile that they need constant validation and support.

The narcissist “cannot tolerate the complex demands of other people but tries to relate to them by distorting who they are and splitting off what it needs, what it can use,” says Turkle in her book *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*. 
Narcissists choose instead to deal “only with their made-to-measure representations” because these are all they are equipped—mentally, physically and emotionally—to handle.

When texting and social networking, “you can take what you need and move on,” says Turkle. “And, if not gratified, you can try someone else.”

“Technology, on its own, does not cause this new way of relating to our emotions and other people,” Turkle says. “But it does make it easy.”

So frighteningly, what was once considered abnormal is now, well, normal.

“In every era, certain ways of relating come to feel natural,” she says. “In our time, if we can be continually in touch, needing to be continually in touch does not seem a problem or a pathology but an accommodation to what technology affords. It becomes the norm.”

**The purpose of school is for children to learn, not for them to feel good about themselves all the time.**

**PARENTING**

Some studies have linked narcissistic tendencies to the type and quality of parenting. When parents praise indiscriminately and effusively, but then coldly reject the child, the latter’s need for constant validation is fueled, leading to an overt focus on the self. For instance, when parents praise the child only for academic achievement, only to reject him when he gets less than stellar grades, the seeds of narcissism can take root.

Being praised for inborn qualities such as appearance or perceived talent, without much effort being expended, is a risk factor. So is receiving praise that is not consistent with reality (a B is now the new C).

When children are given extreme rewards for behavior that is expected, or performances that are, frankly, trivial, they tend to grow up expecting these all the time. For instance, medals are given to everyone on the team, in a misguided attempt at cheering everybody up, regardless of performance.

When we spoil or overindulge our kids, when our own self-esteem is tied up with our children’s achievements, it is likely that our little darlings will become little monsters.

**TOO MUCH SELF-ESTEEM**

We agree with Twenge that Gen Me’ers are not solely to blame. Instead, the culprit is the prevailing culture, where kids have been raised on a diet of excessive self-esteem.

“Instead of creating well-adjusted, happy children, the self-esteem movement has created an army of little narcissists,” Twenge says. “Praise based on nothing teaches only an inflated ego.”

What about those ubiquitous awards in school?

“The purpose of school is for children to learn, not for them to feel good about
themselves all the time,” says Twenge.

Children will feel good about themselves—and rightly so—when they develop real skills and learn something. They also need to learn how to deal with criticism, in preparation for the inevitable day when it is not delivered as gently as they would like. We are doing young people an enormous disservice by sending them into an increasingly competitive world, thinking they will be praised for substandard work.

There are good things about Generation Me, which make it a pleasure to interact with them. They are generally confident, tolerant, and frank.

Stein has an interesting defense of our entitlement generation. He believes that entitlement is not an effect of say, overprotective parents, but “an adaptation to a world of abundance.”

Since almost everyone used to be a small-scale farmer, fisherman, factory worker, and so forth, the argument goes, there is not much fulfillment in these things. (We are not certain if all farmers, particularly the contented ones, will agree.)

But right now, there are so many choices, such as in social media, that our young people basically have the right to be entitled to them.

“What idiot would try to work her way up at a company when she’s going to have an average of seven jobs before age twenty-six?” asks Stein. (We can think of several sensible “idiots” who would not mind doing so.)

»LACK OF RESILIENCE

Twenge cites disturbing statistics of anxiety, depression, and plain unhappiness among today’s youth. Taught that they can have everything or be anyone they want to be, young adults and teens today cannot cope with harsh realities, and cop out through drugs, drink, or suicide.

They have not learned to be resilient.

Twenge tells parents to let children stand up for themselves rather than automatically take their side; teachers to teach self-control rather than self-esteem; and employers to guide rather than scold young employees.

She counsels young people to combat depression naturally rather than turn to medication, to cultivate realistic expectations, to limit exposure to violence and materialism in the media, and most of all, to get involved in the community and think of others besides themselves.

Happily, even the ones responsible for our technologies, a.k.a. the creators themselves, may be feeling that all this narcissistic behavior does anyone no good.

Praise based on nothing teaches only an inflated ego.
Stein interviews Evan Spiegel, the co-founder of Snapchat, the app that allows the user to erase, after ten seconds, the photos or messages he/she sends. Spiegel feels that the constant quest to be someone who we are not can be tiring. “We’re trying to create a place where you can be in sweatpants, sitting, eating cereal on a Friday night, and that’s okay,” Spiegel tells Stein.

If only our youth will heed Snapchat’s creator.
Face to Face Friends, Not Facebook Friends

By Rafael Ignacio S. Dionisio

BS Management graduate, Ateneo de Manila University Entrepreneur

Social media has changed the way we do a lot of things: The way we market products and the way we meet and communicate with people. Social interaction is probably now at an all-time high across the world, as children from Kenya can talk to their friends in Europe or the Philippines online. The barrier of physical distance has been shattered by social media and digital applications: Facebook, WhatsApp, Viber, QQ, WeChat, Skype, and Google Hangouts, to name a few.

However, online communication is a doubled-edged sword. While we can now communicate so easily these days, a lot of people—especially those born into the world with this technology—don’t even know what having real, face-to-face relationships are like.

When I was younger, there was no Internet yet, so I would knock on my neighbors’ doors and play with them. Now we can just play within the safe confines of our house. It’s much easier to interact with other people online, but I believe the relationships from such interactions are shallow. Instead of looking into a friend’s eyes while we share exciting stories with each other, we now stare at the computer screen, watching a YouTube video, researching on a latest online purchase, or downloading a movie.

**Downside**

Online interaction can never replace face-to-face meetings. In mid-2013, I brought a friend who was a computer and IT professional to an out-of-town beach resort, The Circle Hostel. The hostel promotes and seriously encourages visitors to personally socialize with others. There’s no Internet connection, and everything is communal. The only thing to do there is to actually talk and make friends.

After one weekend in the resort, my friend exclaimed, “Wow, I made more real friends today that I had in my entire life! Now I have real friends and not just online ones.” That statement shocked me. My friend admitted that online friends didn’t count for much, and when compared with real friends, online relationships paled in comparison.

Having online friends has its drawbacks. Some people make online friends they have never personally met. Who is to say if those “friends” online are really who they say they are? There are reports of people who fabricate completely different personalities online, often exaggerating certain things about themselves for attention or personal gain.
Now I don’t mean that all online communication is bad—it’s better than not talking at all. For me, online communication is more of a maintenance medication to make sure that friendships continue online and off-line. But we really do not need medication; all we need is a healthy fare of regular face-to-face interactions with our buddies.

**EQ and Success**

I have come across studies that show children who learn early on how to interact, lead, and collaborate with others are most likely to succeed in life. In fact, after a certain level, IQ does not matter as much; it is the EQ (emotional intelligence) or “people smarts” that count more. Social skills are learned best while personally interacting with a group of friends, or a bigger community, not behind a computer screen doing group chat.

Ask the CEO or general manager of any company what brought them to success. They will most probably tell you that it was not their smarts alone, but their ability to actually manage and work with different personalities, sometimes even people smarter than they are.

**Community and Happiness**

I once read a study on happiness conducted around the world. The study said that the number one contributing factor to happiness is community. Being in an active, supportive community is what creates memories and puts smiles on our faces. It is said that sadness shared is sadness cut in half, and happiness shared is happiness doubled. Sharing happiness within a community has significant, positive effects on our emotions.

We are most engaged in terms of relationships when we use all our five senses. When we see, hear, and touch another person, it creates a stronger bond, unlike when we read a virtual text message that pops up on the computer screen.

Some parents bring their two-year-olds to play school so that they learn how to interact with others to sow the seeds of great potential in the future. These parents are convinced that a social child is a more successful child. However, some parents of today’s children see them interact with friends online instead of playing with each other in a neighbor’s backyard.

Parents should constantly encourage their kids to visit their friends, and vice versa. As a child, I did not have a computer console and so I learned how to make friends to keep myself entertained and active. This skill has helped me a lot in my current career in sales, travel, and communication.

Why settle for something superficial when we can get the real thing? The best things in life are free, real friends included. Let’s place our kids on the right track by developing in them the skills to socialize and interact with others early on.
The Perils of Social Media

IN OUR SURVEY, 95 percent of respondents say they visit social networking sites daily. Thirty percent spend more than four hours a day on them.

Students are connected practically 24/7, with constant updates on what their friends do, say, or think. Some teachers even use Facebook to post assignments, though we believe there are other sites (such as Edmodo) that can do the same job with less potential harm.

Facebook may be useful for shy kids who want to make friends online rather than face to face. Kids with special interests can find communities of kindred souls, though this may better be achieved through special-interest forums of like-minded people, rather than a general social medium like Facebook.

In their book *What in the World Are Your Kids Doing Online?*, teen counselors Barbara Melton and Susan Shankle list reasons why they do not recommend social-media sites for children and teens, aside from the fact that many kids and parents disregard the requirement that you have to be at least thirteen years old to join Facebook.

According to the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act set by the United States Congress, websites are not allowed to collect information on kids younger than thirteen years without parental permission. Unfortunately, not only do our kids lie about their age to open a Facebook account, but most often than not, they are aided by us!

“Falsifying age has become common practice by some preadolescents and some parents,” says the American Academy of Pediatrics. “Parents must be thoughtful about this practice to be sure that they are not sending mixed messages about lying and that online safety is always the main message being emphasized.”

فيل אנט

The first danger is that social media “offer the illusion of privacy” even as they “make [our] life public.” A student writes nasty things about her teacher on Facebook, and is shocked when the latter finds out.

“But he is not my friend on Facebook,” she wails. “Only my friends see what I post. How did he know?”

The student thinks that her Facebook posts are like a diary to be shared only with her friends, without realizing that what she posts are basically part of a public forum.

“Kids just don’t get these distinctions,” say Melton and Shankle, “they’re hard enough for adults to get in this new cyber-era—and sites like [Facebook] only further blur that crucial public-private distinction.”

The second danger is that social media “offer the illusion of intimacy” even as they “deliver mainly superficial relationships.”

A college student is frustrated over family and romantic relationships. He is so
depressed that he has attempted suicide. After discussing with him ways to manage his problems, Queena suggested that he confide in his buddies who may be able to offer comfort at the very least. He sadly replies,

“I have more than 500 Facebook friends, but when I have real problems, there is no one I can really talk to.”

“Sure, I can gripe online,” he continues, “but there is no one I really feel like bothering. Everyone seems so happy on Facebook, posting stuff here and there. I feel really down, and frankly, I don’t feel like ‘liking’ any of the things they post. “I feel so alone. Life is really not worth living,” he concludes.

So this is what technology does: enable us to connect with many people, but from a distance.

According to Massachusetts Institute of Technology clinical psychologist Sherry Turkle in her book, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other*, even if the gazillions of people we have “friended” on Facebook, “Americans say they have fewer friends than before.”

“When asked in whom they can confide and to whom they turn in an emergency, more and more say that their only resource is their family,” Turkle continues. “The ties we form through the Internet, are not, in the end, the ties that bind.

“But they are the ties that preoccupy,” she adds.

“Among childhood’s key tasks is learning friendship skills, including resolving conflicts, setting boundaries, and building intimacy,” say Melton and Shenkle. “None of these skills have anything to do with the vast majority of [online] ‘friends’. “But … most of the relationships [are] trivial,” they continue. “How could they be otherwise? What … children learn from this frantic round of Internet socializing is not how to create and nurture the relationships that will sustain them throughout their lives, but rather how to spend hours maintaining an increasingly broader and more superficial network of limited contacts.”

Teens may look very calm as they face their screens, but they are constantly “deeply anxious about missing out on something better,” says *Time* columnist Joel Stein in a May 2013 article entitled “Millennials: The Me, Me, Me Generation.”

There is also the phantom pocket-vibration syndrome. Even if teens do not have their cell phones on them, somehow many of them claim they can feel the phones vibrate in their pockets.

In our survey, 50 percent of respondents strongly agree or agree with the statement: “I am sad and depressed.”

**NO CONSEQUENCES**

The third danger is that social media “promote fantasy identities” even as they promote “an anonymous culture of no consequences.”

“I have two different Facebook accounts,” a student says. “In one, I am a thirty-year-
old blonde American visual artist. And then there is my real one.” She happens to be a sixteen-year-old brunette Filipina college freshman.

“My parents told me to major in business, because it is more practical,” she says. “But I really want to be an artist. So I decided to be one, in another [Facebook] account. Of course it is not very easy making things up, but it is so much more exciting than what is happening to me in reality.”

When pressed, she admits that she is taking a risk, especially since several of her new acquaintances as an artist have asked her out on a date.

“And my friends here are suspicious,” she adds. “But, whatever. I don’t think I am the only one who has a secret identity.”

Young kids can use fantasy to develop confidence and social skills. They pretend to be a queen or a superhero, and there is really nothing wrong with that.

But they need to understand that what they are doing is fictional. Melton and Shankle suggest that these children and teens join the theater or write fiction, all the while distinguishing between fact and fantasy.

“People are inflating themselves like balloons on Facebook,” Stein quotes University of Georgia psychology professor W. Keith Campbell.

The real world has become “too boring” for teens, so they go online and create their own virtual world there, with potentially harmful consequences.

“Sadly, these kinds of fake identities only reinforce the idea that your own identity isn’t good enough,” say the Melton and Shankle. “If the only way you can make friends, let alone date, is to pretend to an age, look, and life history that you don’t really have, you’re only reminding yourself of your own inadequacies.”

“It’s a poisonous message,” they warn, “especially for teens, who are already staggering under the burden of trying to find out who they are and what they’re capable of.”

Online activity appears to have no consequences, at least at first, or on the surface. When a teen curses an acquaintance online (using capital letters or emoticons), he does not see and perhaps cannot imagine how much he has hurt the other.

When he cuts and pastes an image from a site without permission, no copyright police arrests him, since teachers are often unaware, too busy, or plain dismissive about online plagiarism.

When an idea or thought is too uncomfortable for a teen, he switches to entertainment or to other sites that he finds palatable.

Because there are usually no virtual consequences (yet), the Internet is the perfect escape. At least, until the real world tugs you back.

How can children learn in the virtual world—that their actions and intentions really affect other human beings? Melton and Shankle describe the dilemma:

“You push a button, and something happens—but what that means to you or any other human being is not at all clear. If you don’t like what you wrote, you simply click and it
disappears from the screen. If you don’t like what you see, you can make that disappear as well. And if you don’t like the kids in a certain chat room, you simply stop going there—and because you’ve never met them, maybe it feels as though they, too, have simply vanished.”

“The insubstantiality can be extremely confusing even to adults,” they continue. “To children, who don’t yet know what their bodies are capable of and who haven’t yet figured out how their actions affect others, Cyberworld can be profoundly disorienting.”

DEFFRIENDING (OR UNFRIENDING)

In real life, friendships often break or fade away when common interests diverge or when conflicts arise. Breakups can be messy, but usually these happen in private; hurt and painful feelings more clearly and confidently expressed between only the parties concerned.

On Facebook, defriending (or “unfriending”) someone is often a painful process. It can be sudden (with few, if any, signs of impending dissolution before the mouse is clicked). It happens without explanation (at least on the part of the transgressor).

Worst of all, defriending is always a public activity, however small the circle of immediate online friends. It is never just confined to the two parties.

No wonder people who are defriended online become angry, panicky, and depressed.

In his book, *iDisorder*, California State University psychologist Larry Rosen tries to explain “why depressed people use more media … or why media makes people more depressed.”

One reason may be that there is no regulation in cyberspace. Anything goes. So we are free to say anything at any time, however hurtful, without regard for somebody else’s feelings.

“A photo that we post on Facebook might garner some ‘likes’ from friends, and then that one nasty, negative comment from a friend of a friend hits us like a fist-sized rock,” Rosen says. “Literally our world can be turned upside down by one thoughtless, off-the-cuff remark made by someone identified only by a profile picture and words … These negative responses hit us at a cellular level in our brain in an area responsible for feedback-related negativity, so it is no wonder that a single bit of negative feedback can send us spiralling emotionally downward.”

Rosen also talks about social cognitive psychologist Albert Bandura of Stanford University, who has theorized about the concept of self-efficacy, which is our belief about our ability and competence, derived from our dealings with others.

“If we are already experiencing depressive symptoms, negative evaluations … can have a devastating impact on our self-evaluations and, in turn, on our depression,” Rosen says. “This is particularly true given the wealth of research and robust findings showing that depressed people demonstrate selective attention to negative comments far more than positive ones and allow those negative comments to linger and occupy attention far longer than positive ones. People who are depressed tend to miss the positive and overaccentuate
the negative, which means that if we are showing even the mildest depressed feelings, negative communications can have a much more pronounced effect on us,” adds Rosen.

The inevitable conclusion? “In our wild west Internet world we often encounter those nasty slaps, which can cut us deeply, even when the person delivering the blow isn’t someone we know or consider part of our friendship network.”

»LACK OF TIME

Hours spent on social media use, of course, mean those same fewer hours spent studying, exercising, or helping others. Yes, several people use social media to serve other people, as evidenced by volunteer groups, online pressures against tyrants, and so on. Sadly, most students use social media for less altruistic purposes.

Does this affect students’ grades? Common sense says yes.

In a 2010 study, psychologists Robert Weis and Brittany Cerankosky of Denison University gave game consoles to boys who did not have them. One group got the games for the consoles immediately, while the other group were told that they would receive theirs after four months.

The results surprised no one: The boys who got the consoles immediately spent an inordinate amount of time gaming, which took them off school and social activities. Their reading and writing scores lowered soon after, and they started having behavioral problems in class.

“Video games may displace after-school activities that have educational value and may interfere with the development of reading and writing skills in some children,” the researchers say in the journal Psychological Science.

The study was done on gaming, not social media. But very likely, the effects would be similar.

Aside from students’ grades, creativity has suffered. Scores in the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking have increased from the 1960s to the 1980s, but they fell at the turn of the millennium, from 1998 onward, which not coincidentally, was also the time that technology began invading homes and schools in the United States.

»POOR SLEEP

In our survey, 50 percent of students say they have trouble sleeping.

Staying up till late at night in front of the computer interferes with sleep. According to psychologist Madeline Levine, American teens get up around the same time than they did three decades ago, but they are getting far fewer hours of sleep.

Why? Because they go to bed much later.

“Teens are taking advantage of the changes in their brain’s sleep center to stay up late plying their social-networking skills,” says Levine in her book Teach Your Children Well.

When bedrooms of teens are filled with all sorts of gadgets, the light emanating from
them decreases the production of melatonin, the chemical responsible for good sleep.

Shutting off all stimulation and keeping some devices out of the bedroom (such as the computer) can help our children and teens sleep better.

**The light emanating from gadgets decreases the production of melatonin, the chemical responsible for good sleep.**

**» AT RISK**

In November 2010, Scott Frank, director of the Case Western Reserve School of Medicine Master of Public Health program, presented to the American Public Health Association the findings of a study linking communication technology to a plethora of poor health behaviors, such as smoking, drinking, and sex.

Hyper-texting was defined as texting more than 120 messages per school day, while hyper-social networking meant spending more than three hours per school day on Facebook and its ilk.

Frank and his team studied high-school students from an urban Midwestern County. Hyper-texters and hyper-networkers were 40 and 62 percent, respectively, more likely to smoke; twice the chances and 79 percent, respectively, more likely to drink; 43 and 69 percent, respectively, more likely to binge drink; 41 and 84 percent, respectively, more likely to use drugs; 55 and 94 percent, respectively, more likely to get into a fight; 3.5 times and 60 percent, respectively more likely to have had sex; and 90 and 60 percent, respectively, more likely to have four or more sexual partners.

From the data above, it appears that hyper-networking is even worse than hyper-texting. Hyper-networking is highly linked to “stress, depression, suicide, substance use, fighting, poor sleep, poor academics, television watching, and parental permissiveness.”

“The startling results of this study suggest that when left unchecked, texting and other widely popular methods of staying connected can have dangerous health effects on teenagers,” says Frank. “This should be a wake-up call for parents to not only help their children stay safe by not texting and driving, but by discouraging excessive use of the cell phone or social websites in general.”

**» ALONE TOGETHER**

Psychiatrist Elias Aboujaoude, director of Stanford University’s Impulse Control Clinic, has coined the phrase “e-personality” to describe us when online. There are advantages: The shy ones among us can be more assertive; the anonymity the Net provides can make us brave and even topple governments (witness the Arab Spring); we can become friends with those who share our interests, even if they are halfway around the world.

But because we are less restrained and more aggressive online, our e-personality also spurs us to break up with someone over the Net rather than face to face, to avoid delicate conversations, to behave as if real-world problems disappear when we wish them so.

Social media has often become an ironic phrase. What is meant to be social has made us less so. Turkle sums this up best:

> Online, we easily find ‘company’ but are exhausted by the pressures of performance. We enjoy continual connection but rarely have each other’s full attention. We can have instant audiences but flatten out what we say to each other in new reductive genres of abbreviation … We have many new encounters but may come to experience them as tentative, to be put ‘on hold’ if better ones come along. Indeed, new encounters need not be better to get our attention. We are wired to respond positively to their simply being new … We like being able to reach each other almost instantaneously but have to hide our phones to force ourselves to take a quiet moment.

---

**Rowie and Ria Juan**

**USING SOCIAL MEDIA RESPONSIBLY**

Our foray into the social-media world was made richer with the insights and experiences shared by sisters Rowena “Rowie” Juan Matti and Rosario “Ria” T. Juan. Rowie is a mother, educator, entrepreneur, and currently the CEO of the Galileo Enrichment Learning Program Center. She aspires to help improve the education system in the country “so that we can train children to become leaders who bring progress to the Philippines.”

Ria is a social-media consultant, a digital strategist in social-media integration, founder of TweetupMNL, and Lead for Google Business Group–Makati. Passionate about community building and collaboration, Ria participates in causes such as #rescuePH, which mobilized rescue teams during the August habagat (monsoon) season in 2012, and Twestival Manila.

**GAMING**

Ria’s firsthand exposure enabled her to grasp the rudiments of gaming. One example is *Second Life*, a fantasy game where one creates his/her own character and interact with other gamers online using their fantasy persona. In this game, one can reinvent himself/herself, choosing what they want to look like, what their ideal job will be, and so forth, in order to create an avatar.

According to Ria, gamers have been known to fall in love with each other while playing and interacting online. A lot of them decide to meet in person to continue their love story.

But real life for these people behind avatars is stripped of their wonderful and fantastical features. And this is where the trouble starts. Living a fantastical life will not ever transfer to a pragmatic every-day reality. Sometimes it takes a third party like
relatives or friends to urge these gamers back to reality, in order to spare them from possible disastrous real-world relationships.

From Ria’s experience, playing games is definitely engaging and exciting. She can spend four straight hours on a game like Candy Crush or Plants vs. Zombies. But she only plays games in her limited spare time. Most professionals like her do not get addicted to gaming because they have careers to take care of in the real world.

Some gamers, though, indulge in games just for bragging rights, to attain rock-star status in the gaming community. For other gamers, the ultimate goal is to level up at every turn and finish a game, even if extremely challenging. Some gamers who manage to complete the game start again and employ different strategies to top their own scores or records.

Game companies often hire players to see the various ways a game can be played. In Shanghai, these gamers get paid as much as US$100 a day to do this. Through their feedback, companies tweak the games to make the more challenging, and therefore, addictive.

**NETWORKING**

Ria is involved in organizing networking events to enable netizens to interact offline. This provides a venue for face-to-face encounters of the different personalities behind the tweets and blogs.

Sometimes the mental picture we have from interacting with someone online turns out to be quite different when we finally meet him or her in person. For example, a humorous political satirist who writes a very popular blog is thought to be *kenkoy*. In reality, he is very pleasant but quite serious. Ria speaks from personal experience. She has long enjoyed the humorous blogs of a certain political satirist, and she was excited to meet him in person. When they finally met in a convention, she was surprised to discover that the person she had thought was a life-of-the-party extrovert was actually quite shy in real life. Ria found him to be pleasant, but realized that his humor was more evident online than off.

**FOMO**

FOMO or Fear of Missing Out is the reason why many of young people throw patience out the window: they just have to watch a movie on its first day of showing. They get antsy when they’re already in one party but thinking of another one happening at the same time. To solve this, they go online and view photos and video clips of the other party to make sure they’re updated.

FOMO is also why our teens view concerts online, for fear of missing out on events their friends were able to experience.

Constant posting of pictures, events, and comments for all to see affects people in various ways. Some people are compelled to react with insults or dismissal. Some roll their eyes at comments such as “Oh Lord, help me get through the day.” Some do the best thing: ignore such comments.
It is a Herculean task for our teens to create online posts they want their friends to “like.” This is quite stressful to them. According to Rowie, her teen daughters consult each other before tweeting or posting photos on Facebook because they share generally the same audience. The anxiety over posting the wrong thing online may be so great on young people; one time it prompted one of Rowie’s daughters to exclaim, “I hope my future daughter does not experience this when it’s her time.”

So how do we know whether or not to post something online? Ria’s advice is straightforward: “If you will regret it at any point in your life, don’t post it.”

**Privacy**

Contacts on Facebook can reach an uncontrollable number, because we are linked to people we do not even know personally. In Ria’s social-media line of work, this is unavoidable. She has tried to fiddle with privacy settings, but they are not foolproof.

Privacy is not a real priority to media companies that make money out of advertisements. The more ads people click, the better for them. At the end of the day, we are using their websites as tools. Warnings are in fine print, but who among us bothers to read them?

Nevertheless, Ria counsels us to still read the warnings and to understand what we are getting ourselves into. We need to (patiently) customize our privacy settings, especially if we truly want our posts shared only to specific people.

We need to regularly check who our friends are on Facebook, who our followers are on Twitter. Or we can even try other social networks, like Path or WeChat, whose settings we can customize to our advantage and needs.

As what some young people have told us in the course of our study, from her experience with social networking, Ria agrees with our finding that Facebook use in the 18–25 age group has been declining, in favour of Instagram or Snapchat. One reason may be because parents have moved into this social-media community.

So many young people have now migrated to Instagram and Snapchat that claim to be much more private. Users of Snapchat think that what they post vanishes into thin air in a matter of minutes.

But systems are not foolproof and glitches do occur. Besides, these posts are stored or archived somewhere in the cloud, and can be accessed easily by seriously determined parties. A risqué photo posted on Snapchat that should vanish in a minute can be “saved” by photographing and then re-posting on another website—for everyone to see.

Ria also shares that there are studies that track the trend of breakups on Facebook. Apparently, researchers have identified “seasons” for breakups. Even the privacy of saying good-bye to a friendship or relationship has been reduced to a click of the relationship-status button. As for prowlers, a change of status from “in a relationship” to “single” by someone who has just broken up with someone (and probably still hurting because of it) is an alert for them to move in and try their luck.

**Bottomline**
Social-media companies are just like other corporations that are now faced with the challenge of users who tend to move toward sites with cheaper service. So even with the ubiquity of social networking, big companies also hire marketing and public-relations personnel to promote their sites, creative teams to make the sites more attractive, and community managers to deal with customer service.

Sites like Facebook is currently trying to move away from pure text, using more visuals like infographics to become much more distinct and attract more traffic.

According to Queena, this trend toward pictures rather than text seems like a regression to the cave-man era when people communicated with pictures on the wall.

What will happen if we don’t read and just rely on images? Images are often subject to misinterpretation, Ria says, and chances are we will get substandard results.

Ria reflects on her childhood, when she read a lot of books while growing up. Now that she is using a lot of gadgets, she downloads online articles instead. With multiple tabs, however, she sometimes gets distracted. The links attached to the articles can further draw her attention away from the task at hand.

Queena has experienced the same thing, and even if she believes she has learned to focus well through the years, the hyperlinks embedded in online materials have tempted her so many times to stray. What more with our attention-deficit youth, many of whom have never even learned to efficiently focus in the first place?

**Security**

How can we know what our children are doing online? Ria says that the easiest way is to just turn on their computers.

An online browser or search engine (such as Google Chrome or Internet Explorer) is rigged with cookies that help generate income for the company. The sites that first appear on browsers are those frequently visited by a computer’s user.

Whether we like it or not, our online activities are public. We drop “crumbs” along the way for other people, like advertisers and marketers, to pick up. That’s why advertisers are able to pitch certain specific products and services to us based on our browsing activity. For example, if we browse books on Amazon, suggestions will pop up based on the previews of books we clicked on or on our past purchases. So if the ads that pop up on our children’s browsers are for porn sites, then most likely, these are what our kids have been accessing. Another way is for parents to also check the search engine’s cache or history. This history is accessible to anyone on the computer.

Many schools provide lessons on Internet privacy and security for students. But we parents need to train our children to be always aware and conscious of what to share online or not. Many of us love to post about our kids, but we need to be careful as well. It is certainly more prudent not to reveal our children’s names, and schools, and our addresses, phone numbers, and so forth.

**Netiquette**
Etiquette, both the old-fashioned and the new fangled kind, seems to be a thing of the past in this era of modern technology. Students use their camera phones to take pictures of notes on the blackboard, without the teacher’s permission. Diners are more preoccupied with their gadgets than the people around them, while ostensibly having dinner with family or friends.

Writing longhand has become a lost art; a lot of kids now cannot even write properly. Ria was asked once why she brought a paper notebook to a meeting instead of a gadget. Ria feels that there is a big difference between typing on a keypad and writing notes on paper. When we type, the letters are already there, formed and impersonal. Unlike typing, writing longhand renders a personal touch, and we have a better recollection of our thoughts as they appear on paper.

Texts and e-mails are now often curt one-liners with no room for “thank you” or “please.” Relationships end impersonally via text or on Facebook. Ria sometimes has to remind her young media officers to stow away their gadgets during meetings so that they can pay full attention to the few minutes given to them to report. For those who disregard “Devices away!” a crumpled ball of tissue tossed in their direction gets their attention.

Rowie reminisces how the late Fr. James Reuter could remember practically everything that he had heard in spite of his age. Through the years, Rowie had shared many things with Father Reuter, and she was constantly amazed by how much he remembered, even the smallest details.

When she asked Father Reuter how he did this feat, he replied, “I listen to you. I give you my attention.” When we listen—really listen—to another, we do not easily forget what was said.

Ria sums it up nicely, “Etiquette is not about a set of rules. It is the ability to think.”

**FAMILY**

Ria believes that many of our attention-deprived youth are not resourceful enough. They usually have no initiative to solve a problem, replies “I don’t know” when asked a question, and says “I am bored” even if there are a ton of things they can engage themselves in away from the computer.

Rowie and Ria both grew up with no-nonsense parents who set rules. Dad is the stricter disciplinarian, but both parents are consistent in implementing house rules.

“If we did not get the grade,” say the sisters, “then no TV for us, and that meant no TV for the whole household, even Dad.” The Juan family also did not have cable TV. Toys were taken away for misbehavior. Tutors were not encouraged, and used as a last resort only when the siblings encountered difficulties in particular topics.  

Rowie says, “Mom would always say ‘Kaya mo’y an.’ (You can do it.) Our parents will not solve our problems for us. They would tell us to find out the answers ourselves.”

For the Juan sisters, a lot of TV content now is disappointing. Even History Channel has succumbed to commercial allure, with the airing of reality-TV shows. Ria talks about another US reality show where an actress known for serial hook-ups and coarse language
is touted as a role model.

One way to deal with our media-saturated world is to find balance. Rowie and Ria’s brother Rommel has tech-savvy kids, but he and his wife have long encouraged them to play sports. Their kids are part of a soccer team, with daily practices in school. When the children get home, they have little time for TV or gadgets.
Raising Socially Adept Kids

OFTEN OVERLOOKED among children who are raised with gadgets is the development of social skills. Toddlers start to interact with different people—families, caregivers, playmates. Kids communicate by smiling, cooing, and babbling, until language further develops. When they play, kids make their own rules, and they learn to abide by them. Through play, kids learn to play fair.

In actual face-to-face interactions, children learn to feel happy in the presence of playmates. They laugh out loud. They touch. They converse.

Children learn to fight, too, and they learn to fix the fight and say sorry. They become uncomfortable when they get into trouble, or when someone gets mad at them. They get angry or fearful in turn, but they are compelled to confront the other person and resolve the problem.

▶ NO NEED TO RESOLVE

Virtual play—mobile or computer apps, games, videos, or other screen programs—unfortunately does not allow children to experience real-world interactions.

Kids do laugh at the screen but they do not have anything to do with the fun. They can think, they can play, they can have virtual fights, and a whole lot more.

But if children become uncomfortable with what they see on screen, when a program or app becomes uninteresting, too slow, too scary, too fast, too complicated, when they do not like to play with the opponents they have, or they simply do not want to deal with the situation anymore, the X button in the corner of the screen window is just a click away!

No need to stay with the uncomfortable feeling. No need to deal with the challenger. No need to resolve their fright, their discomfort, their conflict. Just close the program or turn off the gadget.

▶ LIMITED INTERACTIONS

When children hang out more often with virtual playmates, their interactions with real people become limited. They find it hard to deal with friends and playmates that they cannot click away once a situation becomes too sticky for them. They find it hard to keep eye contact or to discuss substantial issues with friends.

Real play becomes less exciting. More boys prefer to engage in rough play than actually interacting with one another.

Ichel has observed several preschoolers and school-age kids who lack basic social skills. A Prep girl who is enamored by apps is actually a smart kid, but she does not look at others when they speak. A Grade One boy who spends hours on the iPad and game console gets into physical fights and even loops stories for his benefit because he cannot handle the discomfort of being in conflict with his classmates. A second grader is so much
into computer games and the tablet that he cannot sit still in class. He has not been able to form friendships and has a hard time cooperating with others in group activities.

When kids spend most of their time in the virtual world, will there ever be a chance for them to manage the real one? In our survey, 20 percent of students say they never go out with friends. More than 80 percent percent say they enjoy staying at home.

**SAM’S CASE**

Ichel cites Sam (not his real name), whom she has tried her best to help when he was in Prep and Grade One. In his previous school, Sam was allegedly bullied by classmates.

In the new school, Sam is a big boy who towers over everyone in class, due to his size, personality and fluency in speaking. But he always insists on getting his way during play, and whines and complains when he does not attain this.

While he sounds smart, his writing, insight and logical reasoning are not as good. Dealing with classmates does not come easy for him, and he gets into physical fights with some boys. Sam has a tendency to tell different versions of stories about incidents that happened in class, especially if he is at a disadvantage.

Sam has difficulty handling his feelings and being in control of situations. He believes that his classmates are always trying to fight him and so he needs to defend himself. His words and stories, when validated, are based on what he hears and sees on TV, or on games he plays.

Over the course of several conferences with Sam’s parents, Ichel and her colleagues learned that Sam usually plays by himself and is often engaged in screen time—TV, cable, PlayStation, and the iPad. His parents neither allow him to go out and play with neighborhood kids nor do active play inside the house or the garage.

Rules are quite hard to follow, since they would be implemented differently by the parents and the grandparents. Ichel has recommended intervention strategies, but Sam’s parents always put forward reasons and difficulties for not doing them.

Unfortunately, Sam is not an isolated case.

**TEACH MANNERS AND GREETINGS**

Only when we ourselves interact and relate well with our children and guide them on the ins and outs of relating with others will they learn social skills essential in life.

We can start with good manners. This is something kids learn in school, but seldom practice consistently at home or outside. Whether children say the formalities, “Good morning” or “Good evening” or hear us say, “Hi” or “Hello,” the important thing is that they give due respect to other people.

According to Ichel, waiters and attendants in restaurants tend to direct their questions to adults, and ignore children. Despite this, Ichel encourages her four-year-old daughter Maia to request for what she needs.

Simple requests such as “May I have a glass of water?” or “I need more napkins,
“please” can hone children’s confidence and alleviate their anxiety in social situations.

**CHOOSE REAL PLAYMATES AND GAMES**

We can give our children toys and gadgets, but only when kids have actual playmates do they get to practice real-world interaction skills. Siblings, cousins, neighbors, and our friends’ kids can be good playmates for our children.

Ensure that kids can meet their playmates regularly. It would help if you share a similar, if not the same philosophy (including the manner of raising and disciplining kids) as the parents of your children’s playmates, and that your kids share their playmates’ interests.

Interacting with their peers in the real world does not become less important when our children get older.

Flordeliza Francisco, who teaches at the Ateneo Math Department, once asked some college students what they did for fun. They said they played together, but this meant sitting beside each other, and meeting each other in a fantasy simulation game—a virtual world rather than the real world where they can physically interact with one another.

**JOIN KIDDIE GAMES AND PARTIES**

Most children love parties. Whether in school, fast-food restaurants, or homes, kiddie parties are a good laboratory for kids to practice dealing with others, young and old.

Many skills are honed in a party: greeting the birthday celebrants and his or her parents, saying hi to relatives and friends, eating properly, waiting for their turn in lines, winning and losing in games.

Children get to play with different kids of varied ages, friends or strangers. They also have to follow different rules implemented by the hosts.

Ichel says, “Even if we are tired out from playing ‘Bring Me,’ and my kids have long mastered the game ‘Longest Greeting,’ my kids almost never turn down an invitation to a party.”

**It is not natural for children to stay at home or in their room all the time.**

Of course, in a party, it’s best to leave gadgets at home. Pio Castillo, a professor at the University of Santo Tomas, says that kids today are so different from when we were children. He tells Ichel that during family reunions, he sees many children get together physically, but instead of actually playing with each other, running around and laughing, they are each engrossed in their own handheld gadgets.

Using gadgets to ensure that kids stay still detracts from actual opportunities to relate and connect with different people.
LET KIDS HANDLE THEIR OWN BATTLES

If our children get into fights, let us not immediately fight their battles for them. In Filipino, we say, “Huwag patulan ang away-bata!”

Why should we not immediately intervene when someone fights with our children? First, there will always be mean people and our kids should learn the skill of dealing appropriately with them. Second, if we fight for our children now while we are creating an image that we are indeed there for them, we are also taking away their personal power of being able to deal with the situation themselves.

Third, we will not be there all the time to save our children, and so it is best to train them with skills in socializing, negotiating, and resolving conflict early on.

LET CHILDREN ANSWER SIMPLE QUESTIONS

Many parents automatically answer questions directed to their kids, such as the child’s name, age, or school. They answer for their children, with the excuse that their kids are too shy.

While this is not entirely wrong, it is best to guide our children to respond properly to adults or other kids. We can encourage them to share their ideas, and we need to resist the urge to comment, correct, or interrupt them when they start talking.

Without being too intrusive, enter their world by paying attention to what they say. “Oh, I heard you say that teacher did not call you during Math. Why is this so?” or “Good job, group leader! So what does a group leader do?”

TREAT FAMILY MEALS AS SACRED

One of a local noodle brand’s corporate social responsibility programs is promoting the value of shared family meals. While the importance of meals has been established by research as an effective means of establishing connections and relationships, we can consider it too as a way to develop children’s social skills. If communication lines are open, children will learn to share about themselves, confident that what they say will be accepted by others.

Meals are a way for family members to share each other’s ups and downs, help each other solve dilemmas, and have a good laugh over meals.

However, some families who declare Sunday lunches as family bonding time suffer the scenario of family members holding their gadgets at the table. They are connected to their gadgets rather than to each other and barely talk about each other’s concerns.

We need to drive home the sacredness of family meals. Children and adults are required to talk with and listen to each other. If we cannot even get together for a meal, when can we really sit down to connect with each other?

EXPOSE CHILDREN TO DIFFERENT PEOPLE
It is not natural for children to stay at home or in their room all the time. For parents who are raising toddlers and young children, it may indeed be convenient to leave them home most of the time, since it will give the adults some breathing space.

Moreover, limiting them from going outside just because they are shy, hyperactive, or playful limits real-life experiences of practicing how to behave well. Consider the advantages our children will gain from being outside: meeting new people, gaining confidence in speaking, playing with new acquaintances, or engaging in new activities.

Let kids tag along while you do the grocery. Aside from exploring shelves and bins and taste various food samples, children get to greet or chat with the guard, the cashier, salespersons, friends, and neighbors. You can also bring them to community activities, such as prayer meetings that have activities for children.

Ichel says, “It may be a tall order sometimes, but rather than leaving them at home with the nanny, being out with us parents is a good way for our kids to socialize with adults and other kids who may not be familiar to them. We ourselves always do pep talks with Migo and Maia about where we will go, whom we will see, how to do proper greetings, and to behave around different people.”

“Though they would tend to climb up and down chairs, and even fool around, we make sure they know the expected behavior and that they do not disturb other people,” Ichel continues. “My husband Koots and I ensure that aside from the rules set, we have a Boredom Buster kit for them. At their playful stage now, we are proud to say that they can sustain nothing-to-do-for-kids occasions, yet they get to be with us, meet different people, and learn the proper behavior in social situations.”

It is usually a different story with tweens or teens who no longer want to tag along with parents unlike when they were younger. Understandably so. But we know of many cases of family reunions or parties, when tweens and teens choose to stay home rather than interact with cousins or other relatives. When they are allowed to stay home and be in their room most days, chances are they are glued to the Internet and in their own virtual world.

Balance is needed here. Tweens and teens are allowed to be by themselves and do their own thing, because they need to seek their own identity. But they also need to abide by social and familial obligations, and leave their gadgets at home during these times.
ICHEL SPEAKS
STARTING YOUNG

With my background in developmental psychology, I was an obsessive-compulsive mom when I had my son Migo. I wanted him to be on track with the expected milestones. I noticed that Migo had good motor skills, both fine and gross. He sat up earlier than expected, and he was already walking (albeit wobbly) when he turned one. When he was just an infant, Migo was already able to notice details and explore new things.

While my husband Koots and I made sure that Migo’s play area and immediate surroundings were safe, we allowed him to explore. Instead of stopping him from climbing up and down the bed, we helped him pull himself up and taught him to go “feet first” when going down.

Migo had his share of falls, of course, but not overprotecting him helped to develop his gross motor skills, especially agility and running ability now.

Migo had a lot on real-world interactions with adults. We never used baby talk with him, and we soon noted his language development. We did not overstimulate him with videos or TV shows; instead, we talked to him often and labeled the things around him. (“Look, that’s your block.”)

During car rides, we joined Migo in identifying the things we saw out the window. (“See that dog! Oh, a red car passed by!”)

Migo’s pediatrician noted that he was active and explorative, as well as advanced in language skills. Language development is usually faster for girls than for boys. Yet at six months onward, Migo was already using syllables to communicate with us. At one year, he could call out almost all the people around him.

Migo loved poring through books, and story-telling delighted him. His favorite book then was the Abakadang Filipino. He could name the pictures both in English and Tagalog, even point to a photo of the author and say, “Author.”

At about one-and-a-half years old, Migo was speaking in phrases. When he turned two, he could recite nursery rhymes like “Hey Diddle-Diddle” and “Baa-Baa Black Sheep.” He could even sing Karen Carpenter’s song “You” with me.

We did our best to limit multimedia exposure on him when he was much younger. That’s why we were able to maximize our son’s development.
Using Social Media Effectively

HOW CAN WE combat the tendencies of media, especially social media, to promote narcissism in even the best of us? How can we manage social media to minimize communication problems with one another?

»REAL PEOPLE

We need to acknowledge that there are real people at the other end of any digital communication. It is almost too easy to say thoughtless things to those we cannot see face to face. We need to put ourselves in other people’s shoes. Will they be hurt by what we say? Do we really mean what we say? Can our message be misinterpreted?

This is especially important if we type in hurtful messages (even if we ourselves feel hurt). Though difficult, we can take a deep breath and wait a while before deciding to press the “Send” button.

Now if we are the victims of a cruel message, we have to resist the temptation to engage the sender immediately. We need to back off and cool down. Better still, we can talk to the sender face-to-face, if possible, to clear up any misunderstanding.

If the sender is not someone we know (just one of those Facebook “friends”), then at least we know that this is not a real friend, someone we would really care to have in our life.

In our survey, 34 percent of respondents say they quarrel with people online. Forty-two percent of respondents say they quarrel with people face to face.

»KEEP IN PERSPECTIVE

Keeping comments in perspective makes social networking easier for everyone. If we realize that posted comments are often thoughtless or done at the spur of the moment, then we can better ignore them.

That the world is composed of other people, aside from us, is something we need to keep in mind. Do we really need to send a photo of what we ate yesterday? Pass on a weak joke? Inform the whole world that we are about to go to sleep?

When we post, let us be mindful of the number of “I” or “me” pronouns we use in every message. We can practice changing some of these instead to “we” or “us.” Again, the world does not solely revolve around us.

We need to learn to befriend ourselves, and not stay tied 24/7 to everyone else.

»FOUR-STEP PROGRAM

The wife of Canadian-born science and technology journalist Daniel Sieberg used to call him “glow worm” because every night when the lights were out, his face would still
always be shining in front of the screen. Their relationship began to suffer, until Sieberg, who used to work for CBS, realized that he was spending more time with Facebook friends rather than real ones.

In a 2012 interview with Jewish Chronicle Online, Sieberg says, “I was immersed in social networks, gadgets, and devices. I thought I was super-connected. But one day, sitting across the table from family and friends, I realized that I didn’t really know very much about what they were actually doing and they didn’t know a lot about what was going on with me. It was a wake-up call.”

So Sieberg, who now ironically works for Google, consciously decided to communicate with others in a more personal way. The result was the book The Digital Diet in 2011, which details a four-step plan to regain our non-digital lives.

The first step is Re:Think, or be aware of the problem. How much time do we spend on digital devices per day? Multiply that by the number of days in a year, and we will likely see that we spend an inordinate amount of time online, to the exclusion of anything else.

The second step is Re:Boot. We can try disconnecting from gadgets and devices for a certain time. The withdrawal symptoms may be unpleasant, so Sieberg likens this phase to a kind of “digital detox.” In fact, when Sieberg disconnected from Facebook, “people reacted like I was dying.”

The third step is Re:Connect. We then slowly reintroduce technologies back into our lives, but we need to judiciously choose which to utilize in which situation. Sieberg asks us to reflect on, for instance, if we should be updating our social network or be out having lunch or coffee with a friend.

The final step is Re:Vitalize. We make human contact a priority whenever possible, and learn to control social media, and not let it control us.

**DIGITAL FOOTPRINTS**

Many students post revealing photos or rant on topics on Facebook, and are shocked when employers check these out and use them as incriminating evidence against hiring them. When it comes to technology, common sense goes out the window.

“Rightly or wrongly, employers and admissions committees are … gaining access to young people’s private selves,” says University of Texas at Austin radio-TV-film professor S. Craig Watkins in his book The Young and the Digital.

When Watkins speaks to US middle- and high-school students, he always asks them, “What does your profile say about you?”

“The truth is we all leave digital footprints,” says Watkins. “It just so happens that for tweens and teens, the footprints they leave behind in MySpace and Facebook will likely impact their prospects for college admissions or employment.”

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) advises us to educate ourselves to lessen the “participation gap” so we can better understand the technologies that our children use. The AAP also recommends that we supervise our children’s online activities actively,
through open communication, rather than passive methods like Net Nanny used to monitor net use without the need for parents.

The AAP also recommends a “family online-use plan that involves regular family meetings to discuss online topics and checks of privacy settings and online profiles for inappropriate posts.”

The emphasis should be on citizenship and healthy behavior and not punitive action,” continues the AAP, “unless truly warranted.”

**SCHOOL MONITORING**

In August 2013, the Glendale Unified School District in southern California took a proactive stance. Aside from regulating what students do online in school, the district decided to also monitor what they may be doing at home. The district partnered with the company Geo Listening, which searches social media for student posts that can point to particular problems, such as depression or bullying.

This move is controversial, with huge implications for privacy. But the school district emphasizes that only public posts are monitored, not protected ones on Twitter or Facebook. The school defends its move, saying that this early, such monitoring has already saved a student’s life. This student had posted his intent to commit suicide online.

Should schools monitor student posts outside campus? We believe that such responsibility lies with the parents, and students themselves. But in a world where Internet use is double-edged, we cannot blame schools for attempting to do what they think best.
Once, when I talked on how the youth can better manage media today, a parent asked what I thought about the Cybercrime Prevention Act (RA 10175). Its intentions seem to be noble, I replied, but like many other people, I question the provision penalizing libel more in cyberspace than in print, and the clause authorizing the Department of Justice to clamp down on websites deemed offensive.

The parent then narrated the heartbreaking story of how her daughter was repeatedly bullied by classmates and so-called “friends” on Facebook, so much so that her grades plummeted and she spiraled into depression. Her daughter had to change schools.

Bullying is not a small matter, the parent said, and because of what happened to her daughter, she wants social media to be regulated. Freedom of speech should not be absolute, she said.

I gently informed the parent about the Anti-Bullying Act of 2012 (RA 5496), which would address the matter better than the proposed Cybercrime Prevention Act.

Bullying should not to be taken lightly. I have seen the effects of bullying on my students, whether physical, emotional, mental, or whether done by classmates, teachers, siblings, and parents. Prevalent in schools (and even in workplaces), bullying is a serious matter with repercussions ranging from hurt feelings or broken friendships to indelible wounds or even death.

I agree with the said parent on most counts. Sometimes, if bullying cannot be controlled by authorities (parents or school), then changing schools would be the most sensible option.

But I told the parent, freedom of speech means exactly that—the liberty to speak one’s mind without fear. I don’t have a Facebook or a Twitter account—because I don’t have the time or the inclination to maintain such accounts, and because I feel a lot of the content in those sites are trivial. But even if I don’t do social media, I believe that everyone has the right to indulge in it, without any restrictions. As Voltaire famously said, “I disagree with what you say, but I will defend to the death your right to say it.”

**DEALING WITH BULLYING**

Bullying does exist, but in our survey, it is not the predominant concern. Less than 15 and 10 percent of male and female students, respectively, say they have bullied others online.

But one bullying case is one too many. So how can we deal with bullying?

Education is key. Discuss bullying in school and at home—its characteristics (aggression, power imbalance, repetition), the kinds it can take (physical, verbal, social, emotional), and the places it can happen (school, home, cyberspace).

Include anti-bullying lessons in the curriculum. Emphasize that bullying is not acceptable in any form.
Install procedures to deal with bullying in school. To have a clear picture of the prevalence of bullying in school, start by conducting surveys—anonymous ones to protect students’ privacy. Many schools underestimate the frequency of bullying because students seldom report incidents. Once surveys are done, decide if and how to communicate the findings to parents, teachers, and students.

Many schools do not want to do this for fear of embarrassment or inflaming sentiment. But I know of at least one school that has openly disclosed its findings, and stakeholders have responded positively, working together to create an anti-bullying program.

Train teachers and counselors on how to handle bullying. Monitor hot spots where bullying is likely to occur, such as the cafeteria, the playground, and bathrooms.

Many parents accuse school staff of turning a blind eye to bullying, but the latter often do not know what to do.

Offer seminars to parents, too. Teachers and administrators often feel that when parents butt in, with emotions all awry, things may get worse.

But for bullying to be minimized, or even eradicated altogether, all sectors need to communicate with and work together. Identify respected and well-loved teachers and other staff whom students can turn to for help. Empower them to act judiciously and quickly to avert more bullying.

If possible, identify also well-respected parents known for their fair judgment who can mediate conflicts among fellow parents. This may be hard to do because many reasonable parents do not want to involve themselves in what they perceive to be school politics—but they need to be convinced to help out.

MODEL GOOD BEHAVIOR

Good behavior can be contagious. Recognize students when they go out of their way to help others, be it volunteering for flood relief, tutoring classmates, stopping fights, respecting teachers, or standing up to bullies.

Adults should be good role models. Teachers should refrain from raising their voices to students (unless absolutely necessary), insulting them, or laughing at them. Parents should never shout at teachers or threaten them (such as during parent-teacher conferences).

Anti-bullying starts at home. Prevention is always better than any remediation. It may be unfair to blame all parents for their children’s bullying behaviour—sometimes bullies are raised by the gentlest of parents (I have counselled one such case).

But that was the exception. Several studies show that more often than not, bullies are raised by parents who themselves are bullies (physically or verbally abusive fathers, manipulative mothers, parents who intimidate or threaten others), absentee parents (either deceased, working abroad, or just too involved in other things to pay attention to the kids), or parents who cannot discipline their children (those who prefer to be barkada [buddies] rather than parents, those who cannot say “no” to their kids, those who refuse to set
limits).

Children raised in homes where communication lines are open, discipline is firm but loving, love and trust are unconditional, seldom become bullies. And if ever bullied, they have enough confidence and strength to handle the situation.
The Selfie

*By Mae Esguerra-Sy*

*Mother of two, entrepreneur (Babinski Baby)*

I take a picture of myself in the mirror, using the flip function, or with the digital camera then delete it if it doesn’t pass my standards. Oh, I have to raise the camera a little higher; this would give me a smaller nose and bigger eyes … Tilt it a bit here and focus a bit there … Greeeeat, the double chin’s gone. If still not satisfied, I click photo edit, browse through the filters, and adjust the contrast.

Lo and behold, I have just created my own avatar—a selfie that I could show the entire world. A picture of myself that I am proud of, but ironically, the laughingstock of acquaintances in coffee-shop get-togethers.

The selfie reflects an insecure, self-seeking validation culture. Lurking behind that perfect profile could be a depressed or confused soul. A selfie avoids the scar on his face; he cannot take a picture of his character. Character is what he is in the dark, it is who he is when no one is looking.

This is the selfie shot. It is easily created, directed, edited. There’s nothing wrong with healthy narcissism sometimes. But be careful not to overdo it or other people will get sick of it, too.

Sometimes thy selfie shot is not really thyself.

*Posted on Facebook, July 12, 2013*
Let’s Talk About Sex

TWEENS AND TEENS are the digital natives. They make friends, chat, fight with each other in real life, but increasingly more through digital interaction. Once they are out of school, they still engage in online connections, even while working on homework.

But due to their lack of maturity or social skills, they inevitably bring personal issues that used to belong in private diaries into social networks: Conflicts with peers, quarrels with boyfriends or girlfriends, troubles with teachers, anger toward parents.

Instead of reflecting on how they can privately handle these matters, they choose to express themselves out in the virtual world, satisfying for the moment their needs of assurance, acceptance, alliance, and even anonymity.

What our tweens and teens find hard to confront and deal with in real life, particularly issues in relationships and social interactions, they put forth online, reaping mixed results.

TEENAGE DATING AND ROMANCE

Many teens these days start romantic relationships through mobile phones, online chats, or social networks. Some female teens say, “We have friends who meet their boyfriends online, they court each other online, they pursue the relationship online, then they breakup online, too.”

In our focus group discussions, teens say that such relationships tend to last for about three to five months.

Some male teens do their courting (panligigaw) through digital media to help them save face in case things do not work out. They find it hard to woo girls face to face, because they tend to be torpe (or chicken out) in expressing what they feel.

Pursuing girls through chat or text makes things less daunting, they say. Moreover, in the past, sex talk was limited to the (analog) telephone. Now with “sexting,” teenagers, and even children, engage in sex talk also through text. Child and adolescent psychiatrist Nancy T. Cinco, who practices at the Cebu Doctors University Hospital, has handled cases of sexting by children as young as ten.

While teens feel that such methods seem to serve their purposes, they are hindered from developing important skills in human interaction and intimacy, as well as experiencing the value and essence of real friendships and relationships.

A crucial developmental need of adolescents is to develop their identity and learn to relate with the opposite sex. Teens need to understand themselves in relation with others, be aware of how to handle their emotions, and establish genuine and intimate relationships.

If they fail to learn these skills in adolescence, then they will likely find it hard to maintain satisfying relationships in adulthood. As they seek instant gratification and at the same time avoid uncomfortable situations, they will find it hard to manage mixed
emotions, and will have difficulty developing genuine and mature relationships.

**THE ROLE OF PARENTS**

In discussions with several groups of students from various high schools, we have discovered that many students have intimate relationships with those of the same or the opposite sex. The former type starts around middle school, but often lessens once male-female interactions happen.

During school-sanctioned interaction activities, boys and girls meet each other, then continue interacting through digital media, sometimes leading to actual meet-ups. Teens also say that they form insights about sex and relationships primarily through informal discussions with peers, formal classroom lessons on health and sexuality, and TV and movies.

But many female teens say that they did not totally comprehend the interplay of romance and sex until much later in life. Many of them just piece together what they hear or see, or what they have been told.

While most of the students regularly interact with their parents, only a few feel comfortable talking about relationships and sexual issues with them. Their parents assume that they have already learned about sex from Health lessons in school.

Instead, what they hear from parents are one-sided reminders not to have boyfriends and not to engage in premarital sex. Most have never discussed with their parents about their developing sexuality or guidelines in handling romantic relationships.

Interestingly, the students note that among their peers who are involved in romantic pursuits, most of them have issues with their families. They tend to lie to and ditch their parents in order to get together with their romantic partners.

**REVEALING SELFIES**

*Philippine Daily Inquirer* writer Pam Pastor reports on an American mother’s online post that has gone viral: In September 2013, Kimberly Hall, director of the women’s ministry of All Saints Presbyterian Church in Austin, Texas, viewed summer pictures on Facebook with her children, three boys and a girl. After all, in the Hall household, parents can access children’s online posts. “If you are friends with a Hall boy on Facebook or Instagram or Twitter, then you are friends with the whole Hall family,” says Hall.

To her shock, Hall viewed revealing photos of teenage girls who shared them online. She then posted a letter to these girls, saying that the selfies do not “reflect who you are at all!”

“We think you are lovely and interesting, and usually very smart,” Hall writes. “But we had to cringe and wonder what you were trying to do. Who are you trying to reach? What are you trying to say?”

Proper parenting is crucial. Hall says, “Your family would not be thrilled at the thought of my teenage boys seeing you only in your towel … In our house, there are no
second chances with pics like that, ladies. We have a zero-tolerance policy. I know, so lame. But if you want to stay friendly with our sons online, you’ll have to keep your clothes on, and your posts decent. If you post a sexy selfie (we all know the kind), or an inappropriate YouTube video—even once—it’s curtains.”

»SHORT SHORTS

Pastor also tells the story of Scott Mackintosh, father of four daughters and three sons. The family was supposed to eat out and play mini golf one time, but there was one problem: His daughter did not want to change out of her short shorts.

Instead of threatening or scolding his daughter, MacKintosh who has had enough of his daughter’s fashion style creatively tackled the problem. He wanted to “make a statement on how her short shorts maybe aren’t as cute as she thinks.”

MacKintosh cut up an old pair of jeans into his own short shorts, wearing them for dinner and mini golf with his family. Throughout the night, many people stared and pointed fingers at him.

At the end of the night, the daughter refused to get out of the car for milkshakes. Her father’s point must have been so effective because she posted her father’s photos in short shorts to her Tumblr account, which has since gone viral.

MacKintosh has been interviewed on TV for his out-of-the-box parenting style. On his wife’s blog, he posts, “My daughter will always know that her dad loves her and cares about her enough to make a fool out of himself.”

He has not seen his daughter in short shorts since.

»THE “TALK”

We may have either traditional or conservative views about sex, but there is a need for us to assist our children toward healthy sexual development. We need to consider the quality of our parent-child relationships, our communication patterns, and verbal and nonverbal messages. We cannot always control the things our teens may see or hear all the time. We cannot forever tell them, “Cover your eyes!” whenever there is a kissing or sex scene in movies. The more we generate anxiety, the more our teens will want to satisfy their curiosity, whatever the cost.

We can start talking about sexual issues when our children are eight or nine years old, by using age-appropriate terms and in the context already comprehensible to them. For teens, we can inject sexual issues through casual conversations, such as sexual scenes in movies or sexual lyrics in songs. It is best to get relationship and sexuality truths from us rather than from the media. It is only from us that our teens will understand what values and morals we hold dear.

Sex is not an easy topic to deal with. First, we can reflect on our own beliefs, values, and inhibitions. What are the sources of these beliefs? Do they serve us and our children well?
Next, we can evaluate the quality and manner of communicating with our teens. Can we say that we and our teens are honestly open to each other on just about anything? Are we accepting of our teens’ beliefs and opinions about sexuality and relationships? How do we react when these topics arise? Do we communicate with them without malice and judgment?

Let us use the appropriate terms in our discussion, and try to be as comfortable and natural as possible in handling questions that may arise. We can narrate an actual life experience, or take cues from songs or videos, or even stories they tell us about classmates.

Ask questions like, “What do you think of the couple in the movie?”, “What kind of relationship do you think the song is trying to say?”, “Your classmate is grounded for what she did with her boyfriend. What is your opinion on that?”

Talking about sex is a real challenge. But it’s better that our teens learn from us rather than a stranger on YouTube. We need to listen well to our teens’ questions so we can respond well. Then we can proceed by explaining in a matter-of-fact way about the beauty of the human sexual act, the goodness of this gift from God, and our values about love and sex. We can stress the importance of the mind to discern, the emotions to feel, and the spirit to do what is right.

With this approach, we can easily discuss with them related topics, such as premarital sex, date rape, pornography, teenage pregnancy, STDs, etc.

When we talk to our children about sex, we are not removing their innocence, but rather, helping bridge the gap between what they think they know and what they are experiencing or about to experience.

**APPROPRIATE BEHAVIOR**

Regardless of fads or peer pressure, adolescents are expected to be able to reflect on their thoughts, words, and actions in line with their sexuality. This includes what they say and how they act during interactions with the opposite sex, including text messages and posts they share online.

In our survey, not many students are into porn, with 40 percent and 5 percent of male and female respondents, respectively, having visited porn sites. Most do not visit regularly.

But we still need to talk to our children about sexual matters, no matter what. Sexually mature adolescents are capable of handling their feelings. This means bringing their emotion to the level of recognition and making appropriate thoughtful decisions based on both their feelings and the realities of the situation. They may be infatuated or sexually excited, but they know their limits and act accordingly based on their own principles and morals.

Mature teens are in touch with their own sexuality and values, as revealed in how they carry themselves, speak and act when dealing with the same and the opposite sex. They can manage their intense emotions and act according to their spirituality and value system.

It is tempting for our teens to take the easy way out. Photos and videos can be
uploaded easily, virtual relationships are replacing real ones, an “in a relationship” status can be changed to “single” with the click of a button.

While our values on family, relationships, sex, and marriage may remain the same, the ways we communicate these to our teens take on a special urgency in this day and age. Now more than ever, we need to be mentors in the proper sense of the word, and model for our teens the essence of genuine and lasting relationships.

Elaine Morales and Family
ENGINEERING EFFECTIVE HABITS

Elaine Morales’s career as an engineer came to an abrupt end when her family had to move from the province to Manila. Her husband’s career transfer entailed more responsibilities and travel, which meant he had less time to spend with their children.

Before the move, Elaine was a working mom, and had to share with her mother the responsibilities of caring for her daughters. But now Elaine had an opportunity to spend more time and focus more on her family, and immerse herself more in motherhood. Her daughters, Kim and Gia, were in Grades Five and One, respectively, at that time they changed schools, from a coed to an exclusive girls’ institution.

As an engineer, Elaine was used to organizing and carrying out plans in a methodical manner. So it was in this disciplined fashion that she carried out her task as a full-time mother.

Elaine made a to-do list for her daughters to make sure that they carried out the things needed for the next school day. She went through these checklists at the end of the day.

She tutored Kim up to Grade Five, and Gia, who was more playful, up to Grade Seven. Elaine continues to supervise their study periods today.

Accomplishing all school tasks was always a prerequisite to leisure time, which consisted of family activities, such as watching TV shows and movies or playing board games.

Aside from enrolling them in an after-class Math program to reinforce learning, Elaine also encouraged them to read a lot when they were younger. The latter activity Kim took up with gusto.

As the kids grew older, Elaine allowed them to take up their own interests: cheerleading for Kim, and cheerleading and dance for Gia. These activities entailed training sessions after class.

Still, the typical teenage lament “I am bored” would come up occasionally. Elaine’s retort: “How can you be bored when you have so many things to occupy your time?” The unwelcome suggestion of cleaning up their room and doing other chores would immediately make the teens clam up immediately.

Elaine saw her daughters’ vulnerability to living in the digital world and designed a system of controls to help her monitor their use and to minimize their being too absorbed
in gadgets.

When the kids were younger, the family had a shared computer that had parental controls. To limit usage, the computer had a program that would shut it down at a prescribed time.

This all changed with the advent of the school-required tablet for Gia and more school work for Kim. Usage was harder to monitor because when Elaine would tell her daughters to log out, the need to extend online time would crop up because of homework.

The tablet as a school requirement has its advantages: lighter physical load for students and easier access to grades for students and parents. Moreover, students have become more independent in doing schoolwork. They are taught to become more responsible, since gadgets are expensive and they have to learn to take extra care of them.

The major downside of the tablet is the distraction that it allows. Instead of being a time-saver, it may prolong the study period when students pay more attention to other things than school work. Social networks are readily accessible while studying, further dividing their attention. The availability of Wi-Fi connections almost anywhere enables students to navigate other sites while doing school work.

Thankfully, in spite of the tablet’s reputation as being an “all-in-one” gadget, Gia still looks for paper books for studying. Fortunately, Kim belonged to an earlier batch who still used paper books, which were then passed on to her little sister.

Both girls had their first gadgets in grade school, a simple cell phone whose main function was to facilitate pick-up schedules (*sundo*) from school. Now they have their own iPod Touch and laptops, Galaxy tablets, a shared iPad, a desktop computer, and a school tablet for Gia.

But the most important gadget for the girls is their smart phones.

Elaine is worried about too much gadget use, so when her daughters study, they are required to keep their phones away from the study area.

Elaine is very aware about social networking and the effects it may have on her daughters. She did not want Gia to be too exposed at an early age. Only after a lot of persistent pleas from Gia did Elaine allow her (Gia was then younger than thirteen) to share her own Facebook account.

Elaine was firm in not lying about Gia’s age just to open an account for her. Elaine would log in for her daughter, since she had the password, and she would supervise Gia’s usage.

But when Gia was in Grade Seven, Elaine was forced to give in. Gia’s teacher asked the class for e-mail accounts and she was the only one who did not have one. So mother and daughter agreed that Mom had to know the password when Gia migrated from the shared e-mail and Facebook accounts to her own.

Kim, who was a non-conformist, did not have a Facebook account until she reached third year. Initially, she joined the site to be updated on the preparations for the World Youth Day trip to Spain with the school delegation. Since then, Facebook has morphed into a tool for school updates and studies.
To counter her daughters’ tendency to be too engrossed in gadgets, Elaine established rules to regulate their usage. When the kids were younger, their cell phones had to be checked in with Mom at a certain time. Mom kept them in her room until next morning.

Definitely, no gadgets were allowed on the dining table since dinner was for family bonding.

Elaine declared an annual family “Gadget Holiday” scheduled for three days of the Holy Week. This injunction was met with a lot of expected objections, but Elaine remained firm. Aside from observing Holy Week rites, the family watched movies and simply bonded together.

Elaine actually contemplated a once-a-month phone holiday, which elicited vehement resistance. The consequences she set for lapses and breaking rules are grounding and, of course, confiscating gadgets for a day or more.

Elaine believes that parents should make an effort to keep up with technology so that they can guide their children better. She observed that for girls today, distraction from social networking may be more of an issue than for boys.

Her daughters are sucked in by Twitter, which she considers the number one application they use, followed by Facebook and Instagram. Elaine keeps up with them by being a Twitter and Instagram follower, a Facebook friend, and a lurker.

**Elaine reminds her daughters that these gadgets are a privilege and just mere tools.**

Elaine is bothered by the amount of time the girls spend logging on to these sites as she sees them mindlessly scrolling Twitter posts up and down repeatedly. There are times when she thinks the girls get affected by the posts as evidenced by sudden mood swings.

Elaine also feels that some requests and reactions from her daughters are initiated by Facebook posts of friends about travels, activities, and material acquisitions. Sometimes she would hear the plaintive “Why can’t we do the same?”

According to Elaine, the switch from the digital world to reality somehow affects the girls’ disposition, prompting her to constantly reason with them and enlighten them on the fact that social networks should not affect us in these ways.

In an effort to prove her point about the excessive usage, Elaine told her daughters to keep a gadget log on an index card, where they could jot down the amount of time they use the phone, iPod, tablet, etc.

At day’s end, Elaine would total the number of minutes and hours each daughter spent on the gadgets. This injunction was again met with objections, but hopefully, this has made her daughters more aware that they have to discipline themselves.

Elaine often reminds and emphasizes to her daughters that these gadgets are a privilege and just mere tools. These should never take over their lives. People created these things and we should have control over them.

Good values are instilled through firmness, discipline, and leading by example. The
last one is also a struggle for her, as she is a techie herself and relies much on the Internet and computer in doing her professional and volunteer works.

She regularly accesses her social-network accounts but tries to limit usage based on the rules she has set for her daughters. Some of her rules may be atypical and unpopular with many people, but she did them to address what she thought would be effective in making her children grow into more responsible adults.

Kim is now at the Ateneo de Manila University taking up Legal Management, with future plans of pursuing law. Gia is in high school at Miriam College.

Elaine has realized that being accomplished is not a monopoly of professionals. Fulfilment can be attained in being a dedicated mother, a domestic engineer, and a very involved and zealous parent-partner of her daughters’ school.

DEEPER READING


Rosen, L. (2012). *iDisorder: Understanding our obsession with technology and...*
overcoming its hold on us. NY: Palgrave Macmillan.


Sheng, T., Gheytanchi, A., & Aziz-Zadeh, L. (2010). Default network deactivations are correlated with psychopathic personality traits. PLOS One, 5(9).


Chapter Five
Getting a High,
Escaping the World
Addicted to Games

IN THE FIRST exam taken by two freshman Math classes in the Ateneo de Manila University in June 2011, six times as many males did poorly on the exam as females. The ten highest scores were all from females, while the ten lowest scores were from males.

Queena, who taught both classes, called attention to this disparity. The female students applauded, the males just laughed.

In the past years, Queena has been working with increasingly more troubled youth (a lot of them male) who have problems with family or romantic relationships. They seldom communicate with their parents (or if they do, usually both parties end up slamming doors, yelling at each other, or even hitting one other).

The students are bitter about breakups, attributing their failures mostly to their exes. The students are depressed and disillusioned, and their ways of coping with problems revolve around drinking themselves to oblivion (and punching the wall) or retreating to aggressive gaming (“to let the stress out”).

Don’t get us wrong. Many of Queena’s male students seem to be well-adjusted and content, and most of them, after sufficient guidance and motivation, manage to not only do well but also excel in class and in life.

But she is worried about the increasing number of troubled male youngsters.

“Life sucks,” they say, and they wish their lives were different. Real life, with its uncontrollable ups and downs, seems to be too much to handle.

» DEMISE OF GUYS

These problems have various causes, ranging from abusive or over-pampered childhoods to myriad family pressures stemming from absentee parents or lack of role models.

But now there seems to be another factor. In their controversial book *The Demise of Guys: Why Boys Are Struggling and What We Can Do About It*, Stanford University psychology professor Philip Zimbardo and psychologist Nikita Duncan say that today’s young men do not cope well with life because of their addiction to games and pornography.

Zimbardo is famous for leading the 1971 Stanford Prison Experiment, where he discovered that ordinary college students can become extremely violent when asked to play the roles of prison guards. He has since studied the psychological roots of violence, and his 2007 book, *The Lucifer Effect*, tries to make sense of how “good people can turn evil.”

Now Zimbardo joins the impassioned debate on the pros and cons of video games—landing squarely on the side of the cons.

Figures cited in the book are alarming. According to the National Center of Education
Statistics, females outperform males at every level of education, from primary school and middle school all the way to high school, college, and graduate school.

Males are 30 percent more likely to drop out than females, and they make up 70 percent of the Ds and Fs given in school. Boys are four to five times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and more likely to take prescription drugs to make them focus. Boys account for two-thirds of students in special education programs.

In 2011, despite enrichment classes, tiger parents, cram schools, tutorial centers, government rhetoric, and technological advances, the Scholastic Aptitude Test scores of young men were the lowest in forty years.

The above are mostly from United States statistics, though Zimbardo says that “boys, worldwide, are failing in large numbers.” He also tells the paper Stanford Daily that in 2011, “women got more of every single advanced degree than men around the world, which is unheard of.”

We have not yet come across Philippine national data on gender differences in education, but in the Ateneo de Manila University, more female students generally make it to the dean’s list than males, and more males are on academic probation than females, with causes ranging from lack of focus or motivation to behavioral and emotional problems.

In our survey, more males are into gaming than females. Eighty and 40 percent of male and female respondents, respectively, play computer games. Twenty-five and 10 percent of males and females, respectively, spend more than four hours a day on computer games on weekdays, and more than that on weekends.

**GETTING A HIGH**

Some years ago, a psychology student confessed to his shocked classmates that he used to be a “gaming addict.” He would play online games for six to seven hours a day, racking up higher and higher scores, which gave him a “high.”

Once at midnight, his heart was pounding, palms sweating, and eyes dilated, he was “in the zone.” His only objective was to break his own record. Suddenly, “I think I blacked out,” he says. “The next thing I knew it was already morning, I was lying on the floor, and my head was covered in blood.”

In the excitement of it all, a blood vessel had burst in his brain. He was rushed to the hospital, giving him the scare of his (and his parents’) life. He withdrew cold turkey from video games thereafter, and lived to tell his tale to friends.

The student was lucky. Others were not, such as Chinese and South Korean men who suffered heart attacks after playing games for straight days or weeks. The China Youth Internet Association says that 15 percent of urban youth (almost 25 million) are addicted.

Zimbardo says that the average American boy plays video games for thirteen hours a week, compared to five hours for girls. By age twenty-one, the average male teen will have spent 10,000 hours in cybergaming, which is “twice the time it takes to earn a college degree.”
To make things worse, Zimbardo says that violent video games have been associated with violent behavior. The Columbine High School student killers had long immersed themselves in *Doom* before going on their murderous spree. Some American teens killed their parents who had taken away their games. A Norwegian suspect reportedly used *World of Warcraft* and *Call of Duty* as shooting practice before killing more than seventy-five people.

Of course, millions of other gamers are law-abiding and gentle citizens.

But Zimbardo argues, many studies such as one in the *Annual Review of Public Health*, show that people who play violent games tend to become more aggressive after. Especially since addiction looks to be hardwired into our brains.

**HARDWIRED**

What makes so many people, especially males, so addicted to games and porn?

In the 1950s, psychologists have already pinpointed our brain’s pleasure center, found in the limbic system. When rats were allowed to electrically stimulate their limbic system (with a lever), they “self-stimulated hundreds of times per hour.”

What’s worse, “even when given the option to eat when hungry or to stimulate the pleasure center, the rats chose the stimulation until they were physically exhausted and on the brink of death,” Zimbardo and Duncan tell CNN.

Nothing counts but the present moment, neither consequences from the past nor plans for the future. Nothing is as important as being in the game or indulging in porn right now.

“This new kind of human addictive arousal traps users into an expanded present hedonistic time zone,” Zimbardo and Duncan say. “Past and future are distant and remote as the present moment expands to dominate everything.”

In the 1990s, Zimbardo had already observed young men on campus so immersed in video games “to the extent that they were giving up the real, face-to-face world for the virtual world.”

Far from just offering a break from work, video games and porn can become addictive, and that is where the problem lies.

**Addiction looks to be hardwired into our brains.**

Common addiction, such as to alcohol or drugs, is based on the compulsion to have more and more of the same thing. “Video game and porn addictions are different,” Zimbardo and Duncan tell CNN. “They are ‘arousal addictions,’ where the attraction is in the novelty, the variety or the surprise factor of the content. Sameness is soon habituated; newness heightens excitement.”

Consequences are dire. “The excessive use of video games and online porn in pursuit of the next thing is creating a generation of risk-averse guys who are unable (and unwilling) to navigate the complexities and risks inherent to real-life relationships, school, and employment,” say Zimbardo and Duncan.
According to Maressa Orzack of Harvard University’s McLean Hospital, around 5 to 10 percent of American Internet surfers have some form of addiction, with 40 percent being World of Warcraft players.

In 2009, Chinese researchers in Shanghai Jiantong Medical School found a decrease in brain gray matter density in Internet-addicted teens. In 2011, Kai Yuan and Wei Qin of Xidian University in China found more microstructure abnormalities, including the shrinking of surface brain matter.

In June 2011, the article “High Wired” in the magazine Scientific American gives the details: “Several small regions in online addicts’ brains shrunk, in some cases as much as by 10 to 20 percent. The affected regions included the dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, rostral anterior cingulate cortex, supplementary motor area, and parts of the cerebellum.

“What’s more, the longer the addiction’s duration, the more pronounced the tissue reduction,” the article continues. “The study’s authors suggest this shrinkage could lead to negative effects, such as reduced inhibition of inappropriate behavior and diminished goal orientation.”

Addicts have more problems storing and remembering information, and their decision-making abilities are “impaired—including those that trump the desire to stay online and return to the real world.”

With such hardwired changes deep in the brain, no wonder gaming addiction is so difficult to deal with. Other studies have linked addiction to depression, impulsiveness, aggression, poor school performance, job loss, and marriage breakdowns.

Zimbardo links addiction to poor social skills. “The illusion of connectedness when a person is playing a video game is no substitute for real interaction. Boys who invest hours upon hours in these pursuits are less able to socialize themselves when it comes to real life.”

When addicted gamers stop, they soon reap positive results.

Gaming is so pervasive that when children, teens, and even adults (especially males) are asked to stop, they become defensive and insist that they are not addicted. Many gamers even say that games help them cope with depression and give them a respite from life.

“This assumption is overly simplistic,” say a team of international researchers that did a longitudinal two-year study on gamers in Singapore.

A team comprised of psychologist Douglas Gentile of Iowa State University; social work researcher Hyekung Choo of the National University of Singapore; psychologists Albert Liao, Dongdong Li and Angeline Khoo of the Nanyang Technological University in Singapore; social scientist Timothy Sim of Hong Kong Polytechnic University; and psychiatrist Daniel Foo of the Institute of Mental Health in Singapore followed more than
3,000 children from Grades Three to Eight for two years, to investigate their gaming behavior and practices in-depth. The researchers found that at any one time, around 6 to 10 percent of the subjects were pathological gamers. What are the effects?

“Although children do use games as a coping mechanism, it is not simply a symptom of other problems,” the researchers say. “Youths who became pathological gamers ended up with increased levels of depression, anxiety, and social phobia [and poorer grades].

“Once players became pathological gamers, they began to have poorer grades and poorer relationships with their parents, and to be exposed to more violent games,” the researchers say. “This is of concern, given that several studies have demonstrated both short-term and long-term effects of violent games on aggression.”

There are more insidious effects. “Children who began consuming more violent games also began to have more normative beliefs about aggression, hostile attribution biases, and aggressive fantasies, and to engage in more physically and relationally aggressive behaviors (they also became more likely to be victims of aggression),” the researchers continue. “This pattern is mirrored for those who stop being pathological gamers; they end up with lower levels of violent game exposure (marginally significant), aggressive fantasies, and aggressive behaviors.”

When addicted gamers stop, they soon reap positive results. “Those who stopped being pathological gamers ended up with lower levels of depression, anxiety, and social phobia than did those who remained pathological gamers.”

The good news is, like any other addiction, gaming addiction can be overcome.

**PORN**

Thankfully, our survey does not reveal a huge problem with pornography among the respondents. However, in the past few years, to our shock, some of us authors have been asked to address parents, counselors, and teachers in different private schools on how to deal with children and adolescents who gravitate toward online porn.

According to Zimbardo, the average American high-school boy watches porn for two hours a week. Demand is sky-high. Thirteen thousand five hundred porn movies came out in 2012, as opposed to 600 Hollywood feature films.

We have no statistics whatsoever on the frequency of Filipino children and teens who indulge in online porn. But according to counselors and teachers in some schools, porn addiction is becoming a problem with boys as young as Grade Three. High-school males, we are told, are drawn to live-action pornography, while younger kids visit anime porn sites. We did not even know that anime porn existed.

Zimbardo and Duncan argue that boys who are addicted to cybergaming and porn are less capable of facing real life.

**UNHEALTHY RELATIONSHIPS**

Zimbardo and Duncan say that according to the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and
Prevention, porn users are most likely to be depressed and report “poor physical health.”

Porn can “start a cycle of isolation and become a substitute for healthy face-to-face interactions, social or sexual.”

“The incredible array of pornography that is available to young men is creating an addiction to arousal and habituating young men to similarity,” Zimbardo tells The Stanford Daily. “They are thus unable to perceive reality as it is and are much less prepared for significant and meaningful sexual relationships.”

While we may not have data on college porn, we do know that several male students find it hard to maintain healthy romantic relationships. Moreover, when breakups occur, they become bitter and resentful, laying the blame on their exes, or in extreme cases, stalking them.

Guys addicted to porn tend to objectify women. They are “totally out of sync in romantic relationships, which tend to build gradually and subtly, and require interaction, sharing, developing trust and suppression of lust at least until ‘the time is right,’” Zimbardo and Duncan tell CNN.

“Young men—who play video games and use porn the most—are being digitally rewired in a totally new way that demands constant stimulation,” they say. “And those delicate, developing brains are being catered to by video games and porn-on-demand, with a click of the mouse, in endless variety.”

Not surprisingly, these young men also do badly in school.

“Such [addicted] brains are totally out of sync in traditional school classes, which are analog, static and interactively passive,” Zimbardo and Duncan say. “Academics are based on applying past lessons to future problems, on planning, on delaying gratifications, on work coming before play, and on long-term goal-setting.”

As with any addiction, the best treatment is still prevention. Do online gaming if you must, but stop before you succumb to its lure.
This is the mobile age. Anyone can own a smart phone and/or a computer that can access easily access the Internet, games, communication media. As much as these are good because of convenience, the presence of computers in our lives can be socially and academically disastrous if unchecked.

Back when I was in college from 2004 to 2008, Internet games were very popular, especially Warcraft 3: Defense of The Ancients, more commonly known to boys as DOTA. This is a multiplayer game that allows the players to control one character and “grow” him by scoring points. The more points, the stronger the character gets and the more skills he learns. With four other teammates, the player tries to defeat an opposing team.

This game destroyed or pushed back the future for many bright students. I had one such friend who would spend four to eight hours a day playing DOTA. He became so good at it that he got into the varsity team of a certain computer store, playing against Philippine elite gamers.

Yes, folks, there are gaming events where your sons can compete. The game literally sucked academics out of my friend’s life. He wasn’t the only one, as there was a handful of other “legendary” players who dropped out of school because they were so addicted to the game.

My friend already had an addiction to computer games early on in high school, and in college it was pushed to the extreme as the games got more engaging. He had more freedom, and was surrounded by people who wanted to play with him. He would spend entire Saturdays playing—over eight hours, both in the computer store in front of the campus and at home where he had a gaming console.

This game destroyed or pushed back the future for many bright students.

Sadly, this guy still has not yet graduated from college. We were high-school classmates, but his addiction to gaming affected his studies so much that he is now delayed by many years.

My friend’s story may sound extreme, but in general, for every one person like him who does not graduate on time, there are about ten who do graduate but underachieve because of the distraction that gaming offers. Grades of students with superior IQ sink to a C or D. Those who were once academic stars become mediocre, or take summer remedial classes.
Computer games are like a doubled-edged sword—they can entertain and educate, but they can also take away time from more important things in life such as academics and social interaction.

**For every one gamer who does not graduate on time, there are about ten who do graduate but underachieve because of the distraction that gaming offers.**

Computers can be a good thing. However, computers are tools; a means to an end. They must be handled by responsible people. If a child or a teen has no self-control, then the computer can hurt him, much the same way a sword can hurt the wielder if he/she does not know how to use it. Teach your children to become responsible with their time and to be disciplined, so that they can use computers to their advantage.
Internet Addiction May Be Similar to Drug Addiction

WHEN HE WAS in high school, Pedro (not his real name) used to be a gaming champion. He would study for a couple of hours after dismissal, but at six in the evening, he would start playing computer games till one to two in the morning. Somehow he managed to maintain grades good enough to remain in the semi-honors section, so his parents did not curtail his gaming in any way.

One night, while in the midst of gaming, he got a headache. “My heart was pounding, my pulse racing,” he says, “And then I got the worst headache of my life.”

Pedro played through the pain—only to wake up some hours later, on the floor, with blood coming out of his ear. He had burst a blood vessel in his brain, and his doctor told him he was lucky to be alive.

The doctor also advised him to “take it easy,” to play less.

Pedro knew he could not stop once he began gaming again. So he decided to quit, cold turkey, that same day.

He suffered withdrawal pains, ranging from cravings to anxiety, but sheer willpower—and fear for his life—made him succeed. Whether or not due to this experience, Pedro decided to enter medical school after college.

UNPLUGGED

In 2011, the International Center for Media and the Public Agenda of the University of Maryland asked around 1,000 students from ten countries to completely give up media for a single day. In this World Unplugged study, this meant no Facebook, Twitter, cell phones, or TV, for twenty-four hours. Landline phones and books were allowed.

The students hailed from Argentina, Chile, China, Hong Kong, Lebanon, Mexico, Slovakia, Uganda, the United Kingdom, and the United States. They were asked to keep a diary of their thoughts during this time.

The results were troubling, to say the least. Many students wrote about their “addiction” and “dependence” on media. Internet addiction is controversial, and was not included in the most recent Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (the psychiatrists’ bible).

But students repeatedly use “addiction” to describe their feelings. They felt anxious, fretful, nervous, very upset, restless, fidgety, empty, sad, stressed out—even paranoid, panicky, desperate, crazy. British students reported having to fight their “urges to connect,” while American students developed physical twitches similar to the idiomatic expression “twiddling [of their] thumbs.”

What is scary is that the students did not just miss what we would expect them to (the
convenience, the tools, the news functions), but one in five also had physical cravings for media. These cravings could be likened to those of a drug, nicotine, or alcohol addict.

» CRACKHEAD

An American student writes: “I was itching, like a crackhead, because I could not use my phone.”

A student from China writes: “I’m quite addicted to the computer and the Internet. In the wake of this experiment, I realized that media is spread like a web that binds me. Perhaps before I became aware of it, its threads took root in my muscles, blood, nerves and everywhere.”

A student from Mexico writes: “It was quite late and the only thing going through my mind was: (voice of psychopath) ‘I want Facebook.’ ‘I want Twitter.’ ‘I want YouTube.’ ‘I want TV.’”

A British student writes: “Media is my drug; without it I was lost … I am an addict. I don’t need alcohol, cocaine or any other derailing form of social depravity; I just need my drug. I had this somewhat hideous realization at about 7p.m. on Sunday … I paced, I pondered the meaning of life, and then I panicked. How could I survive twenty-four hours without it? How could I go on?”

Another American student writes: “As I logged out of Gmail and Facebook, [exited] Firefox, and shut down my laptop, I actually experienced a pang of nausea.”

An Argentine student who could not complete the experiment wrote: “I cannot. I feel empty. I feel isolated.”

» SLOT MACHINES

Many people are addicted to gaming, but the newest form of addiction seems to be with the smart phone. Joe Kraus, a partner at Google Ventures, who specializes in mobiles and gaming, likens our phone addiction to that of slot machines.

“Slot machines are extremely powerful earners because they employ a principle called ‘random payout,’” Kraus says. “Turns out if you pull a handle and it pays out predictably, you very quickly figure it out and stop pulling. But, make the reward random and people have a very hard time stopping. Some pulls are nothing, some pulls give you a little, and occasionally, you get a jackpot.

“Think about text messages or e-mail alerts from your phone in this context,” Kraus continues. “Some aren’t important. Some are. And occasionally, something very urgent comes in. It’s random payout in your pocket.”

Kraus warns, “The amazing part to me is that we all look around at each other and see ourselves, as adults, failing and then we give these devices to kids and expect them to do better. Well, they don’t. In fact, as parents of teenagers know, they fare far worse….”

» CHINA AND KOREA
A lot of the research linking computer addiction with brain abnormalities is pouring out of China, Taiwan, and South Korea. These countries also have computer-addiction programs and centers in order to detox people whom they classify as addicts.

Why China, for instance? According to the China Youth Internet Association, at least 24 million kids (around 15 percent of young people in urban areas) are addicts, compared with say, around 5 to 10 percent of American kids. As of this writing, there are no figures yet for the Philippines. Theories abound regarding the preponderance of Internet addiction in China, but a strong contender may be the escape valve the Internet provides.

Because of academic and work pressures, a lot of Chinese youth turn to the Internet to escape.

Scientific American in 2011 quotes neuroscientist Karen von Deneen of Xidian University who says, “Americans don’t have a lot of personal time, but Chinese seem to have even less. They work twelve hours a day, six days a week. They work very, very hard. Sometimes the Internet is their greatest and only escape … In online games you can become a hero, build empires, and submerge yourself in a fantasy. That kind of escapism is what draws young people.”

**BRAIN ABNORMALITIES**

Various studies have linked certain brain systems that may lead teens to a higher risk of becoming a technology addict.

Novelty seekers—those who constantly need stimulation and seek out new things—tend to be more prone to substance use and abuse. Exposure to new things activates neural substrates similar to those in substance use.

“The mesocorticolimbic dopamine system, originating from the ventral tegmental area and projecting toward a wide range of the limbic structure, is associated with [novelty seeking or NS],” say Taiwanese researchers Chih-Hung Ko, Ju-Yu Yen, Cheng-Chung Chen, Sue-Huei Chen, Kuanyi Wu, and Cheng-Fang Yen in the Canadian Journal of Psychiatry in 2006.

“The association between high NS and Internet addicts may reveal that, as in substance addiction, Internet addiction is possibly associated with an impaired dopamine system,” they add.

Studies have recently revealed the extent of brain changes associated with heavy Internet use. Again, Chinese researchers are at the forefront.

**Only when we reach adulthood, in our mid- or late twenties, does the prefrontal cortex fully mature.**

A widely cited article, which appeared in the online journal *PLOS ONE* in 2011, is “Microstructure Abnormalities in Adolescents with Internet Addiction Disorder,” done by the team of Kai Yuan, Wei Qin, Guihong Wang, Fang Zeng, Liyan Zhao, Xuejuan Yang, Peng Liu, Jixin Liu, Jinbo Sun, Karen M. von Deneen, Qiyong Gong, Yijun Liu, Jie Tian,
hailing from several research institutes: Chengdu University, Peking University, Sichuan University, together with the Chinese Academy of Sciences and the University of Florida.

Brain-imaging scans reveal that gray matter has decreased in several areas, especially the prefrontal cortex. Brain changes are significantly correlated with the duration of Internet addiction.

The more time spent online, the worse “the potential for chronic dysfunction.”

Atrophy of the prefrontal cortex is particularly troubling, since this is an area that governs control, decision making, rational behavior. The prefrontal cortex develops slowly, and during adolescence, it is still not fully formed, which is a provocative observation that can be linked to adolescents’ propensity for risk-taking and impaired judgment.

The Internet, with its ease of access, anonymity, and immediacy, can amplify these negative effects. Only when we reach adulthood, in our mid- or late twenties, does the prefrontal cortex fully mature.

Aside from the prefrontal cortex, the researchers found decreased gray matter volume in the supplementary motor area, the orbitofrontal cortex, the cerebellum, and the anterior cingulate. These areas are involved in motion, thinking, empathy, impulse control, and emotion, among others.

Another study of Chinese adolescents showed that those addicted to the Net exhibit more impulsivity than those who are not.

Still another study reveals response inhibition, with addicted subjects showing “less efficiency in information processing and lower cognitive control.”

The researchers conclude that all these studies suggest “functional impairment of cognitive control in Internet Addiction Disorder [IAD] … [and] hope that … results will enhance our understanding of IAD and aid in improving the diagnosis and prevention of IAD.”

LIKE HEROIN

How similar is Internet addiction to drug addiction then?

In 2009, Ko and his colleagues came up with a more extensive research article in the *Journal of Psychiatric Research*, confirming that the craving that computer gaming addicts experience is similar to that of substance-abuse addicts.

Ten gaming addicts and a control group of non-addicts are presented with gaming pictures while their brains were scanned.

Brain areas that were activated in the addicts include the right orbitofrontal cortex, right nucleus accumbens, bilateral anterior cingulate, medial frontal cortex, right dorsolateral prefrontal cortex, and right caudate nucleus.

Brain activity was “positively correlated with self-reported gaming urge and recalling of gaming experience.”
Shockingly, results show that “the neural substrate of cue-induced gaming urge/craving in online gaming addiction is similar to that of the cue-induced craving in substance dependence … suggest[ing] that the gaming urge/craving in online gaming addiction and craving in substance dependence might share the same neurobiological mechanism.”

In February 2013, the article, “Decreased Functional Brain Connectivity in Adolescents with Internet Addiction” appeared in *PLOS One*.

The researchers were composed of Australian and Korean psychiatrists, psychologists and educators (Soon-Beom Hong, Andrew Zalesky and Alex Fornito from the University of Melbourne; Luca Cocchi from the University of Queensland; Eun-Jung Choi, Jae-Won Kim, Ho-Hyun Kim, Jeong-Eun Suh, Chung Dai Kim, and Soon-Hyung Yi from Seoul National University).

The researchers scanned the brains of addicted adolescents and those of healthy controls while at rest. They found evidence of “decreased brain functional connectivity” in addicts, with 24 percent difference in cortex and subcortex connections, and 27 percent difference in other subcortical and parietal areas, between addicts and non-addicts.

In fact, 59 altered connections were found, with 25 between the left and right hemispheres and 34 within the hemispheres themselves, “pointing to involvement of long-range as well as short-range connections throughout the brain.”

The researchers say that since Internet addiction is relatively new, with diagnostic criteria still nebulous, “it might be surprising to find such an extensively affected network in the brain of these subjects.”

They quote previous research with widespread decrease in “white matter integrity” in addicted teens.

What is alarming about their findings is that “Internet addiction shares neurobiological characteristics in common with other addictive disorders,” with subcortical regions pathologically hit.

Their findings are similar to those of other researchers who have discovered that cocaine addicts have the same brain results. They cite a team who in 2011 has observed “reduced interhemispheric functional connectivity in cocaine-dependent adults … [with] primary involvement of a fronto-parietal network, with a relative sparing of temporal regions, results that parallel our findings.”

**SCHIZOPHRENIA?**

The parallels seem endless.

“Interestingly, a similar pattern of decreased resting-state functional connectivity between frontal and parietal regions was reported both in cocaine- and heroin-dependent individuals … a recent review … suggested that decreased connectivity in the fronto-parietal circuits might be a central component in the impaired cognitive control network of drug-addicted populations,” the researchers say.

Not only drug addicts, apparently, but also computer addicts.
“Our findings in Internet addiction also supports the notion that decreased functional connectivity between frontal and parietal regions might be a common characteristic across different types of addiction,” the researchers add.

The putamen is a region in the subcortex heavily affected by Internet addiction. The putamen is involved in motor activity, and previous studies have linked repetitive finger movements to action of the putamen.

“People suffering from Internet addiction may undergo a far higher frequency of certain behaviors over a long period of time, which include repetitive manipulation of the mouse and keyboard, and these experiences can affect their brain,” the researchers say. “Therefore, aberrant connectivity stemming from the putamen perhaps indicates a specific characteristic of internet addiction.”

Addiction may even have parallels to schizophrenia. “A recent investigation of whole-brain functional connectivity in schizophrenia showed prominent fronto-temporal rather than fronto-parietal or fronto-striatal changes, consistent with classical pathophysiological models of the disorder,” the researchers somberly note.

What is alarming is that Internet addiction shares neurobiological characteristics in common with other addictive disorders.

DESIGNED TO HOOK US

Technology is ubiquitous, easily accessible, ever-changing. These have benefits, providing stimulation, convenience, and entertainment. But these same benefits can have negative effects, especially when used frequently and for the long term.

University of Pittsburgh psychologist Kimberly Young, a pioneer in treating Internet addiction, has likened the excitement of using the Net to the high that video-game addicts get when they play, or that gambling addicts get when they bet.

In his book, iDisorder, California State University psychologist Larry Rosen describes the popular online game World of Warcraft as “World of Warcrack” because many of us find it so addictive.

To make matters worse, video-game creators, more often than not, hire psychologists as consultants. The psychologists “use their expertise of the human mind to make the games more enticing—and harder to put down,” says the website Salon.com.

Salon quotes American psychologist Ariella Lehrer, a designer of games targeted at, of all people, middle-aged women. Lehrer says that the psychology is “pure Las Vegas,” since “flashy graphics and sparse rewards get players hooked within twenty minutes.”

“We learned this with rats in a food pedestal,” Lehrer tells Salon. “If you only occasionally give [sic] a reward, then you keep going. That’s what Las Vegas does. The rewards don’t come every time.”

The sad thing is addiction is now seen not just in teens, but also in young children.
April 2013, the UK Mail Online reports that a four-year-old girl, Britain’s youngest addict so far, is undergoing psychiatric treatment.

Hooked since age three, the young girl is so addicted to games in her iPad that if it is taken away, she has severe withdrawal symptoms, such as tantrums or uncontrollable behavior. Her psychiatrist Richard Graham from Capio Nightingale Hospital in London charges 16,000 pounds a month for a digital detox program.

A recent survey in the United Kingdom reveals that more than half of 1,000 parents let their infants use a tablet or a smart phone, and one in seven parents allow this for more than four hours a day. Half of parents admit that they buy devices for their kids, but 81 percent feel that their children spend too much time on them.

LOW SELF-ESTEEM

Addictive behavior has been linked to various negative traits. One of them is low self-esteem. Psychologists Lynette Armstrong, James Philips, and Lauren Saling from Monash University in Australia measured the scores of people with heavy or light Internet use, and found that those with lower self-esteem spent more hours a week on the Internet.

The researchers are not certain why this is so: whether low self-esteem is a result of Internet addiction, or a cause of it. Either way, it is highly associated with addictive behavior.

Low self-esteem is linked to addiction.

Depression, anxiety, and loneliness have all been linked to addiction. Even texters are not immune. The title of a 2008 article in the journal Computers in Human Behavior by Japanese researchers Tasuku Igarashi, Tadahiro Motoyoshi, Jiro Takai, and Toshikazu Yoshida says it all: “No Mobile, No Life: Self-perception and Text-message Dependency Among Japanese High School Students.”

Even television is used as a narcotic. In the World Unplugged study, an American student says: “I always fall asleep with the TV on and I guess I never realized how much I depend on media throughout the day and night because I couldn’t fall asleep.”

Another student says, “I’m proud to say on that day I did not turn my television on as I always do before bed—and instead chose to take an Ambien [a sleeping pill] and pass out for ten hours.”

WALK THE TALK

To test firsthand if taking time off can reset our brains, five neuroscientists did a rafting and wilderness trip in Glen Canyon National Park in Utah in 2010. Led by psychologist David Strayer of the University of Utah, the other scientists (psychology professor and brain-imaging expert Todd Braver of the University of Washington in St. Louis, professor Paul Atchley of the University of Kansas, Johns Hopkins chair of psychological and brain sciences Steven Yantis, and neurology professor Art Kramer of
the University of Illinois) ventured into the wilderness in a quest to understand how heavy tech use influences our brains.

**Addiction is now seen not just in teens, but also in young children.**

Though three of them could not stop using their phones at the start, by the second day, the majesty of their surroundings has given them a sense of calm. The conversations flowed. Their brains were recharged, ideas and insights arose. Even Yantis, one of the initial skeptics, reports that “late-night conversation beneath stars and circling bats gave [him] new ways to think about [his] research into how and why people are distracted by irrelevant streams of information.”

“This is the rhythm of the trip: As the river flows, so do the ideas,” says *The New York Times*.

Disengaging from media has opened the scientists’ eyes. Kramer says that his colleague feels it is impolite if he pulls out a computer during meetings. His usual reply? “I can listen [while still] working on the computer.”

After the trip, Kramer says, “Maybe I’m not listening so well. Maybe I can work at being more engaged.”
Are You Addicted to the Net?

Though the topic of Internet addiction is controversial, everyone agrees that compulsive behavior of any kind is not healthy.

How do you know whether you are at risk or not? US psychologist Kimberly Young has pioneered an Internet Addiction Test, after which the following danger signs are patterned.

1. Is the time you spend on the computer increasing? A month ago, you were spending four hours on the Net, now you spend six hours.

2. Do you neglect other activities, including those you used to enjoy, because of computer use? You used to play basketball with friends, now you shut yourself in your room to do World of Warcraft.

3. Has your school or work performance gone down because of computer use? Your average last semester was 85, now it is 77.

4. Do you become antsy if you are not online? You check Facebook five times a day, and rejoice every time your smart phone pings.

5. Do you exhibit anxiety, secrecy, or even furtiveness when you are on the computer and someone in authority (a parent, the boss) is in the vicinity?

6. Do you display inappropriate emotions over events? Instead of feeling empathy, you act insensitive or feel nothing at all when faced with painful or sad events.

7. Are you excessively hyper or sleepy? Do you find it difficult to sleep or wake up? Being online for hours, especially at night, can interfere with regular sleep patterns.

8. Have you displayed any behaviour which is not typical for you? You used to be sociable, now you seem withdrawn. Can you be experiencing Facebook depression?
How I Beat My Facebook Addiction

By Angelica Marie S. Dionisio
AB Psychology, Ateneo de Manila University

I was a pretty late bloomer when it came to the Facebook hype, as I only got into it when I was a high-school senior.

Part of the reason why I got addicted to Facebook was because of all the affirmations and attention I got. It felt good to see people liking my posts and commenting on them. I hooked my self-worth on the feedback I got from my Facebook friends. When I had a lot of notifications, I felt happy and really good about myself.

But when I only had a few likes or comments, I would feel sad, invisible, or ignored. That is why I got into the habit of posting entertaining and interesting thoughts that would grab other people’s attention. My mind would just be filled with thoughts like, “What should I post? Oh if I post that, I’ll get a lot of likes!”

So I ended up spending about four hours a day glued to Facebook. The first thing I did when I got home from school was to log in to my Facebook account. It became so ingrained into my lifestyle that even when I did not intend on using Facebook at a particular time, my fingers automatically typed F-a-c-e-b-o-o-k on the search bar.

Things got worse when I learned how to convert YouTube videos into .mp3 files. Every day, I would spend at least an hour looking for songs and downloading them into the computer.

I was in a bad state. My grades were affected; focusing on school work became extremely challenging. My attention span for reading significantly weakened. After just a few minutes of reading, I would itch to turn on my laptop and check for the latest update or notification.

It slowly dawned on me. I was addicted to YouTube and Facebook. My day would not be complete if I did not check those two websites. But the low grades I received also began hitting me hard.

I hated the whole thing, so I decided to kill the bad habit. I realized that by not posting on Facebook, I would receive fewer notifications. By limiting myself to just two songs, I would spend less time on YouTube.

Things started to look up. My grades started heading north again and I began to feel quite good about myself. I started feeling better about my performance in school more than about my “performance” on Facebook.

Looking back at my experience, I realized that Facebook time must be limited. My world should not revolve around it. There are so many other activities I can do
that are more exciting! This is what parents have to deal with and think about now: offer fun and fulfilling activities so kids can replace Internet use with them.
Escape into Virtual Reality

IN 2010, the Internet security company AVG polled 2,200 mothers with Internet access and with children two to five years of age in the United States, Canada, United Kingdom, France, Italy, Germany, Spain, Japan, Australia, and New Zealand. What tech skills do the young children know? How about life skills?

The results were shocking but not surprising. At very early ages, children start to learn skills in technology at the expense of real-life skills.

Fifty-eight percent (70 percent in the U.K. and France) of children know how to play a basic computer game, but only 43 percent can ride a bike.

Twenty-five percent of children can open a web browser, but only 20 percent can swim, and only 19 percent can tie their own shoelaces.

The younger the parents, the poorer the life skills of their kids. Forty percent of toddlers with mothers aged thirty-five or older can write their own names, versus only 35 percent of those with younger mothers.

At this rate, how well can our children navigate the real world?

» BRAIN RESEARCH

In 2006, psychiatrists, professors, and researchers from Kaohsiung University and National Taiwan University have linked several personality traits to Internet addiction. Teens who love to seek out novelty are prime candidates. But so are those who go out of their way to escape discomfort and difficulty. These teens scored high on “harm avoidance” (HA). HA is not just an idle personality trait, but is linked to brain regions.

“HA is thought to reflect variation in the brain’s punishment, or behaviour inhibition, system, which includes the septohippocampal system, with serotonergic projections from the raphe nuclei in the brain system,” say Chih-Hung Ko, Ju-Yu Yen, Cheng-Chung Chen, Sue-Huei Chen, Kuanyi Wu, and Cheng-Fang Yen.

Neurology aside, the findings are not surprising. The Internet provides children with a perfect escape, because “they usually perceive less responsibility and harm” online than what they find in the messy, confusing, and troubling real world.

» LOW FRUSTRATION TOLERANCE

Surprisingly, teens with low reward dependence (RD) seem to be more prone to Internet addiction. After all, aren’t those who surf the Internet constantly or do frequent gaming dependent on rewards?

Not so fast. The scientists say that low-reward dependence actually implies low responsiveness to social reinforcement.

“RD is thought to reflect variations in the brain system that facilitates the acquisition
of conditioned signals or reward or relief from punishment,” they say.

“Adolescents with low RD are impaired in their responsiveness to verbal approval and social reinforcement, and they have poor persistence,” the researchers add. “They demonstrate little tolerance for unpredictable frustrations in real life.”

Since Internet activities, especially games, are predictable and immediate, these can satisfy teenagers, without the attendant frustration and unpredictability.

But real life is neither predictable nor, in most cases, immediate.

⇒ LONELINESS

When more than 1,000 students from ten countries were asked to unplug from any media use for just twenty-four hours, many felt extremely lonely, saying that media had so far been the filler of any void in their lives.

An American student says, “I depend so heavily on my phone to relieve any sort of social anxiety.”

A student from China says, “At the beginning, I felt irritable, tense, restless, and anxious when I could not use my mobile phone. When I couldn’t communicate with my friends, I felt so lonely as if I was in a small cage on an island.”

A student from Lebanon says, “I felt as though I was ‘lost’ in a void. It was a very unusual and uneasy feeling. I felt like I was dis-attached [sic] from the world completely, as if everyone around me was doing something but I [were] ‘left behind’.”

According to John O’Neill, director for addiction services at the Menninger Clinic in Houston, Texas, the quality of our human attachments determines how well we can manage stress, feel trusted and safe in relationships, and deal with life in general.

In the article “Time to Disconnect?” O’Neill says, “Children who suffer from attachment disorders struggle with trust, superficial relationships, poor peer relationships, lying, fear of intimacy, shame, and feeling alone.”

Many of us are lost in our own worlds, preferring to text rather than converse face to face, play online games rather than physical ones, listening to music not with one another but using individual headphones.

We prefer “to block out the world … [since it is] easy … to escape,” says O’Neill.

Best-selling Internet book writer Harley Hahn, who studied Math and Computer Science from the University of Waterloo in Canada, has coined the term “island syndrome” to describe the isolation and frustration we feel even as we try our best to connect 24/7. Modern technologies seduce us into believing that since we can communicate easily, our need to communicate and to belong will be met. But the promise is hollow. Unless our needs are truly satisfied, “we will never be satiated, and—at the same time—we will never stop trying to get what we want, even when we don’t fully realize what we are doing or why,” Hahn says in his blog.

“Unconsciously, we will find ourselves habituating to behaviors that result in a type of continual, deep, biological discontent,” Hahn says.
MUSIC

Silence—even for just twenty-four hours—is too painful.

A student from Slovakia says, “I’m addicted to music, so it was really terrible for me. I didn’t like the silence, which was everywhere.”

A student from Chile says, “The silence was like an infinity [sic], and I thought how different this situation would be if the music was on. I felt awkward, like if I was forced to keep on talking. I was anxious to get home fast; the silence was killing me.”

Without music, students find it hard to manage the realities of life.

A student from the United Kingdom says, “I can hear the neighbor’s music, but unlike most days, I can’t drown it out with my own until he gets the hint. The bass makes it hard to focus.”

A student from Lebanon says, “On my walk back to my place, I had hoped that without my headphones, I would hear the LIFE of Hamra’s streets. I didn’t. I just heard lots of cars and honking.”

A student from Chile says, “I left my earphones and iPod at home … when I was on the bus, for the first time I realized the bus’ breaks [sic] squeaked, the other cars honked the horn a lot and how loud the people talked. I was used to listening to my music and disconnecting from the world that surrounded me. This bothered me; I wasn’t used to such loud acoustic contamination.”

In our survey, 94 percent of respondents listen to music daily, with 30 percent spending more than four hours a day doing so.

TRIGGERS

Negative life events, such as a death in the family, illness, unemployment, or poor academic performance, can trigger heavy media use. These can help dull the ache of life’s vicissitudes, making it convenient for us to escape the bother of dealing with them.

While comforting in the short term, escape is not the ideal way to deal with life in the long term. After all, when we get off the Net, real problems remain.

VIRTUAL WORLDS

Many people use the Internet as a form of escape, particularly in gaming, where they have more control over what they do, which may be different from what is going on in the real world.

While occasional fantasies are not harmful (we may fantasize about dating a movie actor, for example), if we indulge in them frequently, consequences may be profound.

“For people with a predisposed difficulty in distinguishing personal fantasy from social reality, the distinction between online fantasy environments and online social environments may be blurred,” says Rider University psychologist John Suler in the journal Cyberpsychology and Behavior.
“In our modern media-driven lifestyles, the power of computer and video-game imagination can infiltrate reality testing,” he continues.

In the World Unplugged study, 5a Hong Kong student puts it this way: “Once you enter the Internet life, you can do whatever you want to—play games/chat with friends/receive information/news. To a certain extent I agree that this is actually our second life. One can even sit, motionless, and spend the whole day interacting with the computer. You can skip your meals, skip sleeping time and you can even give up your real-life identity to get indulged [sic] in the Internet world.”

“For all of its promise and potential, the fact that some people, a few million perhaps, go to virtual worlds to feel things—power, love, status, self-worth, and acceptance—that they cannot feel in the physical world is distressing,” says University of Texas at Austin radio-TV-film professor S. Craig Watkins in his book *The Young and the Digital*.

Why? “This suggests that the reasons people use computer-generated worlds may have as much to do with what they encounter in their first lives and physical world as it does in their second lives and virtual world,” Watkins says.

In short, people who are not happy with their real life tend more to seek solace from the online world rather than those who are satisfied with their first lives.

Watkins cautions against living the second life 24/7. “Life in the online world is intricately connected to life in the off-line world. It always has been and it always will be.”

〉CARPE DIEM

American parent Rachel Macy Stafford writes in her blog, *Hands-Free Mama* about how she was struck by the revelations of the dangers lurking on the Net when her community organized the Innocence Lost program.

“[Ever] since … I’ve been trying more than ever to model that there is a time and place for device usage—that a phone does not need to be an added appendage, and that it does not require constant checking,” Stafford says. “I am fully aware that my children are learning tech habits from me. A friend wrote on her beautiful blog last week, ‘What would you like for your children to remember you holding in your hands when they were young?’”

Stafford believes it is just as important to ask, “What will my children remember holding in their hands when they were young?” Despite this generation’s heavy reliance on technology, I hope my children remember holding Banjo our cat, a wooden spoon to form cookie dough, musical instruments, books, bike handlebars, ladybugs, seashells, and especially my hand in theirs.”

Let us model to our kids that life is ours for the taking. Seize life—real life—and run with it.

In June 2012, English teacher David McCullough, Jr., told the Wellesley High graduating class:

The founding fathers took pains to secure your inalienable right to life, liberty and
the pursuit of happiness—quite an active verb, “pursuit”—which leaves, I should think, little time for lying around watching parrots rollerskate on YouTube. The first President Roosevelt … advocated the strenuous life … [Henry David] Thoreau wanted to drive life into a corner, to live deep and suck out all the marrow. The poet Mary Oliver tells us to row, row into the swirl and roil. Locally, someone … encourages young scholars to carpe the heck out of the diem. The point is the same: Get busy, have at it. Don’t wait for inspiration or passion to find you. Get up, get out, explore, find it yourself, and grab hold with both hands.
South Korea is perhaps the world’s most digitally connected society. Nearly two-thirds of the populace of 50 million people own a smart phone and 98 percent of households have broadband Internet service. Part of the government’s ambitious plan is to digitize all textbooks and base education on tablet computers by 2015.

As citizens of one of Asia’s more advanced and wealthy nations, South Koreans are proud of being wired, but they now reap the consequences that have adversely affected their youth.

In the government’s survey on smart phones, results showed that an estimated 2.55 million people are addicted to smart phones, using the device eight or more hours per day.

In our survey, 85 percent of students say they text regularly, with 15 percent spending more than four hours a day doing so. This is not as alarming as South Korean figures—yet.

The South Korean National Information Agency reports that an estimated 160,000 South Korean children aged five to nine are addicted to the Internet, accessed through smart phones, tablets, or personal computers.

**Wired**

Associated Press technology writer Youkyung Lee describes how the digital lifestyle has taken its toll on children in an article for MSN News in November 2012. Lee portrays the “wired” life of a typical eleven-year-old South Korean girl who sadly “sleeps with her Android smart phone instead of a teddy bear.”

The first thing that the youngster’s eyes latch on when she wakes up is the screen on her smart phone. Her first task for the day is managing messages from friends. The gadget has turned into a semi-permanent appendage of her hand as it goes with her to the streets, the school, and even the bathroom.

Aside from coping with the steady stream of messages that she replies to, she deals with the hourly feeding of a digital pet hamster on one of her mobile apps.

The palm-sized gadget has ushered in anxiety at such an early age. Self-imposed “catastrophes” consist of not having wireless Internet connection and a phone battery that is less than 20 percent full!

Confident and amiable, this girl is not into computer games, yet results from an addiction test she took showed that she is “unhealthily dependent on her smart phone.”
**STARTING YOUNG**

Kim Jun-hee, a kindergarten teacher for ten years, carried out an eight-month survey on Internet safety and addiction education for preschool children. She noted that the early exposure to high-tech gadgets has made kids more indifferent, fidgety, and impulsive.

Kim believes that the issue of digital and web addiction should be addressed early because the smart phone has emerged as the children’s new toy. She developed a program for three-year-olds geared toward creative use of the computer, with programs for music appreciation and others.

Kim warns kids as young as four or five years old about the dangers of too much gadget use. She instructs them on methods of control.

Taking tech breaks consists of resting the eyes, stretching, telling stories that tackle Internet addiction, and playing games without the use of the computer.

According to Kim, parent cooperation is vital and the best way to teach the kids is for them to set a good example.

**TREATMENT**

Internet addiction has not yet been recognized by the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* as a mental illness.

But several South Korean medical practitioners choose to treat this addiction more as an illness rather than just a social problem. Lee Hae-Koo, a psychiatry professor at Catholic University of Korea, College of Medicine, says that South Korea, along with Taiwan and China, are actively researching on whether Internet addiction should truly be diagnosed as mental illness.

The chronicles of online addiction in Asia documents cases primarily linked to gaming, with outrageous aftermaths like heart attacks and in some, deaths resulting from nonstop gaming without food and rest.

In 2010, the unsettling story of a three-month-old baby girl who died from neglect stirred the hearts of the South Koreans. The parents were avid gamers who were so engrossed with marathon online gaming that they fed their baby only once a day.

A teacher in the south of Seoul has taken the initiative to address the issue of gadget obsession in his own small way by requiring students to check in their gadgets when they get to school. The gadgets are returned to them at dismissal time.

The teacher implemented this when he observed that the students missed lunch or they would stay in the classroom during Physical Education class, absorbed in their gadgets.

The maladies that now beset the South Korean youth because of overuse of gadgets and the Internet has prompted the government into taking a proactive stand in dealing with the issue. The government provides counselors for those who are obsessed with online gaming or Internet use.
Plans are in place to undertake drastic measures to address web and digital addiction in 2013. The Ministry of Public Administration and Security is revising laws to include the mandatory instruction of the dangers of Internet addiction starting from preschool, with kids as young as three.

**JAPAN**

Japan and the United States are following suit. More than half a million kids aged twelve to eighteen in Japan are believed to be Internet addicts, so the Ministry of Education plans to create “fasting” camps where kids will have no access to computers, smart phones, gaming devices, or the Internet.

“We want to get them out of the virtual world and to encourage them to have real communication with other children and adults,” Ministry Spokesperson Akifumi Sekine tells *The Telegraph*.

Children will be encouraged to do outdoor activities, and should the transition prove traumatic, they will have access to psychiatrists and psychotherapists.

**THE UNITED STATES**

In September 2013, the Behavioral Health Services at Bradford Regional Medical Center in Pennsylvania opened the first Internet addiction clinic in the United States.

The voluntary, inpatient program lasts for ten days, where people refrain from using phones, tablets, or the Net for at least three days. Therapy and educational sessions help them control their compulsion.

According to the program founder, psychologist Kimberly Young, typical addicts are young, male, intelligent, who “struggle socially,” and have low self-esteem. Most are obsessed with games such as *World of Warcraft*, not porn.

“Like any other addiction, we look at whether it has jeopardized their career, whether they lie about their usage or whether it interferes with relationships,” Young tells *Good Morning, America*.

The US$14,000-program, which is not covered by insurance, helps patients to return eventually to computer use, but in a healthy way. The goal is not to completely turn away from computers (which is impossible in today’s wired world), but to use them wisely.

Gaming disorder was classified only as “For Further Study” in the 2013 edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*. But Young, like many psychologists and psychiatrists around the world, believe that Internet addiction is real.

“There’s over twenty years of research on this,” Young says. “If people are suffering and have a real problem, why wait? Why not give them an outlet to deal with it right now?”

Perhaps our country can consider taking such measures before the majority of
our youth follow their South Korean and Japanese counterparts into the gadget trap.
Confucius says, “Balance life and everything will fall into place.”

I am a gamer, and I enjoy playing Call of Duty or DOTA. I find that gaming isn’t all bad; it’s a way to unwind, relax, and spend time with my friends.

However, gaming isn’t the only thing I do. I also read books, study for school, and actually talk with friends. So that I have enough time for everything, I find that it’s important to have a balance between gaming and my other hobbies and responsibilities.

Maybe people spend so much time gaming because they don’t have anything else to do. Personally, I limit my gaming by finding other activities to do. By finding something that I enjoy other than gaming, I manage to lessen the time I spend in front of the computer or game console.

**I tell myself that gaming isn’t everything.**

Another way to balance my time is to prioritize things. During school, I make sure to put homework before gaming. I don’t allow myself to play my video games until I have finished all necessary projects.

During my free time, I still prioritize other activities that I find much more important, like reading and writing. Keeping in touch with friends or spending time to be creative is a more worthwhile use of time than gaming.

Finally, a simple thing I do is to tell myself that gaming isn’t everything. In the long run, your high scores won’t matter. In real life, it’s the friends we’ve made and the things we’ve achieved that do matter. So instead of just gaming, we should find something to do that’s worthwhile and naturally satisfying. When we find a hobby we truly enjoy—whether it be writing stories or making music—we’ll find ourselves gaming less but achieving more.
Blessing in Disguise

By Matthew Leland David Y. Gue
High school student, Xavier School

One of the many reasons we teens today lack social skills and academic focus is the pull of online gaming and social-networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter.

Through them, many of us shield ourselves and create our own world centered in cyberspace, which consequently makes us stubborn or ignorant of those around us in the real world.

Having foreseen this problem, my parents implemented parental controls on my Internet access and online gaming, starting from grade school. My parents restricted my Internet access to two hours a day and used for school work only. I was only allowed to use my game consoles on weekends.

These restrictions are actually a blessing in disguise.

Although it seems that controlling Internet access is an easy problem to solve, it is not. This is a tricky issue, because nowadays in school, teachers, if not all the time, often use and endorse the Internet as a source for studying and doing projects.

If it were not for the online projects and research, I would have no problem with the parental controls instituted at home, but because of them, I often ask for additional computer time to finish my work.

I find these restrictions fair enough since they have taught me to manage my time and that of my groupmates and so that it won’t be hard for me to limit myself in the future when I have to face deadlines in school.

I may not be as actively involved as others in social networking at the moment, but a sacrifice is needed to achieve a goal, which is why these restrictions are actually a blessing in disguise.
I finally succumbed to the lure of technology the summer of 2013 when I bought an Android phone as a gift for myself. Who could resist the irresistible offer of a credit card chain at a gadget fair—six months to pay off at zero interest and billing to commence sixty days after purchase!

In all honesty, this impulsive purchase surprised even me, but turning sixty-three makes one do strange things. When I got the gadget—barely the size of the palm of my hand—I wondered what I could do with it that would make it earn its keep.

I am not tech-savvy like the grandma character in the Bayantel commercials, eponymously named Lola Techie—who goes into a near-fit when the Internet connection goes awry while she is playing a computer game. I own a “dumb” phone and have had the same prepaid SIM card since I bought it.

To my mind, I was going to be stuck with a “dumb” phone for life because “prepaid” somehow is incompatible with Android functions. Wi-Fi/Internet accessibility on the go is costly entertainment if I were just to surf aimlessly so with the prepaid SIM card, and the fun gets cut once the load runs out. I was not ready to change numbers or subscribe to a postpaid plan.

My adventure into cyberspace began once I turned on the phone and started discovering the awesome features packed into the little gadget. First of all, I had to acquaint myself with the touch screen. I had to conquer my fear of losing everything on the phone if I were to mistakenly touch the wrong icon.

But I realized soon enough that it is called a smart phone because it is indeed quite clever. All that was needed to discover the amusement park within the Android phone is a lot of guts and curiosity, laced with a hint of recklessness. After all, if the system goes crazy with my irresponsible tapping, the phone is under warranty and will be replaced with a new one if returned within a week.

Once I got the hang of it, I was hooked. The Android is pretty much like a laptop where you can e-mail and surf the web with an added feature: You can use it to make phone calls.

The apps, most of them free, will really keep us up all night—breaking news, Google, e-books, games. You can write notes/memos, follow people you know, and stalk people you do not know. The app called Viber even allows you to text, send pictures, and talk with contacts who have the same app for free.

The phone was truly a banquet of freebies, yours for the taking with a gentle tap on the screen. I also discovered that I need not consume my load budget in order to surf the web because free Wi-Fi connection is readily available now in most establishments.

My two boys (husband and son who both own “dumb” phones) were both impressed at my newfound entertainment as I shared with them the latest NBA scores and actual game play on YouTube, plus breaking news on ABS-CBN and CNN. In spite of the phone’s
compact screen, the pictures are sharp and crisp and the audio quite clear.

I could not help but marvel at the ingenuity behind this powerhouse of information and activities readily accessible in the palm of my hand.

Before I acquired the Android phone, I had little interest in gadgets of any kind. I was even resentful of the laptop I was given on one of my birthdays because I felt it was a superfluous expense as we already owned a desktop.

When my mommy-friends (younger than I am) started getting an iPhone, I was a bit fascinated at how engaged they were with the gadget that occupied a prominent place on the dinner table during get-togethers. Click, Click, Click go the phones as the entrees are served, feeding the phone memory images of the artfully styled food. More clicks for what used to be “Kodak moments” with friends. Then, tap, tap, tap and off they go into social-networking sites through cyberspace. No postage stamps needed, no walking to the post office to mail them off. Just minutes to do all these!

But, with all the attention the phones were getting, we should have reserved a seat for them. Sadly, the phones have now become stealthy members of our group, as they have now become members of the family for most of us.

It is with trepidation that I dwell on this matter because I am ambivalent on what stand to take. Do I condemn or condone how gadgets have taken over most of our lives?

While I was waiting at the airport and the lobby of the hotel on holiday, I saw that the iPad was the omnipresent gadget for adults and children. Even toddlers in strollers had iPad-toting nannies delighting their wards with games and videos to keep them from being fussy. A friend who just came from the United States to visit her grandchildren decried her daughter’s employment of the iPad as bedtime buddy of her less-than-a-year-old apo (grandchild). It had an app which played soothing put-to-sleep music at the baby’s tap of an icon.

Admittedly, I have been bewitched by the innovativeness of technology. But I am a late bloomer with a lot of exigencies that come with the aging process. Thus, addiction is out of the question for I am scared of damaging my eyes.

If I were to justify my recent acquisition of and engagement with the Android phone, it would be the newfound awareness and understanding of why technology spellbinds our youth with its many facets.

This unexpected fascination at my age has a strong possibility of turning into an obsession for younger people who should have a wider range of interests, social milieu, and emotional needs (other than staying tethered to technology). Therein lies the dilemma that has to be addressed: delaying the exposure to and creatively diverting the youth’s attention from technology too much too soon.

Mary Ann Santiago and Family
PREPARING FOR THE REAL WORLD

Mary Ann is a nutritionist by profession, but has chosen to be a full-time housewife and mother to their three sons: Pippin, a senior in the semi-
honors section; Maro, a sophomore in the honors section; and Jared, a Grade Six student. All of them study at the Ateneo.

Mary Ann considers her team-up with lawyer husband Peter as “strict mom–cool dad.” Mom closely monitors the boys’ studies, while Dad is the “pang-relax” parent who downloads and watches movies with the children and takes them out on weekends.

Since her children started in Prep, Mary Ann has taken to heart the task of nourishing their minds. She herself reads the subject matter being taught in class and does advanced studies to prepare her children for their lessons. She produces exercises for her children to do.

Mary Ann’s efforts at laying a good foundation in studying were not in vain. Maro, a Magis scholar, is in the Advanced Math and Science program. He is also a member of the Math Training Team that competed in the 2013 Australian Math Competition. Maro also plays the guitar and sings in his leisure time.

Peter says that for their boys to love reading, they try their best to set a good example by also being avid readers. Mary Ann also trains the boys to read. At an early age, the boys were already encouraged to borrow books from the library. They were given simple prizes for borrowing the most number of books every year.

During summer vacation, the boys read (and read aloud) books both in English and Filipino. While Mary Ann cooks, she ushers them to the steps of their stairway and lets them read books aloud as if they were addressing a crowd. The children take turns reading aloud, alternating Filipino and English every other day.

Since it usually took them around five minutes to complete this task, they were then allowed to play basketball, video games, Koosh Balls, or whatever they wanted after that.

When their sons were much younger, Peter brought them to school and Mary Ann picked them up after class. Now that they are older, Pippin and Maro commute, while Jared takes the school bus.

To train them to become more responsible, chores are assigned to the boys. Since their helper does not stay in the house, the two older boys have been assigned to take out the trash at night. Simple tasks like changing the jug on the water dispenser have also been assigned to them.

When a family friend passed away, Mary Ann realized that it is important for their sons to be prepared for life because the parents will not always be around. The loss of a parent would be devastating for children who are spoiled and do not know how to do things on their own.

Mary Ann and Peter go out without the boys regularly twice a month. It has occurred to Mary Ann that anything can happen when they are out and the kids are by themselves. Since Pippin is already sixteen years old, he has been told that should anything happen to Peter and Mary Ann, he must take care of his siblings. Mary Ann has also given him instructions regarding pertinent papers, like insurance documents and land titles.
When the children were younger, Mary Ann installed a timer for the Internet connection so that they would have no reason to stay up longer than usual.

Discipline is important in the household, and rules must be followed. Bedtime is set at 10 p.m. for the two older boys and 9 p.m. for the youngest—unless the boys have a heavy workload for the day, such as important projects or exams. The computer is in a common area in the house. The use of gadgets is not allowed on weekdays. Sleepovers at other houses are allowed only if Peter and Mary Ann personally know the parents of the hosts.

Mary Ann advises her high-school sons to focus on finishing their homework that require the use of computers first so that they can focus on other things they have to review right away.

When the children were younger, Mary Ann installed a timer for the Internet connection so that they would have no reason to stay up longer than usual.

During Fridays and Saturdays, the boys are allowed to sleep much later so that they can relax from the stress of the week. Grounding the kids from using the computer and gadgets is one of the consequences when household rules are not followed.

Pippin and Maro were each given a laptop as reward for getting honors. The boys share one iPad and a Wii game console. Pippin is quite frugal and owns an ordinary cell phone, while Maro received a BlackBerry as a graduation gift. Jared wants a cell phone, but Mary Ann still feels he has no need for it just yet.

The parents find that through these gadgets, their sons have considerable access to any kind of information they want. Every now and then, however, Mary Ann would check on what sites they visit, especially during weekdays, to make sure that they are not just playing.

When there is a major exam, Jared requests his mother to review with him, question-and-answer style, at 6 a.m. When he receives honors, he asks for a reward in the form of books, or play time at an Internet café.

As a nutritionist, Mary Ann makes sure her kids eat the right kinds of food. She also explains to them the importance of a healthy lifestyle, such as getting enough sleep and exercise. Pippin jumps rope, plays Frisbee, and occasionally, basketball.

Sunday is always family day: a time to relax, dine out, or watch a movie. During summer vacation, the family usually goes to the beach.

The boys take up whatever interests them, such as guitar, badminton, or cooking. Once, Pippin’s cooking skills were put into use when Mary Ann got sick. She was so touched that he insisted on doing all the cooking and was impressed that he also cleaned the kitchen afterward.

Peter and Mary Ann teach their kids important and proper behavior, including pagmamano and respecting household helpers. But most importantly, they have taught their children to have Christ at the center of their lives. The children pray to God in the
morning, to thank Him for a new day, and at night, to thank Him for the blessings of the day.

Mary Ann and Peter always encourage their children to study hard especially because they have been blessed by God with gifts that they should use wisely. Aside from inspiring them to be the best that they can be, they have also helped equip their sons for the real world.

DEEPER READING


Ko, C.-H., Liu, G-C., Hsiao, S., Yen, J.-Y., Yang, M.-J., Lin, W.-C., Yen, C.-F., & Chen,


Chapter Six
Reading and Scanning, Paper Books and Screens
Scan and Skim

SO WHAT’S THE problem? Reading is reading, be it on a computer, on a tablet, or on tree bark. Well, not really.

When we click on a hyperlink as we try to go through a web document, we have the tendency to go through many links, scanning them quickly in turn, rather than devoting much attention to any one of them. When we search an item, we also tend to jump among sites, absorbing things in fragmented pieces, without concentrating on what the works mean as a whole.

The fact of the matter is: When we are online, we are not ever on our own, and even if we try to focus on reading and writing, interruptions invariably occur.

Here is how science-fiction writer Cory Doctorow puts it when advising fellow writers in *Locus Magazine* in 2009:

The biggest impediment to concentration is your computer’s ecosystem of interruption technologies: IM, email alerts, RSS alerts, Skype rings, etc. Anything that requires you to wait for a response, even subconsciously, occupies your attention. Anything that leaps up on your screen to announce something new occupies your attention. The more you can train your friends and family to use e-mail, message boards, and similar technologies that allow you to save up your conversation for planned sessions instead of demanding your attention *right now* helps you carve out your twenty minutes.

“By all means, schedule a chat—voice, text, or video—when it’s needed,” Doctorow continues, “but leaving your IM running is like sitting down to work after hanging a giant ‘DISTRACT ME’ sign over your desk, one that shines brightly enough to be seen by the entire world.”

**SPELLING AND GRAMMAR**

Let’s start with an obvious effect. Teachers bemoan the lack of syntax and poor spelling of students. In the Ateneo de Manila University, remedial classes in English and Filipino (and also in Math) have steadily increased through the years, with no signs of slowing down. Of course, students in these classes have problems bigger than those of grammar alone, but distinguishing between phrases and clauses, paragraphs with coherence or without, and spelling words properly used to be skills mastered in high school.

No rigorous experiments have been done linking atrocious syntax with the abbreviated forms commonly used in text or social media. But such a link cannot just be coincidence.

“It’s hard enough for children to learn proper spelling and usage without the daily, constant reinforcement of doing it wrong,” say teen counselors Barbara Melton and Susan
Shankle in their book What in the World Are Your Kids Doing Online? “TM [text-message] conversions—U for ‘you,’ R for ‘are,’ and so on—make logical sense but don’t fit the rules of standard English, which are already pretty difficult.

“Every good speller will tell you that good spelling has to become second nature—the words just have to ‘feel right,’ to the point where really good spellers often know how to spell words they’ve never even heard of,” they continue.

The result? “For kids who spend more time TMing than at any other form of written communication, ‘U’ can’t help but seem more natural than ‘you.’”

>>DECODERS, NOT THINKERS

Reading online is radically different from reading the printed page. When faced with a plethora of blinking, insistent links and pop-ups, we have fewer mental resources left to engage with what is right in front of us right now.

In his book The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains, American journalist Nicholas Carr describes in minute detail what exactly goes on in our minds as we (mindlessly or otherwise) surf the web:

The need to evaluate links and make related navigational choices, while also processing a multiplicity of fleeting sensory stimuli, requires constant mental coordination and decision making, distracting the brain from the work of interpreting text or other information. Whenever we, as readers, come upon a link, we have to pause, for at least a split second, to allow our prefrontal cortex to evaluate whether or not we should click on it.

The redirection of our mental resources, from reading words to making judgments, may be imperceptible to us—our brains are quick—but it’s been shown to impede comprehension and retention, particularly when it’s repeated frequently. As the executive functions of the prefrontal cortex kick in, our brains become not only exercised but overtaxed. When we read on the web, we don’t read deeply. Instead, we just decode bits and pieces of information, often without even encoding them in memory.

>>SCAN AND SKIM

When we try to read a page on the Net, we do not so much read as scan. Carr cites the work of American industry researcher Jakob Nielsen, who advises companies on how to attract readers.

In 2006, Nielsen tracked the eye movement of web users. His design was simple yet ingenious: Readers wore a camera which tracked their eyes as they read text onscreen.

When we read a book, we usually read the text from left to right, line by line. But when we try to read a web page, we tend to scan and skim down, in a pattern that looked like the letter F.

Nielsen describes the process:
Users first read in a horizontal movement, usually across the upper part of the content area. This initial element forms the F’s top bar. Next, users move down the page a bit and then read across in a second horizontal movement that typically covers a shorter area than the previous movement. This additional element forms the F’s lower bar. Finally, users scan the content’s left side in a vertical movement. Sometimes this is a fairly slow and systematic scan that appears as a solid stripe on an eyetracking heatmap. Other times users move faster, creating a spottier heatmap. This last element forms the F’s stem.

Nielsen warns, “Users won’t read your text thoroughly in a word-by-word manner. Exhaustive reading is rare, especially when prospective customers are conducting their initial research to compile a shortlist of vendors. Yes, some people will read more, but most won’t.”

Nielsen goes on to advise his clients to make sure to catch our eye in the first paragraph, because many will not go on to the second, much less the third.

True to his word, Nielsen tries his hand at attracting us with his own first paragraph: “F for fast. That’s how users read your precious content. In a few seconds, their eyes move at amazing speeds across your website’s words in a pattern that’s very different from what you learned in school.”

Certainly the speeds are nothing short of amazing. Everyone seems to be a speed-reader on the Net. Studies have shown that people spend only seconds on a web page—ten or less on average, twenty to thirty if the page holds their interest for a while—before they go on to the next site.

Even the most extensive readers, such as scholars and professors, fall prey to this. Academics online exhibit similar behavior with laypeople. They tend to skim from one online source to another, reading at most a page or two in a book before continuing on, seldom to return to a reference already glanced at, however briefly.

REAL READING

Excessive computer use and TV watching can harm our eyes, and make it harder for us to engage in reading.

In her article “Strangers in Our Homes,” American pediatrician Susan Johnson describes how watching too much TV can harm the eyes and impair reading. The same process occurs when we devote too much time to the computer screen.

The ability to search out, scan, focus, and identify whatever comes in the visual field is impaired by watching TV [or doing computer activities]. These visual skills are also the ones that need to be developed for effective reading. Children … do not dilate their pupils, show little to no movement of their eyes (i.e., stare at the screen), and lack the normal saccadic movements of the eyes (a jumping from one line of print to the next) that is critical for reading.

The lack of eye movement … is a problem because reading requires the eyes to continually move from left to right across the page. The weakening of eye
muscles from lack of use can’t help but negatively impact the ability and effort required to read. In addition, our ability to focus and pay attention relies on this visual system.

Add to these the fast scene changes in most TV and online shows, and now, in many computer videos. “The rapid-fire change of … images, which occurs every 5–6 seconds in many programs and 2–3 seconds in commercials [even less in music videos], does not give the higher thought brain a chance to even process the image,” says Johnson.

“It reportedly takes the neocortex anywhere from 5 to 10 seconds to engage after a stimulus,” Johnson says.

Worst of all, when we just watch a screen, we do not really engage our minds.

“While reading a book (that doesn’t have a lot of pictures) the child’s mind creates its own pictures and has time to think about them,” says Johnson.

These thoughts could actually lead to ideas that inspire a child or adult to action. TV does not give time for this higher level of thinking that inspires deeds. Television projects images that go directly into our emotional brain. It is said that the words we hear go into knowledge while the images we see go into our soul. Pictures that elicit emotion are processed by the limbic system and the right hemisphere of the neocortex. If no time is given to think about these emotional pictures, then the left hemisphere is not involved. Once again, watching television often eliminates the part of our brain that can make sense of, analyze, and rationalize what we are seeing.

Reading exercises our imagination, which is something even the most exciting movie cannot provide.

“It is almost impossible to create your own pictures of Snow White from reading a story if you have seen the movie,” says Johnson.

It is also true that often one is disappointed when one sees a movie after reading the book. Our imagination is so much richer than what can be shown on a screen. The problem with television is that children get used to not using their imaginative thinking at all, and they don’t exercise that part of the brain (the neocortex) that creates the pictures. Children are not reading enough, and we aren’t reading or telling them enough stories to help their minds create pictures.

**NO POWERPOINT FOR BEZOS**

In August 2013, Amazon.com founder Jeff Bezos bought the venerable Washington Post. Is this another triumph for digital technology rather than print? It is too early to say.

But one thing is for sure: “Bezos has put PowerPoint out of his business,” says Peter Lawler, professor of government at Berry College and a former member of then-President George W. Bush’s Council on Bioethics.

Lawler says that Bezos has a “humane man’s aversion to cruelty,” and likens
PowerPoint presentations to “torture.”

“Where PowerPoint goes, intellectual enjoyment disappears,” Lawler says. “From my perspective as a teacher, what I mostly see is that PowerPoint makes both teachers and students lazy, as ‘coherent narratives’ are transformed into bullet points.”

Instead of PowerPoint, Bezos demands that his employees write six-page “narrative memos.” Before any meeting starts, everyone should read the memos.

Lest we think that the meeting may never start, Lawler believes that “of course, [it] doesn’t take that long, and reading, more than listening, focuses attention on actual arguments. And, of course, the person who writes the memo has to make sense or be subject to attack, ridicule, or even being fired.”

**Bezos notes that “too many of his employees were having so much fun designing PowerPoint slides that they were forgetting to think.”**

Is writing long memos torture? Not really. Reading and writing sentences and paragraphs is to promote clear and critical analysis, says Lawler.

Bezos notes that “too many of his employees were having so much fun designing PowerPoint slides that they were forgetting to think.”

PowerPoint is not the only problem. “The truth is, of course, that PowerPointing, tweeting, texting, and even e-mailing and blogging have been hell on thinking,” says Lawler.

Philosophy, theology, literature, and other parts of a liberal education require essays, with arguments and counter-arguments to encourage us to think deeply.

When we read or write an essay, we “have to be very attentive and patient to figure out what they’re saying, and that focused attention on reading and leisurely thinking about what [we’ve] read actually gets [our] mind to work the way it should.”

Now we believe that PowerPoint has its place, and that when used effectively, it can even spur critical thought. But Lawler’s points come out loud and clear: When ideas are reduced to bullet points in order to sustain the attention of an audience, then deep thought may be sacrificed.

We believe that one of Lawler’s suggestions has merit: Every student write a six-page narrative memo every week, and class time should involve discussing them.

**GOING GOOGLY**

In 2008, brain plasticity pioneer Michael Merzenich of the University of California at San Diego gave a talk at Google. He did not shy away from telling the Google people what the effects of their creation were, both the good and the bad. First the good: “There is absolutely no question that modern search engines and cross-referenced websites have powerfully enabled research and communication efficiencies.”
Then the bad: “There is also absolutely no question that our brains are engaged less directly and more shallowly in the synthesis of information, when we use research strategies that are all about ‘efficiency,’ ‘secondary (and out-of-context) referencing,’ and ‘once over, lightly.’”

In a 2008 blog post entitled, “Going Googly,” Merzenich talks about how habits affect the brain.

We know that brains grow and elaborate and strengthen when they are CHALLENGED, and that they change little when solutions are easy to come by. We know that brains differentially strengthen specific heavily exercised processes. The hippocampus of a trained London taxi driver, we know as an example, is highly developed, relatively to a typical London citizen.

What do you suppose happens to that hippocampus when we mount a GPS unit in the taxi, or in the typical London citizen’s vehicle? ‘Tis not a pretty picture, brain-wise! If we exchange reading for scanning and thinking for decoding, then our brains change in response. Web 3.0 and its future incarnations are here to stay, but we need to realize that they do affect our cognition, whether we like it or not.

Merzenich concludes, “Personally, it is difficult imagining living without them, or without modern technology in general. But at the same time … HEAVY USE HAS NEUROLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES. No one yet knows exactly what those consequences are.”
IN OUR SURVEY, students read the following books, in order of popularity: science-fiction and fantasy (28 percent), romance (25 percent), thriller and mystery (22 percent), music (21 percent), special interests like photography or cars (21 percent), nonfiction such as *Freakonomics* or *Blink* (16 percent), classics (16 percent), sports (15 percent), science and technology (13 percent), references (12 percent), the Bible (10 percent), TV-movie tie-ins (10 percent), self-help (10 percent), travel (8 percent), inspirational or religious books (8 percent), health (7 percent), biographies (6 percent), porn (3 percent).

Students read the following newspaper sections, in order of popularity: headlines (25 percent), entertainment (25 percent), comics (20 percent), sports (15 percent), gadgets (15 percent), lifestyle (8 percent), editorials (5 percent).

Students read the following magazines, in order of popularity: teen magazines such as *Candy* (23 percent), entertainment (20 percent), music (20 percent), gaming (15 percent), health/fitness (12 percent), lifestyle (12 percent), *Reader’s Digest* (10 percent), science/nature (9 percent), travel (9 percent), *Time/Newsweek* (8 percent), business (4 percent), home/family (4 percent), porn (4 percent), religion (3 percent).

**PAY ATTENTION**

We are evolutionarily more likely to look around often rather than to pay attention. Our ancestors had a habit of shifting and redirecting their gaze and their other senses rapidly to sense what was happening around them, in order to survive.

But in this millennium, most of us are long past the age of the animal predator. In a world that values thinking more than moving, focusing on what we read, write, and communicate to one another is vital to socioeconomic survival.

Reading is a basic skill, which most of us do unconsciously. Learning to read is not an easy task—witness the painstaking sounding-out and finger-tracing that young children initially do in order to help them to read. Reading demands practice and perseverance.

Most of all, reading requires attention.

**READING DEEPLY**


“[Readers] had to train their brains to ignore everything else going on around them, to resist the urge to let their focus skip from one sensory cue to another,” Carr continues. “They had to forge or strengthen the neural links needed to counter their instinctive distractedness, applying greater ‘top-down control’ over their attention.”
Of course, not all reading is created equal. Most of the day, we glance at and scan through traffic signs, store labels, even newspaper headlines. This kind of scanning is not really deep and reflective reading, since it tends to be the opposite—short and shallow.

**Deep reading is what makes reading for pleasure so pleasurable.**

But this is different from the reading expected in school, where we try to decipher the nuances of a novel, get into the minds of historical characters, or even make sense of an algebra word problem. Or the reading expected at work, where we need to understand the complexities behind budget reports, product development data, or marketing research.

In our survey, 25 percent of students say they never read for pleasure and 50 percent say they do not read newspapers.

Deep reading, too, is what makes reading for pleasure so, well, pleasurable. It is one of the ways we differ from other animals. The attention required in reading leads to more significant interpretation of text, not just on a literal level, but also in a meaningful way.

For reading is not just done for the sake of gathering information, as we do, say, when we search online. Instead, deep reading makes us think and reflect.

“In the quiet spaces opened up by the prolonged, undistracted reading of a book, people made their own associations, drew their own inferences and analogies, fostered their own ideas,” says Carr. “They thought deeply as they read deeply.”

**SIMULATES LIFE**

As we learn to read, the visual-word form area in our left fusiform gyrus responds to shapes, to letters, and even more to words, especially those that have meaning, such as “milk” than just random nonsensical ones, such as “lkim.” The act of reading is not an easy one, and takes years of practice.

But we have no choice. “For a child to become a fluent reader, the elemental work of reading must be automatic … or he will never be able to explore a text’s meaning,” says American journalist Maggie Jackson in her book *Distracted*. “He will be stuck on the surface, wrestling with simply recognizing each word, and missing the tapestry of their cohesive whole … The key to this … is attention.”

What does reading do to the brain? In 2009, researchers Nicole Speer, Jeremy Reynolds, Khenna Swallow, and Jeffrey Zachs of the Washington University in St. Louis used functional magnetic resonance imaging to scan people’s brains as they read four short stories. They found that different brain regions become active as people encounter different types of situations or information in the stories.

As they report in the journal *Psychological Science*, such situations could be “references to temporal information (e.g., ‘immediately’), initiations of new causal chains (i.e., when something that happened was not caused by something described previously), points when the subject of the text changed (character changes), changes in characters’
While it is fascinating to know that various brain areas correspond to what happens inside our heads when we read, the dramatic implication here is that far from being a passive activity, reading is actually very active.

Why? The brain regions that act up when we read and go through the different passages mirror those that are involved when we do similar activities in the real world.

For instance, when we read that a character pulled a cord, an area in our frontal lobes lights up—the same one that activates when we control grasping motions in real life. Or when we read that a character rises from a chair to go to the bathroom, spots in our temporal lobes lights up—the same spatial regions we use when we move in the real world.

“Readers dynamically activate specific visual, motor, and conceptual features of activities while reading about analogous changes in activities in the context of a narrative: Regions involved in processing goal-directed human activity, navigating spatial environments, and manually manipulating objects in the real world increased in activation at points when those specific aspects of the narrated situation were changing,” the researchers say.

These neurological findings validate what many researchers in literature and psychology have long suspected: that reading stories help us make sense of other people and of our world.

Several researchers, such as Raymond Mar of York University and Keith Oatley of the University of Toronto, point to the so-called mirror neurons, which are brain cells that fire both when we initially see an act and again when we observe a similar act repeated.


“Narrative fiction also creates a deep and immersive simulative experience of social interactions for readers,” they say. “This simulation facilitates the communication and understanding of social information and makes it more compelling, achieving a form of learning through experience.”

So reading stories, and empathizing with the characters, helps us learn to deal with each other in real life.

Peer pressure is anti-intellectual. It is anti-eloquence.

“Engaging in the simulative experiences of fiction literature can facilitate the understanding of others who are different from ourselves and can augment our capacity for empathy and social inference,” they say.

If we do not read as deeply and empathize as much, how will this affect our
interactions with one another?

It doesn’t help if most of our children’s peers do not themselves read much. “Peer pressure is anti-intellectual,” Time columnist Joel Stein quotes Emory University English professor Mark Bauerlein in the Time article, “The Me Me Me Generation.” “It is anti-historical. It is anti-eloquence.”

Bauerlein goes on, “Never before in history have people been able to grow up and reach age 23 so dominated by peers. To develop intellectually you’ve got to relate to older people, older things: 17-year-olds never grow up if they’re just hanging around other 17-year-olds.”

So if most seventeen-year-olds do not read, then what happens to the rest?

In his speech to the 2012 graduating class at Wellesley High School, English teacher David McCullough, Jr. enjoins them:

Resist the easy comforts of complacency, the specious glitter of materialism, the narcotic paralysis of self-satisfaction. Be worthy of your advantages. And read … read all the time … read as a matter of principle, as a matter of self-respect. Read as a nourishing staple of life. Develop and protect a moral sensibility and demonstrate the character to apply it. Dream big. Work hard. Think for yourself.

E-BOOKS

What about e-books? Does it really matter if we read from a Kindle or from a printed page?

“Science simply doesn’t have the answer to that question yet, so … we are left to reason for ourselves based on what we do know,” says Harvard University clinical psychologist Catherine Steiner-Adair in her book The Big Disconnect: Protecting Childhood and Family Relationships in the Digital Age.

Of course, reading e-books is better than not reading anything at all. But e-books, while they may be portable, may not be the best for developing brains.


Interaction with a three-dimensional book means that [our child] sees and grasps different-size books and views different-size pages; feels the texture of paper and book covers and the weight and heft of a book; focuses the eyes on type and illustrations on a printed page rather than a lighted screen, developing eye-hand coordination by first watching [parents] turn a page and eventually learning to do that herself.

Additionally, Steiner-Adair says that some research has suggested that e-books may “narrow the neurological range” of our children’s brains, so that when they are older, they may find traditional books too challenging to handle.

If our children are already too immersed in screens, the sensible approach would be to
have them read traditional books as much as possible.

**Reading a book involves a filling, or replenishing, of the mind.**

**MEDITATION**

Ultimately, reading deeply is a form of meditation.

“Reading a book was a meditative act, but it didn’t involve a clearing of the mind. It involved a filling, or replenishing, of the mind,” Carr says.

Readers disengaged their attention from the outward flow of passing stimuli in order to engage it more deeply with an inward flow of words, ideas, and emotions. That was—and is—the essence of the unique mental process of deep reading … The brain of the book reader was more than a literate brain. It was a literary brain.
QUEENA SPEAKS
RAISING WRITERS

In 2010, at National Bestsellers in Galleria, our twelve-year-old son Scott launched his first three books, Top Ten Travels, focusing on Kuala Lumpur, Tokyo, and New Zealand (Auckland and Rotorua). Despite the threat of a supertyphoon, we were amazed at the turnout of the audience. (Children’s travel books written by a kid is still a novelty in these parts.)

After Scott wrote an article about his Japan adventures for the Philippine Daily Inquirer, people asked how we raised Scott to be a writer.

Honestly, my husband and I never consciously set out to raise Scott to become one. But we tried our best to make him love reading for pleasure, on his own, early on.

READ FIRST

We are a household of readers. Scott’s late grandpa would always be found reading news magazines such as Time. My husband reads business books. I read nonfiction and fiction alike, on any topic, as long as I feel the book is worth my while. Even our household helpers read. We give the nanny parenting magazines to read, and tell her to forgo TV for books.

At two years old, Scott read his first book, the Berenstain Bears’ B Book, and to our delight, he mastered phonics effortlessly.

Then he decided to read dinosaur books. Since we never told him that the names were complicated, he never learned to fear words, however multi-syllabic they were.

There was no stopping him after that. Hardy Boys, popular science trivia, The Chronicles of Narnia, magic tricks, Jules Verne, Harry Potter, political satires, local newspapers, Percy Jackson, The Hunger Games, and then, to my delight, Lord of the Rings.

I knew how off-putting the Rings trilogy could be, since some of my college students confessed that even if they loved the movies, they could barely go beyond the first chapter, full of lengthy descriptions.

After Scott was halfway through the first book, I casually asked him how it was.

“Wonderful!” was the instant answer. I was surprised.

“Didn’t you find the genealogies of Middle Earth boring?”

“Sometimes,” he admitted. “But I understand the whole thing better, since I could trace the connections between the events.” I stopped worrying after that.

FEW DISTRACTIONS

We have done our best to help our son develop good study habits early on. Through the years, Scott has not indulged in many of the leisure activities of his peers. He does not watch TV much (only selected DVDs on weekends). We do not have video games at home.
(except Wii Sports), so Scott only plays them at friends’ houses.

In middle school, Scott spent only thirty minutes a day on the computer, managing to complete research and homework, including e-mails to teachers. Now that he is in high school, he averages two to three hours a day online.

Does Scott feel deprived? No, he says. The TV shows he likes are already on disk, and we as a family try to catch a good movie every other week (and chat lengthily about it). When his friends come to visit, they bring video games. In school, he visits the computer lab to make his own satirical movies or presentations, without the threat of homework.

Once children learn to read for pleasure, almost always, they will gravitate toward writing.

REFLECT AND CREATE

Children need free time, not just for bonding with parents, but on their own, to rest, to reflect, and to create. Thankfully, Scott likes to do his own poems, rap songs, music pieces, and artwork.

At age five, he did a superheroes story; a year after, a poem about Jose Rizal published in Junior Inquirer. He did a painting for a Powerbooks Narnia contest and an Easter artwork for the California Pizza Kitchen (the free pasta and pizza were the best prizes so far, he says, better than contest medals).

My husband and I constantly encourage Scott in several avenues of creation, generally non-academic, not to win glory in school, but for his own enjoyment.

We require only one thing: that Scott put time and effort into things he chooses to do.

When Anvil Publishing asked Scott to do a Filipino translation of the English text in the travel books, it took him several days, dictionary in hand, to finish it. Only then did Anvil ask seasoned writer Susie Baclagon-Borrero to edit his work. The same thing happened with the artwork: Scott sat down many times with artist Rommel Estanislao, discussing what the pages would look like. It took Rommel months to perfect, and draw the details the way the author Scott envisioned them.

Scott has since come out with three other travel books: Top Ten Pinoy Travels in Manila, Cebu, and Davao. Chosen by the Department of Education to be distributed in schools nationwide, these books were also finalists for the 2011 National Book Awards. Scott’s share of the proceeds from his travel books go to ERDA (Educational Research and Development Assistance) Tech Foundation, which takes care of street children, school dropouts, child laborers, children in conflict with the law, among others.

In 2012, Scott decided to challenge himself. With the guidance of his teacher Jared Uy, Scott did an essay in Filipino entitled “Kapatid,” which garnered first place in the 2nd Bayan and Batas National Cup for Essay Writing.

Writing is a craft. It cannot be learned overnight. If children want to write (or draw or do music), they need regular quiet time. If their schedules are filled with tutorials or computer games, they will never have the chance to do so.
Once children learn to read for pleasure, almost always, they will gravitate toward writing. Once they have been exposed to the power of words (by others), they will want to wield a similar power themselves.

For beginning writers, as it is for readers, the rule is to write (and read) what you love. For us parents, the message then is to provide our children with opportunities to express themselves, and more importantly, take the time to guide them.

How about workshops? For beginning writers, the best teachers are parents. If we know how to read, then we can write. There are workshops galore, but they are more appropriate when children already have started to love writing on their own. Forcing kids to attend seminars may backfire. If writing is seen as a chore, then kids will never want to write.

Scott first traveled with us when he was six. We asked him to jot down and draw the things he saw. Since then, he has carried a small notebook (or hotel stationery) at all times. He recorded his thoughts regularly so that he could keep his impressions fresh. He transcribed these thoughts into story form when we reached home, making them into accounts for family and friends. Now, the notes have served as the bases for his book series.

Parents, never ever do the writing for your children. Writing for pleasure is not graded. Children need to express their ideas, not their parents’ or tutors’ thoughts.

An English teacher once told me, “I can identify the kids whose parents do the writing for them. When I give essays as homework, they submit good work. But when essays are done in class, there is no improvement in their writing at all.”

How can our children’s skills improve if other people do the work for them, and the kids themselves do not read?

To raise writers, raise readers first. Minimize distractions. Give children space and time to think and express themselves. The rest will take care of itself.
What Research Entails

WHAT DOES IT mean to do research? How do we make the information we gather meaningful to us and to others? Rutgers University professor and librarian Carol Collier Kuhlthau posits six steps in the information search process.

First is initiation, where we recognize the need to search for new information, either brainstorming with others or thinking more about the topic. This stage is usually filled with apprehension and anxiety.

Initiation comes next, where we begin to decide what to choose and how to proceed. Uncertainty is replaced by optimism.

Next comes exploration, where information is gathered and new knowledge added to our existing base. Discomfort often returns, when we find it hard to reconcile what we learn from what we thought we already know.

The fourth stage is formulation, when we evaluate the information and focus our perspective, formulating our own thoughts and ideas. This is the most important stage, and focus here is essential.

Things are not as difficult after that. We then enter the collection stage, gathering material to support our focus.

Confidence sets in, as we plunge into the work with gusto, resulting in more successful searching, until we reach the last stage, search closure.

At the last, we summarize what we know, and feel a sense of relief, and based on what we have researched and studied, either a sense of satisfaction or disappointment with what we have found.

That is how research works, or at least, how it is supposed to be. Uncertainty and discomfort are part of the process. We need to wrestle with research.

But the speedy web searching we do, which we think passes for research, bypasses the important stages. We do very limited exploration, all the while at the mercy of what the search engine spouts out, not what may be relevant (though not as popular) out there. We tend to copy the ideas of others, plagiarizing even without being conscious of it at times. Instead of formulating our own ideas, we echo those of others.

Research now happens in a matter of minutes rather than hours, days, or weeks. If a student can submit a research paper a few minutes before deadline, just by searching then cutting and pasting, there is no way he has even attempted to wrestle with anything.

COGNITIVE LOAD

Because there is little or no absorption of material, it is little wonder that people who read online do not perform as well as those who read the printed page, as a slew of psychological experiments have revealed.
In his book *The Shallows: What the Internet Is Doing to Our Brains*, journalist Nicholas Carr devotes page after page to these experiments: People who read hypertext cannot remember as much as those who read paper files; indeed, some cannot even distinguish what they have or have not read.

When asked to report on what they have read, they are more confused and uncertain, less precise, and make more mistakes.

These results occur even when reading materials are at first thought to favor the convenience of links between texts.

In 2000, researchers Dale Niederhauser of Iowa State University, and Ralph Reynolds, Donna Salmen, and Phil Skolmoski of the University of Utah compared two groups of readers, all of them reading on the computer. They were asked to read an article arguing that “knowledge is objective” and the opposing one, on “knowledge as subjective.”

Both groups read the same two articles. But one group was provided links so that they could jump easily between sections in order to compare and contrast what they were doing. The other group had no links, so they had to read the articles sequentially, one at a time.

The readers with the links would have an advantage, right? Wrong. Those who read linearly and sequentially scored higher on a comprehension test than those that jumped from one article to the other.

The culprit? Cognitive load.

When information flows into our memory at any one time, we try our best to store and process it. When this load exceeds our ability to do so, we find it difficult or almost impossible to retain information or to cross-reference it to previously held memories or knowledge. The cognitive load is too enormous, and this impedes comprehension, interpretation, and reflection.

Too much cognitive load is dangerous to learning. The researchers say in the *Journal of Educational Computing Research* in 2000:

Advances in technology have enabled the development of hypertext-based instructional materials. These computerized information-presentation systems are becoming increasingly popular as schools and businesses develop the technology infrastructure to support their use; however, before hypertext-based instruction completely takes over the classroom and the boardroom, a number of questions about the utility of this presentation medium must be answered.

[We have studied] the effects of the cognitive load associated with using hypertext linking capabilities to ‘criss-cross the conceptual landscape’ on student learning … Results indicate that extensive use of hyperlinks to compare and contrast concepts when reading hypertext may inhibit learning.

» TOO MANY WINDOWS
The more links that we click on and the more sites we visit, the worse our comprehension of all the material in front of us.

As early as 1997, Erping Zhu, then a doctoral student at the Indiana University, tested whether the number of links on a web page would influence understanding. After different groups of readers (faced with a number of links) finished reading the pages online, they summarized what they read, and took a multiple-choice test.

The results were sad, but not surprising: As the number of links rose, understanding fell. Apparently, readers had to devote mental resources (including attention) to evaluate the links, thus leaving them with fewer resources to focus on understanding what they read.

The more links that we click on and the more sites we visit, the worse our comprehension of all the material in front of us.

Cognitive overload rears its ugly head again.

In a subsequent article based on her dissertation, which appeared in the Journal of Multimedia and Hypermedia shortly after, Zhu (now based at the University of Michigan) says, “Reading and comprehension require establishing relationships between concepts, drawing inferences, activating prior knowledge, and synthesizing main ideas. Disorientation or cognitive load may thus interfere with cognitive activities of reading and comprehension.”

Today, teenagers are in front of the computer, ostensibly studying, with anywhere from one to three, even six or more windows open at the same time. For many of them, the cognitive load is just too much, and even with the aid of private tutors or expensive resources, they cannot absorb or retain much information, much less try to comprehend it well.

THE UPSIDE

Management professor Don Tapscott of the University of Toronto believes that online technologies are a boon, not a bane. For example, in his book Grown Up Digital, he cites experiments showing that gamers process visual information faster than non-gamers, and that gamers develop skills (basically spatial skills) that can be useful if they want to be surgeons. Tapscott defends this generation’s dislike of reading by saying that they don’t read traditionally. For example, they don’t always start at the beginning. To the plethora of evidence that kids today do not think too much or too well, Tapscott says that kids must have “key mental skills” because after all, they need to be able to search online and make sense of lots of information.

Whether students really make much sense of everything they see, Tapscott does not say. But he assures all of us that “the kids are all right.”

Tapscott acknowledges that most research shows that multitasking does not work. In
his “Guidelines for a Sharper Mind,” he hedges his bets. “Multitask wisely. Don’t answer every e-mail instantly; check it in chunks, ideally a few hours apart.”

Even Tapscott, who applauds all things digital, is forced to say: “Know when it’s best to concentrate on just one task. Deep thought, reflection, critical thinking, innovation, and creativity are fostered best using a single-task focus.”

If only our children can heed this advice!

But even Tapscott draws the line with spoon-feeding media to children very early. Constant TV and video watching “is unhealthy for babies,” he says. “They obviously need close contact with parents to develop properly. Parents obviously need to read to their children and spend time with them.”

In 2010, the results of the first American longitudinal study of parents of infants, regarding media exposure and cognitive development, was published in the Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine. The study was done by New York University pediatricians Suzy Tomopoulos, Benard Dreyer, Arthur Fierman, Carolyn Brockmeyer, and Alan Mendelsohn, together with psychologist Samantha Berkule of Manhattanville College.

The team studied 259 infants who were exposed to children’s TV shows, educational or otherwise, at six months, for an average of 152 minutes (practically two hours) a day. Afterward, the babies’ cognitive and language development was measured when they were 14 months old.

The result? The more exposure to electronic media, the poorer the mental development.

Why does this happen? One reason may be because with increased media exposure, there is a significant decrease in parent-child interactions, which include “reduced audible language, conversation, and engagement with the child.”

When our children increasingly spend their time watching TV or videos, there is less time for us to read to them, or even to play together with (non-electronic) toys, which are long known to be crucial to child development.

**Deep thought, reflection, critical thinking, innovation, and creativity are fostered best using a single-task focus.**

Of course, increased media time means less time for children to engage in (non-electronic) play on their own, which again, we know is critical for growth.

Another reason may be because the rapid scene shifts and in-your-face features of media have direct, adverse effects on the developing brain, as we have discussed elsewhere. The researchers conclude that their experiment supports the recommendation of the American Academy of Pediatrics: no electronic media at all for kids younger than two years old.
Reading FREE
By Marjorie M. Evasco

Literature professor and poet, De La Salle University-Manila

To build and enhance student literary reading skills in my Introduction to World Literature General Education course, I guide my pupils in what my friend, the critic Isagani R. Cruz, calls the FREE strategy of close reading.

FREE is an acronym for FEED the text, READ the text, ENRICH the text and ENJOY the text.

I first learned of FREE from the critic Dr. Cruz in the high-school literature lessons we videotaped for the Foundation for Upgrading the Standard of Education and the Knowledge Channel some years back. I was the teacher he chose for three lessons using a creative nonfiction essay by Margaret Atwood, a poem by Emily Dickinson, and another poem by Angela Manalang Gloria.

Isagani developed the FREE strategy from ideas from various theoretical debates that have been going on for more than a century now in both the United States and the United Kingdom.

Feed the text and your imagination.

I have since fine-tuned my instructional module, using the poet Li Duan’s text from eighth-century China that Witter Bynner has translated as the poem “On Hearing Her Play the Harp.”

Her fingers of white jade by a window of snow are glimmering on a golden-fretted harp.
And to catch the quick eye of Zhou Yu, she touches a wrong note now and then.

Students are able to understand their individual reading process using FREE as the self-reflexive map, since FREE entails the skill of sustained or prolonged focus or attention through at least five readings of the text.

This is how I guide my students in applying FREE to a close reading of text:

- First, read the literary text using your given limited schema or knowledge, otherwise known as surface reading or quick scanning.
- Second, feed the text and your imagination. Research in order to address gaps within your knowledge regarding the text.
- Third, read the text with new research. Write or orally report on the differences between reading with your limited schema and reading with a
research-expanded schema to correct or enhance your way of imagining and experiencing the text.

- Fourth, enrich the text. Read the text with experiences in your life that are similar to that of the text and writing about it. In class, this is done as an exercise using small-group sharing and plenary discussion.
- Finally, enjoy the text and your imaginative power. Re-read the text with an enhanced attention on how literary language works to show the complexity of the human condition or experience.

FREE goes with the skill of close-reading the text with its contexts, to ensure that the reading is focused on the givens of the text, and inferential thinking is actively being done with imaginative reconstruction of the scene or dramatic human situation.

**My long-term goal is to have some of my students sustain their reading lives in life.**

I tell my students that when these skills become second nature, they can tackle any complex or difficult text in any field of knowledge and become confident new knowledge producers.

My personal goal is to become obsolete to the literary reading life of my students by midterms.

My long-term goal is to have some of them sustain their reading lives in life, sounding the depths of their souls with good novels, poetry, essays, and plays.
Motivating Kids to Read

EFFECTIVE READING is perhaps the most essential skill in life, with effective writing a close second. We need to be able to communicate well. In our technological age, it is ironic that we are bombarded with devices that purport to make it easier for us share our ideas. Yet many of us have lost the ability (and even the motivation) to ensure that we understand others and are understood by them as well.

In our 2004 study of the Ateneo de Manila High School achievers, reading for pleasure is one significant practice. Many students who excel in school have learned to read for fun, starting from a young age, and have sustained this habit throughout their lives.

These students do not groan when lengthy novels or plays are required in school; they actually read the assigned books for reviews, without relying on shortcuts or summarized notes. They do not balk at essay writing, and indeed welcome the chance to exercise the power of words.

In our current survey, only 3 and 8 percent of male and female students, respectively, say they read school-required books for more than four hours a day. Thirteen and 15 percent of male and female students, respectively, say they read books for pleasure for more than four hours a day.

Reading, like most skills, is a habit, developed in children with the help of the home and the school. Schools should ensure that their curricula revolve around reading and writing, with appropriate texts and materials. Teachers need to be trained not just on assessment and pedagogy, but also updated on communication skills.

Now let us focus on what parents can do to help our children become lifelong readers.

SKILLED READERS

If our children are already skilled or advanced readers, let us encourage them to continue reading. Vary the materials and topics. Challenge them with more complex books, slowly but steadily, or else they may stagnate.

For instance, if our Grade Six daughter has been reading nothing but romance novels for the past two years, then we can introduce her to other genres such as fantasy, nonfiction, or the classics.

STRUGGLING READERS

What if our children are struggling readers? We need to first observe their reading behavior so we can diagnose the problem. How do our children react when it is time to read? Are they nervous, rebellious, or hesitant? During reading, do they find it hard to focus? Do they read too slowly and haltingly, or too fast, skipping over complex words? Do they understand what they read, or do they interpret the material wrongly?
Perhaps vocabulary is a problem. Let us ask our kids to pause in the middle of the text, once they encounter an unfamiliar word. Have a dictionary on hand, and remind them to use it.

Or guide them to first infer the meaning through context clues, and check with the dictionary afterward.

Comprehension may be their weakness. Several strategies can help, such as questioning, monitoring, summarizing.

**Guide children to monitor their own understanding.**

We need to ask our children questions periodically, or better still, guide them to ask their own questions on what is happening in the text, and even predict what they think will come next.

Guide them to monitor their own understanding. They need to stop and think when something is unclear. Do they understand what they read? At the end of a chapter or even a page, let them summarize in their own words what they have read.

Do our children show enthusiasm with certain topics? This means that these have definitely piqued their interest. Do our kids prefer certain formats? Perhaps they prefer comics to novels. They can start with comics, and steadily move on to text-heavy books afterward.

Some adolescents lose interest in reading because they do not see the relevance of books to real life. Teen boys usually go for fantasy and warfare, but some may prefer nonfiction books.Expose them to materials on gadgets, electronics, or moviemaking.

Teen girls who shun chick lit can try books on pets, astronomy, or hobbies.

Do pictures help or hinder reading? For young readers who are used to lots of pictures, chapter books such as the *Geronimo Stilton* series can help in the transition to words.

But advanced readers may only find the pictures distracting. We know our children best.

**NEED FOR FOCUS**

Growing research has revealed that many children lose interest in traditional reading (printed materials) because they are used to fast-paced movies, games, and websites. If our children spend more than two hours online and cannot even last ten minutes with their textbook, then their multimedia exposure need to be lessened.

Studies of eye motion have shown that when we “read” websites, we do not concentrate word for word or phrase by phrase, but instead we scan, and click on hyperlinks to jump to another related (or even unrelated) site.

Scanning makes research much faster, but sacrifices accuracy, depth, and focus. The constant shifting from page to page, picture to picture, link to link may be detrimental to
growing brains, and has been associated with an increase in attention-deficit disorders worldwide.

If our children find it hard to focus on the page, reading with a finger or a bookmark may help them concentrate. During reading time, the TV, the computer, the cell phone, or the game console should all be turned off.

If we have young kids, J. Richard Gentry’s book, *Raising Confident Readers*, is an excellent resource. Gentry discusses what happens to our children’s brain as they start to read, and recommends activities to develop literacy naturally.

Gentry also recommends books for children, from toddlers to age seven, and advises parents on how to deal with dyslexia, delayed reading, and other challenges.

**Scanning makes research much faster, but sacrifices accuracy, depth, and focus.**

**ROLE MODELS**

Our kids should see us adults reading. We cannot, in all fairness, expect our children to develop the reading habit when we ourselves sit slumped in front of the TV and barely read anything. Let us advocate the value of reading over TV or computer games.

In 2011, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) says, “Children who live in households with heavy media use spend between 25 percent (for three- to four-year-olds) and 38 percent (for five- to six-year-olds) less time being read to or reading. These children have a lower likelihood of being able to read compared with their peers from households with low media use.”

Make reading a family activity. Discuss books or news items over dinner. Instead of shopping for clothes, shoes, or makeup, visit the bookstore regularly. Local bookstores these days often offer bargain books and hard-to-find titles.

Queena and her family rejoice in August and September, because these are book-sale months. They buy a lot of books at huge discounts during these two months and relish them throughout the year.

According to the AAP, “Families should be strongly encouraged to sit down and read to their child to foster their child’s cognitive and language development.”

**READING SCORE**

Scholastic International has developed the Lexile Reading Test, which aims to measure a child’s current reading ability. Many children do not like to read because either the books are too easy (leading to boredom) or too difficult (leading to frustration). The test tries to give an objective measure of reading skill.

Scholastic has partnered with schools such as the Ateneo de Manila Grade School, Assumption Makati, and Immaculate Conception Academy to offer the test to students.

Once our children know their lexile score, they can choose books based on that rating.
National Book Store has classified its children’s books based on lexile scores in selected branches (Powerplant Rockwell, Glorietta 5, Shangri-la Plaza, Bestsellers Galleria, Trinoma, Quezon Avenue, and Mall of Asia).

**Marie and Anabelle**

**SUCCESSFUL SINGLE PARENTING**

“I may not be successful career-wise, but I am definitely successful in rearing you.” These are words that could only come from a single mom who gave up her occupation to raise her only daughter who now brings her so much pride and joy.

Anabelle (not her real name) is in her senior year in high school. A voracious reader and an avid writer, she is editor of the school paper.

The journey of Marie (not her real name) was not an easy one. Separated from her husband when their daughter was young, Marie had to navigate the difficult road of raising a child as sole parent and provider.

Anabelle had ties with her father when she was young, but the physical connection was severed when he moved abroad. Their only link at present is through e-mail.

Marie went through several stages while raising her daughter: working mom, then stay-at home mom, and finally, working mom again. After carefully weighing her options and obtaining her parents’ and siblings’ support, she decided to give up her unfulfilling career to take care of both her daughter and her aging parents.

Recalling Anabelle’s early years, Marie remembersspanking her only twice, with the use of her hand on the child’s bottom. One was for a childish antic, while the more serious transgression involved pouring milk on a newly made bed.

Marie told her daughter, “You will be my best friend but as long as you are under my wing, you have to follow me because I am the one taking care of you.”

This advice served mother and daughter well, since till now, both parties maintain an enviable closeness, coupled with respect. Communication lines are always open and issues are discussed and resolved as soon as possible.

Marie constantly reminds her daughter that life is unpredictable and that what they have now is not forever (“Hindi habang panahon ito ang estado ng buhay natin”).

Marie used to lend her daughter her own cell phone to bring on field trips, but when Anabelle reached Grade Seven, her mother got her a Nokia phone for her own use.

When Anabelle was in early high school, she wanted a BlackBerry because her classmate had one. Marie asked her what the father of her classmate does for a living. When Anabelle replied that he was a politician, the discussion ended right away.

Marie told her daughter that if she really wanted one, she would have to work hard for it, for instance, getting a grade of B in Math. Anabelle has since forgotten about the BlackBerry and is satisfied with the Nokia, which she uses up to now.

Math was an issue between mother and daughter in grade school. Marie pounded
Math on to her daughter, which had a negative effect. Mom realized that she had to change her style. She admitted that there was something wrong in their management of the problem, telling her daughter that they should look at it “another way.”

Marie decided to stop the nagging. She would offer merienda (snacks) first, then she would allow Anabelle to take the lead, basing her next move on her daughter’s mood. Anabelle has done very well in Math since then, and now volunteers to state her scores without any probing from her mother.

Anabelle shows maturity beyond her age and is very prudent with handling money. Marie had early on explained how she manages their money (no ATM cards, only a passbook).

**Anabelle gets to write her short stories but because of the limits set by her mother, she has calluses on her fingers from writing with pen and paper.**

Anabelle gets a daily allowance of 200 pesos. When the topics in Math became complicated, she needed to attend remedial classes and get a tutor.

Marie talked with her daughter when they were not getting the desired effect. “You need to take responsibility for part of the fee because the extra classes are very expensive,” Marie said.

So both parties agreed that fifty pesos should come from her baon (allowance), something her mother felt would make her daughter work harder.

Anabelle has been saving money in a jar, for a possible trip to London. Perhaps she was inspired to visit the city after reading Harry Potter. After all, Marie has taught her daughter to work hard in order to achieve any dream.

Saying no to our children is never easy. But Marie has laid the foundation early on, so that a “no” is not met with resentment. When Anabelle wants to go out with friends and her mother does not fully agree, the mother replies, “Let’s talk about it” or “Let’s think about it and decide later.”

In this way, Marie still has the option to change her mind and say, “I might have made the wrong decision. Let us see, maybe next time.” Marie has earned the respect of her daughter’s friends. She is a favorite escort of her daughter’s barkada (group of friends) since she is deemed funny and cool.

Mother and daughter share and swap books. Favorites are Dorian Gray and those by the Filipina writer Melissa de la Cruz’s from New York City, who has hit it big in the international scene.

Awed by De la Cruz’s success, Anabelle loves to write fiction. She uploads her short stories (under a pseudonym) on a site called Fan Fiction. She has a thesaurus and a dictionary on hand to aid her in her writing.

When Anabelle entered high school, Marie gave her an HP laptop, but with strict guidelines. Marie tells her daughter not to use the laptop every day, and gives her at most
two hours a day for research or homework.

On weekends, Anabelle gets to write her short stories but because of the limits set by her mother, she has calluses on her fingers from writing with pen and paper.

Marie also bought her daughter a Tatoo (prepaid Globe Internet connection) and Anabelle knows she has to stay within the budget. Discipline is employed even during the summer and when rules are not followed as agreed upon, the device is confiscated.

The only time Anabelle complains of boredom is in school. She and her classmates have set expectations of their teachers. The students from different sections compare notes and discuss among themselves how the teacher taught a certain subject matter in one section. They expect it also to be taught to them in the same way, especially if it was taught well by a particularly good teacher.

Aside from the laptop, Anabelle also owns an MP3 player as she enjoys listening to music by the Beatles, the Rolling Stones, etc. Anabelle studies while listening to music, which her mother thinks is a distraction.

The TV and gaming consoles are not on the list of Anabelle’s interests. Marie calls her daughter an “old soul,” since she is quite conservative and does not show much interest in boys. She hangs out with friends who, like her, also love to read.

Anabelle might be called nerdy, as she has already read serious literature like Julius Caesar and The Scarlet Letter in grade school. Anabelle picked French as an elective in high school and her tests show that her career path is headed toward European History and Languages.

The University of the Philippines is her first choice of college, because Marie believes that her daughter will get a good education there and learn about the real world at the same time.

Marie has dedicated her life to raising her daughter without any regrets. Living with grandparents is an advantage as they love their granddaughter dearly.

Sometimes, though, privacy becomes an issue. Once, Anabelle asked her mother if they could hear Mass separately from her grandparents. Though Anabelle loves lolo and lola, she sometimes craves to be alone with her mother, just the two of them.

Marie got Anabelle a dog when she turned fourteen, to wean her away from the laptop and to give her real-life responsibilities. Anabelle has household chores as well, because they live without full-time help.

Successful single parenting is tough, but Marie has weathered it beautifully. A father is an important part of a nuclear family, but only in two major instances did Marie feel helpless. The first took place when Anabelle was ten years old. She asked for her father and cried a lot on Christmas Eve. The second happened when Anabelle was a high school freshman. She heard a cousin say, “I love you, Dad,” which triggered an emotional moment. According to Marie, a parent seminar on undergoing adjustments to high school was very helpful in making them understand and address the changes as students entered anew phase in their lives.

Anabelle has developed into an amazing and beautiful individual. Lately, she has
encouraged her mother to go dating, with the proviso that any relationship would be subject to her approval.

Marie just laughed off the suggestion. She would much rather go back to school to embark on a teaching career.
KIDS UNPLUGGED

My kids attend Colegio Sto. Domingo (CSD), a small school in our subdivision in Brookside, Cainta, Rizal. Putting them in big schools for preschool was out of the question, since I did not want to subject them to long drives in traffic.

I looked for a school that fit our goals for our kids: the teaching style, student formation, educational programs, and the competency of teachers and administrators. For example, Karla Ma. U. de Guzman, Director of the Early Childhood Department (Preschool, Grades One to Three), obtained her master’s degree in Early Childhood Education in Miriam College.

GOAL SETTING

“Themed annual goals are set, which reflect what the children will try to become, and the values they will try to emulate,” says Karla Ma. U. De Guzman, director of the school’s Early Childhood Department. Class management charts (job charts, behavior charts, and so on) are patterned after a particular theme.

For example, for the theme “Hero Headquarters,” the goal is to work hard to gain strength, “wings to soar high,” and succeed in tasks, and to help each other achieve small victories. Student charts reflect their performance: Ready to Fly, Sidekick Status, Superhero Status, and Rescue.

Class management is also based on the chosen theme. “Behaving well is more fun because of the themes used,” says De Guzman. “Students are proud to behave because everyone can see their behavior in the chart.”

PARTNERSHIP WITH PARENTS

CSD believes in partnering with parents to achieve the goals set for the children. Every Friday, a topic outline (for preschool) and a Headstart chart (for primary school) are sent home. These materials list the topics to be tackled in every subject for the coming week, and allows the parents to study in advance. One of the school’s best practices is encouraging kids to love reading. The school requires story-book reading with the family, wherein kids are asked to choose a book from the library every Friday to read with their parents. From this, the kids are asked to draw and parents are asked a few questions about the story.

Aside from reading, CSD encourages children to Speak Up. This literacy program uses storytelling, speech and elocution contests, and Sabayang Pagbigkas (speech class) to advocate various topics such as the nation, the planet, and so on.

“Each child has a chance to host or to say lines through video hosting,” says De Guzman. In the last performance, every child spoke up.

In order to be less demanding of parents’ time and budget, celebratory events are integrated into one. “We have fewer but grander festivities [than other schools],” says De
Guzman.

United Nations Family Day features games, songs, and food of different countries. The Earth Is My Valentine integrates Earth Day and Hearts Day, with a poetry contest about Mother Earth and a bazaar of earth-friendly products. Piyesta para sa Kalikasan is a field trip, family day, and Filipino day rolled into one, including a trip to Fun Farm where families play Filipino games and children perform cultural and environmentally themed presentations.

**ASSESSMENT**

Teachers meet parents twice per quarter to update them on their children’s progress. In mid-quarter, a progress update shows the works and behavioral development of the child, and teachers communicate to parents what they can do at home for further improvement. At the end of the quarter, cards are distributed, with exam results and final assessment.

CSD has a setup similar to traditional schools, but the eclectic teaching style gives room for creativity, imagination, and respect of differences, while still instilling discipline and order. These the teachers strive to do on top of their creative, but inexpensive programs, their regular learning experiences, and their emphasis on good communication skills.

**GADGET PROBLEMS**

Because the teachers are focused on the children, they readily spot whatever problems may arise. Teacher Glenna Marie Gatapia, preschool coordinator, has observed behavior manifestations among children with too many gadgets at home. They have puffy eyes and are sleepy in class due to gaming or TV viewing at night.

Many of them are uninterested during concept or discussion time in class. If teachers only show pictures, tell a story, or use simple PowerPoint slides to present the lesson, these students remain uninterested. They only prefer moving photos and interactive videos.

Many of the kids who watch violent programs are not aware that their physical movements can also hurt others. Since it seems that the cartoon heroes they constantly watch on TV or online do not get hurt, they believe that their classmates won’t get hurt when they hit them in real life.

The fine motor skills of these gadget-immersed children are poor. These kids find it hard to hold pencils and write their names. They do not like to engage in activities like writing, cutting, or painting.

Teacher Lynette del Castillo, a primary teacher who handles Science and Computer, recognizes who among the students are immersed in gadgets, videos, and gaming. These are the kids who cannot sit still in class. While the rest of the class tunes into the lessons, these students do not show interest.

These kids also sound what they like to watch, and their moves are like those of the cartoon or superhero characters they emulate.
When Migo was in school for a year, the school owner, Fe de Guzman, invited me to handle the Guidance and Counseling Program section on a part-time basis. This was a great way for me to balance my goals of tuning in to Migo and Maia’s needs while I continue with the work that I really like.

Karla and I teamed up to handle behavioral cases of students. We did away with the traditional sanctions and timeouts. We also tried to work together with the parents or guardians to ensure that our recommendations are followed at home.

When we sit down to confer with parents of children having problems in school, we ask them these questions:

- What are the rules for the child at home?
- What gadgets do you allow your kids to use often?
- How much time does your child engage in gadget use?
- What are the other activities does your child engage in after school?
- How much time does your child spend on non-digital activities?

We have linked most of the concerns of kids in the preschool and primary school to too much gadget use and too few alternatives activities. The problems worsen when rules are inconsistently applied at home, and discipline is nonexistent.

**CSD KIDS UNPLUGGED**

In June 2013, we initiated a program called CSD Kids Unplugged to educate and support families in managing their children’s screen time and media use.

The program also aims to encourage parents and kids to engage in personal interactions, active play and games, and non-digital learning initiatives.

The program has three aspects. First, we provide parent education through reading materials, such as e-mails and quarterly learning sessions. Second, through learning sessions, we help parents set goals for their children and develop action plans to implement at home. Third, at the end of the school year, we will gather feedback from parents and teachers regarding the children’s well-being: academic, social, behavioral, etc.

The program is done on a voluntary basis. While we have observed that some parents need to intervene in their children’s gadget use, these parents have not signed up for our program, so we will make do with conferences and monitoring of the children’s progress from our end. We do not want to force parents who are not interested; we respect the decisions of individual families.

But we believe that all parents need to know that it can be done. Kids can be unplugged! While we want our students to be technologically adept later in life, right now we need to help strengthen their basic foundations in order for them to grow up well and in tune with the world. As for parents, our task remains the same: to raise our kids the best
we can, with or without technology.

Joji Garcia and Family
GADGETS CAN NEVER REPLACE RELATIONSHIPS

Jocelyn “Joji” Garcia is an active parent at Miriam College High School. Even while she works as a training consultant, she found time to be the president of the Parent Council. She has three children: twin boys Robie and Ronald, now in their twenties, and daughter Regina Jay “Gia,” in her late teens.

Robie graduated with a degree in Developmental Studies and a master’s in Public Administration. He is now a college instructor. Ronald took a double major course: BS Chemistry and Biotechnology. Gia graduated from high school with honors, and is now taking up BS Math at the University of the Philippines in Diliman.

The children were raised with clear rules at home. Ever since they were little, Joji started giving them the needed rules and structure. Raising twin boys were a double challenge, but raising Gia was considerably easier, since the latter “naturally follows” the rules.

“No one can replace parents in instilling social skills and good manners in the kids,” Joji says. Joji and her husband Rogelio are clear and consistent in communicating to their children what they expect from them.

When her kids want to go out with friends or attend parties, Joji makes sure she knows the parents of the host, and she personally brings her kids to and from the place.

“I want them to learn that parties are for socializing and not for partying (drinking, making out)!” Joji says.

The children are also trained on self-help and life skills. They would do chores like fixing their rooms and personal belongings. Joji says, “When they were four years old, my twins already knew how to pack their bags when we needed to go on trips. I would just check on what they did.”

In these ways, the children learn to develop decision-making skills.

“The process has to start when they are young,” Joji says. “As my kids grew older, they were very solid in making decisions and they developed leadership skills. Of course, I was there to guide and give input, yet they were the ones who still made the ultimate choices, including their college majors and career paths.”

Her children grew up being leaders in their own right. The twins were class officers and top leaders of Citizen’s Army Training (CAT) in high school. Gia was class president in high school, and now in college, she has also been voted as president of their block.

Joji tried to establish in her children a love for learning early on. When Gia graduated from high school, she wrote a note to her mom: “Thank you for raising me with a love for learning!”
When her kids were young, Joji used to work full-time. But she made sure not to take further work commitments after 5 p.m. She did not work overtime, since she made sure to be home with her family.

**The Garcia children are never bored. They have a deep love for reading.**

At home, Joji would check on the kids’ homework and help them in reviewing for tests and exams.

“I do not make reviewers for my kids,” Joji says. “They never had tutors! It was I who helped them in everything.”

Though it was difficult making her playful young twin boys study early on, Joji persisted in letting them work on their homework or reviewing them. She tried to establish a system that worked for her boys and another routine for Gia, based on their individual learning styles.

Joji was consistent with their homework and reviewing routines until her kids reached Grade Five, at which time they started doing things on their own, following the same routines they had set.

She says, “It’s important to set routines and then stick to them.”

Joji tried not to scold her children, particularly during exam days. When Gia was four years old, she commented, “Mom, my friend got a low score in the test. She got scolded and remembered the scolding, not the answers.”

As parents, Joji and Rogelio tried their best to ensure that the environment was pleasant and positive, especially when her children studied for exams or tests.

The Garcia children are never bored. They have a deep love for reading.

“I’d rather bring them to the bookstore than to the toy store or other shops,” Joji says. She started reading to her children when they were babies, and continued the practice until her children could read on their own. Joji also provided her kids, especially Gia, with writing materials (pen, paper, notepads, crayons) because she loved to write.

Lego blocks are favorite toys. “With blocks, our children can create and imagine!” Joji says.

In grade school, Gia was involved in the Ateneo Children’s Theater, where she had leading roles while still maintaining exemplary grades. She took classes in Trumpets during summers, to hone her gifts for singing and acting. In high school, Gia was a member of the debate team.

Robie and Ronald, who were also debaters, were leaders in CAT.

Speaking of gadgets, the twins had a PlayStation console in grade school, but they only played during weekends. Joji did not encounter any problems with their excessive use of the gadget.

But when the trend on *Counter-Strike* kicked in, Joji noticed that her boys would
come home later than usual. They would drop by an Internet shop prior to going home to play a few games with their friends. Fortunately, the boys stopped doing this when they were asked to do so, before it adversely affected their school performance.

Gia asked for a mobile phone when she was in Grade Four. Joji gave her a simple one for texting and calling the family. Gia was disciplined and followed the rules, so she never abused their trust. Gia did not chat on the phone much, and did not spend much time on social networks.

School work was a priority, so Gia would not even open Facebook on some days. Joji says, “I would even ask her sometimes if she saw what I put on Facebook. And then Gia would reply, ‘I have not opened it yet!’”

**Nothing can replace relationships, not even gadgets.**

TV and DVDs were never part of their kids’ routines. They would watch reruns of *American Idol*, but they did not have a screen habit. When the family first had a personal computer, it was placed in a common area that was accessible and visible to everyone.

Now that the children are older and have their own laptops for work and school, they still prefer using the common round table at home, instead of working individually at the desks in their own rooms.

“We would sit together, all five of us, to work side by side at our round table,” Joji says.

“Dinners are very sacred to us,” Joji adds. “I had dinner with the kids almost 100 percent of the time while they were growing up.”

Dinner is a means for them to connect and to update each other with what is happening in their lives. They discuss various topics during dinner. In the past, these meant school and activities. Now the family talks about politics, economics, and even philosophy.

Joji believes that “nothing can replace relationships, not even gadgets.” It is a must for her to be present in her children’s lives and to connect well with them, particularly in their formative years. It is a must for her to ask about what is going on with them, and she tries not to react negatively so as to encourage them to share their ideas.

She used to bring each child on one-on-one “dates” when they were younger. While this has declined as her children grew up, family values have been set in the kids and parents and children have built strong emotional bonds.

Amid the influx of multimedia, Joji and Rogelio are reaping the benefits of their wise parenting now that her children are grown. Joji urges parents to “invest time and build relationships with their children.”

“No amount of technology can take away the role of parents,” she adds. Joji and Rogelio have made a conscious effort to read about parenting strategies, such as establishing and following through on rules, being consistent in building relationships, and simply being present for their children.
No amount of technology can take away the role of parents.

Ultimately, the parents have guided their children to see the big picture and the end result of goals they want to work on. “We helped our children see what they are working for, in order for them to have insights on how to reach their goals,” Joji says.

Joji says that she and her husband are not perfect parents. But they have succeeded in raising well-rounded, goal-oriented, and loving children in the digital age.

DEEPER READING


Chapter Seven
Raising Generation Tech, Grooming Digital Citizens

The teamwork of Greg and Lourdes Ozaeta works very well for their sons, Carlo who at this writing is a senior, and Marco, a sophomore, both in the honors sections at the Ateneo High School.

Lourdes fondly calls Greg a “house husband,” albeit an economically active one, while she proudly wears the badge of housewife with pride. The couple decided to be stay-at-home parents to totally focus on raising their two sons. Lourdes, a BS Management Engineering graduate from the Ateneo, resigned the year after she gave birth to Carlo, when she sensed her son was getting too attached to his nanny.

Greg, also an Atenean with a BS Math in Computer Science degree, is the epitome of a hands-on father who chose to conduct business from home.

“Greg teaches the boys while I provide support,” Lourdes says.

The couple have a very good partnership: Dad takes the boys to school and Mom picks them up. Dad tutors them in Math and Science, while Mom coaches them in Filipino
and Araling Panlipunan.

Carlo and Marco both look up to their Dad as their role model and when the time came for them to enter high school, they both aimed to get into Section A, just like Greg. Up to Grade Seven, the boys had been closely guided by Dad.

Since Greg was her batchmate in college, Queena can attest that he is a math whiz. Greg’s fondness for the subject is evident still, as he goes over the boys’ textbooks to answer their questions or explain to them what they can’t understand.

The Ozaetas have strict household rules. The computer is placed in a common area, passwords are shared, and bedroom doors are never locked. When the boys were in grade school, bedtime was at 11 p.m.; in high school, it was adjusted to 12 midnight because of the added school load. Since Carlo is in the honors Science and Math classes, he is allowed to stay up to finish his work. (On one occasion, he had to stay up till 4 a.m.)

Lourdes insists that her sons work on the computer in the common area because she will not be able to see them anymore if it were in their room. Lourdes would like to impose a “no gadget” rule on weekdays but since they are doing very well in school, Greg relaxed the rules on the condition that homework should be prioritized.

The boys are allowed to sleep over at a friend’s house only if they personally know the other parents. Greg decided to get games for the boys so they would not find an excuse to go to a friend’s house to play. The boys’ classmates now sometimes go to their house to play games, which the couple prefers.

Lourdes provided the boys with ordinary cell phones, not worth more than 10,000 pesos. No one is particular about owning a high-tech phone because Greg has what must be the oldest cell phone which serves its most basic purpose well: making calls.

Once on a plane trip, the icebreaker was a “Bring Me” game. One of the items called for was the oldest phone; and Greg’s phone, a model equipped with an antenna, was the winner.

The boys each have a computer, an old PlayStation I, a Wii console, a Portable PlayStation, an iTouch, an iPod, and two iPads (one was a gift, the other purchased).

Recently, Greg installed an app that would shut down the Internet connection at 11 p.m. because the parents observed that the boys would be distracted by social-networking sites like Facebook while doing homework. The parents both feel that it is getting more difficult to control computer use, because sites like Facebook are also used by teachers and friends for updates on school matters.

While the boys are working on their computer, Lourdes occasionally surprises them with a peck on the cheek, asking them “What’s up?” as her eyes scan the screen. It is an opportunity for her to see what they are up to without being too obvious. When she sees the posts of friends that borders on bad language (“What the ___!”) on Facebook, she reminds her sons to always be careful with what they write. She also tells Carlo the consequences of having very little sleep and for him to be responsible for his health.

The boys have very different study habits. Marco is more visual, and often Skypes with a classmate to prepare for some quizzes and tests. Carlo prefers to study quietly by
himself.

When the boys do not meet their goals, Mom asks them, “Did you try your best?” On the rare occasions that they do not want to review lessons, she tells them, “If you get a low grade or flunk, it will be reflected in your report card. It is your responsibility, so if that happens, you suffer the consequences.”

Lourdes believes that the pressure to be good should not be external. As teenagers seeking their own identity, the boys may “experiment.” But since they have developed internal restraint, they feel guilty because they know the difference between right and wrong.

Rewards for academic achievements are not given on a quarterly basis, but only at the end of the year. The most requested rewards are apps and games which Greg researches on before giving them, so the boys have to wait for weeks, even a month, before getting them.

On the other hand, when the boys slip up, they get grounded, which means less computer time, or no gadgets and no TV even if it is a Sunday.

Greg and Lourdes make an effort to involve themselves in the activities of their two sons. They watch TV and movies together. The boys are now into K-Pop which they watch on the Korean station KBS. The boys are starting to learn to read, speak, and understand the basics of the Korean language. Lourdes’s exposure to the conservative values of the Koreans in the movies they watch together has stirred her interest in learning the language, and she is now enrolled at a course in the Ateneo.

Like normal teens, the boys say they are bored all the time to make their parents feel somewhat guilty so that they will be allowed to use the computer. She tells them to stop complaining and look for something to do, like clean their rooms.

Greg encourages them to exercise and put together a regular workout regimen. He believes that the boys need to be well-rounded, with time for studies and for recreation. He says, “Hindi naman puwede puro aral lang.” (It can’t be just pure studying all the time.)

During the school year, the boys focus on studies, but summer is time for recreation. They choose what they want to do, like learn the guitar, dance, or cook. Mom tells them that since they love to eat, they have to know how to prepare their own food. This has motivated Marco to learn how to cook and his aspiration now is to be a chef. The parents will support him all the way because they believe that their sons will be happy with whatever career they choose.

Greg and Lourdes are confident that they have given Carlo and Marco a solid foundation consisting of good values, focus, diligence, right attitudes, and most of all, prioritizing family ahead of everything else.
How to Talk So Our Kids Will Listen

IN OUR SURVEY, 70 percent of students say that being listened to by others makes them happy.

How do we moderate our children’s use of gadgets and the Internet? Do we ground them, threaten them, shout at them? How do we regulate our kids with regard the use of technology?

The first step is to have a great relationship with our kids. When we know our kids and our kids know us, there’s a greater chance they’ll follow what we say, and we can influence their decisions.

The keys to having a great relationship with our kids can be summed up in A, B, C, D, and E.

**A—ATTENTION GIVING**

In order to have influence over our kids, we have to get to know them and earn their trust and respect. We recommend a weekly date with each child, for us to get to know them and for them to get to know us.

We can join our children in their interests, bring them to parties and sleepovers, talk to them on the way to school. It is important for us to be there with them and for them during significant events.

It’s not enough to talk or pay attention to our children only in our free time. Let us *make* time for them. We can set regular times to meet, talk, and have fun together. We can choose to be there for them, even if it can be a challenge financially. Regular chat time leads to better and more satisfying relationships with our kids.

Spending time with each child is necessary, especially if siblings have different temperaments, interests, and capabilities. Let us help each child find his or her passion, support their participation, and give them the time and attention necessary for them to feel loved and valued.

As much as we can, let us give each child equal time and energy in their work, play, or other efforts.

**Make a Weekly Family Schedule**

We all say we want to make time for family, but many of us think that because we are in the same house as our children, we are already spending time together. Spending time with each other means face-to-face interaction. It is about talking to each other about what was pleasant or bad about the day.

Scheduling time with each child daily—for even twenty or thirty minutes, during an afternoon snack or dinner—can strengthen the bond and increase connections between our children and us.
Without a schedule, we can do so many different things outside the house and may forget our most important responsibility.

Our children will want to be with us during their first ten to twelve years. Let us make the most out of this period, because once our kids become teenagers, they will likely want to spend more time with their friends.

Spending more time with our children will increase the chances of our influence in their life, and may influence them in regulating their use of technology. Eventually, this time we spend with them may help influence them in achieving the life goals that they set for themselves.

Following is a sample plan for a working mother to divide her day:

- Self-care: 2 hours
- Spouse: 1 hour
- Children: 3 hours
- Career: 7 hours
- Home management: 1 hour
- Recreation/Sport: 1 hour
- Night Rest: 7 hours
- Parents/Friends: 1 hour
- Apostolate/Civic Work: 1 hour

Children also need structure. We can work out a schedule with each child to increase the chance that all required activities will be carried out.

Normally, our children might spend too much time on one activity. One child might spend too much time playing, another might spend too much time on Facebook. A printed schedule reminds them of what they have to do at particular times.

Keeping track of our children’s schedule also prevents us from constantly having to remind them to focus on things. Instead, we gently say, “Where are you in your schedule now? Do you need help in anything? Is there something you want to change in your schedule? Let’s work it out.”

Aside from weekdays, a weekend schedule can also help regulate our kids’ time. A schedule prevents them from watching TV or gaming the whole day. Our children will likely have more computer time over weekends, but they should also learn to regulate their time. They need to read books, play with their friends, chat with family members, study, and rest.

**B—BUILDING SELF-WORTH**

We need to be reassuring with our kids when they are able to regulate their Internet/gadget use. We can say, “You’re improving in managing the use of Facebook.
That way you’ll have more time to do your other interests. Good job!”

Or we can also say: “I really appreciate your concern to balance time for studies and your time online.”

Catch them when they do something positive. Don’t just tell them off when they do something undesirable. Make sure to something when they’re doing good.

What We Can Say

1. **Demonstrate acceptance.**
   
   We can say, “We all make mistakes. We all spend more time on the computer than we need to at times. What can we do to avoid it next time?”

2. **Show confidence.**
   
   We can say, “It’s hard to balance computer time with studies. That’s a rough one, but I’m sure you’ll work it out.”

3. **Affirm contribution.**
   
   We can say, “It was admirable of you to cut computer time by thirty minutes,” or “Thanks, I really appreciate your effort to make time for your studies and to regulate your Facebook time.”

4. **Recognize effort.**
   
   We can say, “It looks as if you really worked hard at studying the editorials on the newspaper. How do you feel about it?”

   Or, “I’m glad you are making time to join us for dinner rather than eating alone in front of the computer.”

   Or even, “You may not feel that you’ve reached your goal, but look how far you’ve come. You now spend thirty fewer minutes on games. That’s thirty more minutes to write your essay!”

C—COMMUNICATE REGULARLY AND WELL

It’s important to keep lines of communication open. When the opportunity arises, ask kids what they enjoy about their Internet activities.

We can practice empathy by putting ourselves in the shoes of our children. We can try to feel what they feel, try to see what they see.

We can practice paraphrasing as well, in order to listen more effectively. What our children say in 100 words, we can paraphrase into ten. This is an effective technique that helps let our children know that we are listening.

We can end our restatements with the line, “Did I get that right?” so that our children can validate our understanding of what they have just said.

We can also practice reflective listening by completing the following line: “You seem
to feel __________ because __________.

In this way, our kids feel that they are being heard.

To keep communication lines open, we need to provide opportunities for interaction. While taking them to or picking them up from school, we can ask questions such as “What was good about today?”, “What was fun in school?”, “What do you look forward to?”, “Any new friends you met today?”, “How much homework do you have?”, “What is the latest in computer games? Why do you like it? What’s nice about it?”

Ask questions that are not answerable by a simple yes or no. Employ questions that will prompt more explanation.

Let us avoid sermonizing. Our tone is friendly, non-judgmental and non-sarcastic. This will go a long way in enhancing the relationship with our children.

» Use I-messages

We can use I-messages to communicate our positive feelings as well as those that bother us. I-messages focuses on the parent, not the child. I-messages do not assign blame on the child.

First, we describe the undesirable behavior. (“When you leave the computer turned on at night …”)

Second, we state our feelings about the consequences of the behavior for us. (“I feel worried …”)

Third, we relate the consequences. (“Because the computer can break down. A computer left running also increases our electric bill.”)

Fourth, make the request. (“So please switch off the computer after you finish working. I am confident you will cooperate with us.”)

We must stop verbally attacking our children. (“You’re spending too much time on the computer and you’re going to fail your test in school! You might even repeat a grade level!”)

Here is what we can say instead, keeping the I-message in mind: “When you spend six hours on the computer every day, I worry that you might not achieve your academic goals, and you might get upset. I am confident that you can achieve your goals, but your computer time might prevent you from attaining the objectives that you have set for yourself. Am I right? Should I be worried?”

» Be Sincere

There are ways in which we can enroll our kids to new behavior when they behave in undesirable ways regarding computer or Internet use. We can ask our kids sincerely what they enjoy about their computer activities. This is a question that they do not expect since it doesn’t have any sermonizing elements in it. This can get them off-balance, since our interest in their hobbies may surprise them. They might be more willing to tell us all about their interests because of this. In turn, we can also more easily understand why they spend
so much time on their gadgets.

Very extensive and almost addictive use of technology may be a sign that our children have needs that must be fulfilled. We’ll want to know what these needs are and see if we can assist in filling them or providing alternatives to gadgets or computer use.

For instance, if our child says, “I have no one to talk to, that’s why I am chatting with my friends on the Internet.” This is a cue for us to help provide our child face-to-face contact with other children. We can call up one of your child’s friends and schedule a play date.

When we ask our children about their interests, we really have to be unbiased and sincere. We can’t fake this; otherwise, our kids won’t trust us and they won’t tell us about these interests.

Sincerity and openness create a positive relationship, which will be helpful when we need to influence or convince them in much more serious matters in the future.

The disadvantages of extensive technology use must come from our children. Insights are not as effective if they come from us. Children tune out sermons, but if they reflect on the disadvantages for themselves, they are more disposed to accept them.

Of course, we can guide our children and lead the way, but consequences are more effective if the realization comes from them.

Discuss Goals

We can ask our children about their goals in life. We can encourage them to dream big and enjoy the process of working toward their dreams. The clearer the goals are, the better.

Then we can ask, “How does your gadget use help you achieve your goal?” Note that the question is phrased positively (as opposed to “How does gaming get in the way of your dreams?”)

If things go as planned, our children may realize on their own that excessive technology use is getting in the way of their goals. This can be a light-bulb moment, and it then becomes easier for them to change their behavior accordingly.

If not, then we can ask, “If you can make a change in your Facebook time or gadget use, what might happen?” Again, the question is meant for our children to think for themselves rather than our telling them what to do.

Finally, we can ask our children, “What changes would you like to make?” We allow our children to come up with ideas on this, adding our own suggestions only after they have finished.

The most effective strategies are those that fulfill the needs we mentioned earlier.

D—DISCIPLINE WITH LOVE

To discipline means to teach and to instruct. It is our role as parents to have our children exhibit desirable, appropriate behavior. Discipline does not mean shouting and
spanking.

In our book *Helping Our Children Do Well In School*, we reiterate that discipline encourages our children to be considerate of others, to be responsible for themselves, and to function well in society.

Discipline is not punishment, threat, or humiliation. With good discipline, children grow up confident, conscious of their actions, and responsible for them.

Children need discipline when they break house rules agreed upon by the family. We need to ensure that the method of discipline is compatible with age and personality.

Many problems can be prevented by giving our children choices versus dictating to them. Good discipline includes giving our children choices within appropriate limits. They need to experience some control over various areas in their lives and have choices.

For instance, we can say to our four-year-old, “Do you want to watch thirty minutes of *Blue’s Clues* or *Sesame Street*?”

When faced with choices, children usually feel valued and responsible. They become more cooperative because we give them a chance to participate in the process of selection. When they choose wisely, they feel competent and are less likely to engage in misbehavior. When children (especially teens) feel they are not given choices, they get discouraged and frustrated and will tend to rebel.

If we tell our high-school teens, “The Internet connection will be shut down at 9 p.m., you have to be asleep by that time,” without consulting or discussing those house rules with them, then we will likely be countered with rebellion.

Most high-school students nowadays do school work using the Internet. Instead of dictating, it is best to use an I-message: “I am worried about your sleeping late. Is it possible if we shut down the router by 9:30 p.m.? Will this give you enough time for your school work and online activities? Can we try this out for one week?”

This way, we may get the cooperation of our teens, saving us from unnecessary conflicts and misbehavior. Usually, we can no longer impose ourselves and our rules on children who are thirteen years old and older.

»Script

To help us in disciplining, it is helpful if our children have their long-term, lifelong goals. Take this real-life case, involving Pat (not his real name), the son of Maribel’s friends.

Pat had a goal to graduate high school with honors, and he had the capability to do so. However, Pat was addicted to the TV and the computer. He would eat his meals in front of the screen. He would spend so much time on these devices that his parents felt he was not going to achieve his goal.

Being responsible parents, they gave their son feedback over a dinner date in his favorite pasta restaurant. The conversation went this way:
Dad: I see that you enjoy watching NBA basketball games on TV. It must be so much fun and exciting watching them.

Pat: Yeah! Lebron James is so explosive, he’s an amazing player.

Dad: Yeah, I know he’s an amazing player! But I have a concern, I noticed that you’ve been watching a lot of these games, and I am worried about the goal that you set for yourself, which is to graduate with honors. I know you need time for relaxation, but at the rate you are watching these programs, what do you think is the effect of this on your goal?

Pat: Oh, yeah, Dad, you’re right, the other day I got an 85, but I knew I could’ve gotten a 95, if only I had managed my TV time.

Dad: Oh, okay, thanks for letting me know. So you also think that TV time has to be managed? What are your suggestions? What are your plans?

Pat: I still want to graduate with honors, so maybe I will try cutting down my time on Facebook by thirty minutes and put these thirty minutes into studying. I still want to watch those NBA games, though. What are your thoughts, Dad?

Dad: Yeah, that sounds good. Would you like to experiment doing this for about two weeks this third quarter?

Pat: Okay. Let’s try it out.

Dad: Let’s have a burger dinner two weeks from now and see what happens.

When we talk in a respectful, friendly way, our children are more receptive and it’s easier to get their cooperation.

**E—ENHANCE OUR RELATIONSHIP WITH OUR PARTNER**

In our zeal to become good parents, we often forget to take care of our other relationship: that with our spouse. A date once a week (without the kids) works wonders, so does an annual couple vacation. We can start by making sure that we take the time and effort to communicate with our spouse every day.

In our digital world, a frequent source of conflict between husband and wife concerns gaming. The husband often wants to play games (and involve the kids in such play), while the wife worries about the consequences.

What can we do in this situation?

*Dad:* It’s fine with me if our kids play computer games. *Mom:* No, they are playing too much. Four hours a day is too much.

*Dad:* Okay, I hear that four hours is a lot for you. What do you suggest?

*Mom:* They can play computer games, but we may need to help them reduce the time eventually to two hours a day. By the way, two hours includes Facebook time also.
Dad: Two hours! They will complain! How do you plan to achieve that? Yes, I know two hours is best for them … but I do not know how to get them to do this.

Mom: I am glad you say two hours is enough. At least we both agree on this. We need to find out why they love gaming so much, and then offer alternative activities. We need to speak with them gently.

**Social Networking**

Spending too much time on social networks is worrisome, but with the right tone and message, we can work things out, with our children’s cooperation.

Dad: Honey, I see you enjoy computers a lot. I am curious, which activity do you like the most?

Daughter: I like chatting online the most. I continue to connect with my friends even after school. I have no one to talk to at home since you are all still at work. So I chat with my friends on Facebook.

Mom: Okay, I see you enjoy connecting with your friends more when we are not at home. But I am worried about the amount of time you use on the computer. Many times we are home and we do not have dinner together. Is it possible to have dinner together at least three times a week?

Daughter: Okay, three times a week sounds good.

Dad: We will come home earlier so we can have more time to talk. What do you think?

**Off-line Rather Than Online**

What if our children prefer to chat online rather than face to face?

Mom: Wow, you’re so techie, you’re using the computer to chat with me! I enjoy our chat.

Son: Yeah, many of my friends do this. Some even use their cell phones even if they’re beside each other.

Mom: Yeah, I heard that from my friends as well, that their children communicate with them using cell phones or the computer even if they’re near each other. I wonder, why is that so?

Son: Oh, it’s cool mom! We’re so techie!

Mom: Yeah, I know it’s techie, but you know, I would really prefer it if we talk face to face, because I like hearing your voice, seeing your facial expression, and stuff like that. There’s so much I don’t see or hear if we talk just on Facebook. I miss those times when we would chat and laugh. I think chatting online is good for those who cannot make time for each
other, but I think that we can make time for each other off-line. So why
don’t we chat over lunch or dinner at your favorite burger place?

Son: Burger? Let’s go, Mom!
RAISING DIGITAL CITIZENS

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) strongly recommends no screen time for children below two years of age. I learned about this in my graduate class, and at first, it sounded absurd!

But when my pediatrician observed that my son Migo, who was a year old then, loved to explore and move around in the clinic, the doctor told me to remove any form of multimedia from his routines, so as not to boost his hyperactivity.

To be honest, this was really a struggle. I had to deal with my parents, who looked after Migo then, and would usually tune in to TV. It took a lot of explaining and getting used to not having TV or videos, but we got there.

When Migo turned two, I chose VCDs that were appropriate for his development. Why videos? They have a set viewing time, they are handy, and we parents, even if at work, are in control of what our child watched, as compared to TV or cable TV.

My husband Koots and I opted for shows without aggressive content: no fight scenes, just pure child-friendly programs. The same principles applied to Maia (three years old, as of this writing).

DIFFERENT PERSONALITIES

Raising a child is one thing, raising a second one complicates matters. Maia was born when Migo was exactly two years and eleven months. Since I was very particular with Migo’s every developmental milestones, I thought I knew what to expect with Maia.

But my two kids are totally different in their personality, attachment, and learning styles. Migo uses more visual and auditory skills as he explores. On the other hand, Maia instinctively learns by moving around. She has a gift for motor skills and movements.

Tuning in to their unfolding skills, personalities, and interests, and accepting their uniqueness early on have made it easier for me to respond to my kids’ needs.

When Maia was almost a year old and Migo, almost four and starting preschool, I gave up my full-time work as a school counselor and decided to devote myself to my two kids.

My knowledge of developmental psychology helped me learn what to expect from my kids. I may not be too keen on keeping them busy all the time, but their having time to play and explore are essential.

Maia literally grew up when I was working online most of the time. I contributed articles for online sites like smartparenting.com.ph. I kept my own blog and maintained an online shop. I would breastfeed Maia and she would play beside me while I was busy on my laptop. Maia would see me working on the computer, almost daily. But I never expose my daughter to any videos that many kids her age view on the Internet. Maia will watch them when we feel she is ready.

Since we are in the midst of training and managing Migo in his multimedia use, we
thought that doing the same with Maia would not be difficult. So we just followed the set patterns we had established with Migo and consistently implemented them.

But we noticed that when Migo had his video time, Maia would naturally go sit beside her kuya (older brother) and watch. What should I do with the AAP’s strong recommendation of no screen time for kids younger than two? Maia would not want to be anywhere else except beside her brother. So to balance things, we engage the kids in conversation when they watch. Migo was then into Barney, Dora, Blue’s Clues, Diego, Handy Manny, and Hi-5. Though still not ideal for our growing girl, such choices are acceptable to us.

Whenever our kids would watch, the differences in their personalities and learning styles are evident. Migo would be intent in watching, even if the children on screen were being asked to jump, dance or hop.

Maia, as early as two, would be physically engaged. She would jump, when Dora said “Salta!” She would sing and dance to the groove in Hi-5. She would sing along with whatever the kids on Barney were singing.

Yes, Maia is an engaged viewer. Videos are good for her since she copies the moves and the beats of whatever she watches. At this time, she is learning about the world, and videos are just a tool for her to do so.

IMITATION

When he was younger, Migo did not know about superheroes then; he preferred cars. But when he was six years old, he discovered Transformers. Since he is into cars and all, Koots and I thought that maybe we could slowly introduce Migo to TV programs like Transformers that had fight scenes.

But after about a week of watching, we observed our son doing a lot of kicking, jumping, and fighting, most often toward his sister. The same thing happened with the Angry Birds mobile game, which he only played on weekends on my sister’s iPhone, for only ten minutes.

I even heard Migo holding a stuffed toy one time, telling his sister, “Maia, I’ll throw this at you and then you cry … Hiyaaaaa!”

Just bits and pieces of multimedia programs with aggressive undertones had made my son act in this manner. How much more would his behavior be affected, I wondered, if he were constantly wired to this kind of program?

Raising young children in the age of multimedia is doubly hard. A question from Migo: “Mom, how come my classmates have Facebook [accounts]? When will I be allowed?” I told him that Facebook is for thirteen-year-olds and older, but it was a struggle to explain why even if some kids his age have it, he cannot have an account yet.

Another question: “Mom, when can we have a PSP? I saw some kids playing it and I really like it.” I had to take him aside and discuss why his toys are much cooler than handheld game consoles.

And then another question: “Mom, when I’m using the computer, can I check out
some videos on YouTube that I want to watch?” I really needed to pause and think about my answers rather than simply saying no. I explained to my inquisitive boy that while there are some videos that he likes, he cannot just access YouTube whenever he wants to. YouTube is not really meant for children, and so he can access some videos only with us parents or grandparents.

My answers seemed to have satisfied him, because he did not pursue these topics further. I believe that it is our role as parents to actually discuss with our children why certain rules apply and why they are important.

Children would not accept a simple no. They will ask why repeatedly, so gauging what is developmentally appropriate at each stage is important.

**DIGITAL NATIVES**

When Migo was growing up, he used to stay during daytime at my mom’s house, where there was no Internet connection. But Maia stays most of the time at home where there is Wi-Fi connection. My in-laws, who live just next door also have Wi-Fi. They are tech-savvy and have their own desktop that my kids often use. Maia also grew up when smart phones and tablets hit the market.

When Maia was two, as she was looking at the circular arrow on the computer screen, she exclaimed, “Oh it’s buffering!” At two years old! It tickled me then, proof that she is a true digital citizen.

Maia also grew up interested in taking pictures. She got that habit from my two sisters, her titas. When they get together, it is a must for her to use her titas’ iPhones to take “pi-chur” and use the PopBooth app. It is really cute when kids explore and take funny poses of themselves, without the consciousness of selfies! At this point, taking pictures is part of her childhood development.

At three, Maia knows how to change the colors of the photos. When I take pictures of her artwork, she would say, “Oh Mom, this is nice! Put it on Facebook na!”

When Migo would have privileged time to use the tablet or the computer, Maia would demand the same thing. “But Migo had his turn!” she would say. The pressure is on us! So if Migo was allowed about ten to twenty minutes online, Maia would be allowed half the time.

We give a little, yet we put limits on what is still age-appropriate for our kids.

We live in an age of electronic media, but building lasting relationships, carving out family time, and developing our kids to the fullest of their capacity are our top priorities. It is tempting to hand each kid a gadget so they can sit still and we can have precious time for ourselves. This tactic can work on some occasions, but together with Koots, I try hard not to give in to that kind of culture in our home.

How do we regulate our child’s multimedia use?

1. **Only two hours a day**

Now that Migo and Maia are older, we stick to the recommended maximum of two
hours of screen time a day. They watch videos for an hour (they take turns choosing the show), they spend ten to twenty minutes on the computer to play really slow games, and play for about fifteen minutes on the tablet. No gadgets can be used after dinner onward.

2. Everyone’s cooperation

We set the rules with the kids and communicate these to all members of the household: the yaya (nanny), the grandparents next door, my sisters, and my mom at whose house the kids visit during weekends. We are all on the same page in regulating screen time for the kids.

3. Consistent implementation

Do our kids ever go over the allotted time? Oh, yes! During those instances that they want more screen time (for watching videos or playing apps), we do give them extra time. But then we remove their screen privileges the next time. The kids agree to this without whining.

4. Gadgets as privileges

Migo is conscientious in asking permission to use the computer. He would ask permission from us when at home or call us when we’re out. We often remind our kids that gadgets and electronic media are a privilege; there are other important things to learn and do without them. During family dates, we try not to bring our tablet or have a mobile phone on hand.

5. Age-appropriate programs

In choosing videos, we do not just pick the ones that are said to be child-friendly. We pick programs containing values and those that are interactive. We also pick those with slow-paced scenes in order for our children to focus well.

   Call it primitive, but my kids still opt to watch good ol’ Barney, the creative and energetic Hi-5, Dora and Diego, Handy Manny, Angelina Ballerina. Their favorite movies are Toy Story, Cars, Nemo, and A Bug’s Life.

   Our trusted helper comments that while our kids watch these videos over and over again, they still laugh out loud as if watching them for the first time.

   I find it a relief our kids do not find these shows boring. We have not yet introduced them to the advanced, fast-paced, and complex programs not fit for them at this stage.

6. Appropriate apps

We have one tablet at home that I use. I allow my kids to use some apps and games on it. If they do not like a game anymore, then we delete it and replace it with a new one.

   Of course, I have to approve first the games my children request me to download. This is a win-win set-up. Kids have a dose of approved apps, while we regulate their use.
**MIGO TODAY**

Instead of feeling bored, Migo can now sustain independent play and spend his time in his make-believe world, creating vehicles, villages, and racetracks out of his Legos, Hot Wheels, and even his small Transformer figures. He challenges us with card games such as Battle Cards, and plays chess, and other board games. He also doodles pictures of cars and people.

Migo and Maia fool around and play make-believe games, and both of them love to read.

In school, Migo does not seem to feel deprived because he does not have his own gadget, Facebook account, or even cable TV. Migo is a happy and eager learner. When he finished Prep, he graduated with honors and was named “Mr. Innovator,” since he would creatively share ideas with the class, and contribute helpful suggestions. For Koots and me, this was a worthy recognition, describing the kind of student and learner our son was.

Migo loves actively playing with neighborhood kids. Together with his friends, Migo would bike in the streets (under the watchful eye of adults), play hide-and-seek with them, swim in inflatable pools, race, catch insects, play tag, and make up their own silly yet creative games.

**MAIA TODAY**

Maia is the type who does not just sit still. She is not hyper; there is direction, coordination and focus in her movements as she speaks. Maia loves to dance. She would say, “I don’t like it, I love it!” as she copies dance steps in Hi-5 and Angelina Ballerina. When she saw the UAAP cheer dancing competition, she was glued to the TV, saying, “I like that! I will practice doing that!” She dances with poise, grace, confidence, and contentment.

Maia attended ballet class once a week in the summer of 2013. The teacher says she’s a natural, which confirms our observations on our daughter’s innate gift for balance and movement. No wonder she goes around the house on tiptoes!

Maia is fond of singing, too. She listens to Disney songs and my old Lea Salonga favorites. Whenever she is allowed computer time with her lola (grandmother), they would view videos or download music from Sound of Music, Disney classics, Strawberry Shortcake, Hi-5, and others appropriate for her age. All these things have become her tools to dance, sing, and learn.

While Maia likes to move, she is also into arts. If not busying her feet dancing, she busies her hands doodling, writing, drawing, coloring, cutting, painting, pasting, or using clay. At three years of age, Maia can color almost within the lines. She can also write her name.

She can be messy, but we allow her to be. She loves to pretend as a princess, a ballerina, a fairy, or a cheerleader.

Maia has also good language skills for her age. She can speak her mind well and comments on things around her. Now that Maia is starting Kinder, the teachers say she is
very participative in class. She can talk to anyone, kids and adults alike. It is easy for her not only to greet, but also to start a conversation with family, playmates, and familiar people around her. I even have to coach her at times to speak only when she is allowed to. She has lots of stories to share and likes to hear stories, too. She likes being read to, and she can mimic the voices of the characters of the stories we read to her.

Neither Migo nor Maia resists much when we ask them to turn off videos, or when we remind them that tablet time is up. Of course, there are the “one more minute” requests, and they do ask repeatedly if they will be allowed to play or download something.

But it’s how children are!

While we do not know what new questions, requests, or concerns we will encounter as Migo and Maia grow older, we are certain that we have started establishing in them what we consider important: a love for learning and reading, fair use of multimedia, and the value of play.

We have a long way to go. We do not know how much more complex technology may become, but we will do our best as parents to raise our children in the most balanced and healthy way we can.
Why We Need to Say No Sometimes

IN OUR SURVEY, 58 percent of respondents say that having lots of money to buy the things they want makes them feel good. This is not surprising, and in fact, is quite expected in today’s challenging world. But when we give in to our children’s every desire, we are doing them a disservice. They may grow up spoiled, entitled, narcissistic, and miserable.

“Constant fulfilment of desire is the enemy of both satisfaction and gratitude,” says clinical psychologist Wendy Mogel in her book *The Blessing of a B Minus*.

Citing studies that surprisingly show that teen happiness is inversely related to parental income, Mogel says that children from middle-class families report the highest level of happiness, while upper-class children report the least.

The main reason? “Privileged children, deprived of deep longing, consequently are deprived of deep satisfaction.”

“Entitlement kills enthusiasm,” says American psychologist Madeline Levine in her book *Teach Your Children Well*. Levine is a co-founder of Challenge Success, a program at the Stanford School of Education that tackles student well-being and parent education.

If we constantly give in to what our children want without setting reasonable limits, then our children will never feel the joy of achieving things for themselves.

“If your child wants for nothing, then there is nothing to strive for, no desire, and no possibility of feeling happily satiated,” says Levine.

Unfortunately, this philosophy is easy to say, but hard to do.

How do we know when to give in and when to stand firm? There is no standard way for every parent or every teen, and we learn best by trial and error.

**LESS IS MORE**

“Generally with teens, less is more,” says Mogel.

Mogel suggests mantras such as: “Creativity blossoms when it faces limits. A sonnet is fourteen lines; a haiku, just three. When water is allowed to sprinkle it loses pressure, but when it is channelled through a hose the flow is more powerful.”

Mogel describes a cartoon from the *New Yorker*, where a mother watches her adolescent daughter sit on a floor, surrounded by an electric guitar, a computer, two books, an easel, and even a ball of yarn and needles.

The caption? “Maybe if your creativity had fewer outlets, it would come out of you with more force.”

**GOOD TO BE BORED**
None of us want our children to suffer, but these days, we don’t even want them to be uncomfortable or bored. If our children are bored, we immediately push tablets into their hands, and pat ourselves on the back for keeping the little ones quiet. If our children do not listen to the teacher in class and cannot understand the lesson, we hire tutors for them to do their homework after school.

“It’s good for adolescents to be bored, lonely, disappointed, frustrated, and unhappy,” says Mogel.

In the real world they are certain to face disappointments, and we want them to learn early on that they are capable of dealing with problems.

“When we intervene to prevent the pain of tough situations, we create a reflex,” says Mogel. “Whenever the child feels any sadness or confusion, frustration or disappointment, she believes she cannot survive the feeling. If teenagers don’t have an opportunity to recognize their bad feelings or problems and learn to manage them, they … seek out quick, reliable methods to make the pain disappear.”

Teens turn to drugs, alcohol, sex, even overwork, Internet addiction, and many other inappropriate ways to deaden the pain. They turn to anything, except facing the problem and grappling with it.

**IT’S NOT ABOUT YOU**

Ultimately, saying no sometimes is not for us. It is for our kids.

“[No] doesn’t bite,” says writer Denise Schipani, who dubs herself as Mean Mom, in her book *Mean Moms Rule: Why Doing the Hard Stuff Now Creates Good Kids Later*.

“It can have a bite, but the sting fades much more quickly than you might think,” she continues. “If you give in to yes all the time, not only does it inevitably lose its power … but it also causes you to forget, assuming you ever truly knew it, that no is pretty darn great all by itself.”

When we try so hard to make the world perfect for our kids, we need to caution ourselves: Is the whole shebang more about us or about our kids? Because perhaps, secretly, do we believe that our kids are a reflection of us?

If they are happy, then we are good parents. If they are not, then we must not be.

Schipani is forthright: “Say no. Smile. Don’t apologize. Repeat as necessary.”

“An overuse of the word yes—and its cousin, the ‘have it all/have it now’ attitude—is turning us, the parents, into giant blobs of mush,” Schipani says. “And it is turning our kids into entitled tots who think the world is theirs with zero effort required. A few well-placed and well-timed no’s—those that fit in with your values and your goals—are like spinach to kids. Tough to eat at first, but they grow up to love it, and are all the stronger for having swallowed it.”

If we spoil our kids, the consequences can be dire. We end up with people who cannot bear to be criticized, who don’t feel thankful for what they have, who don’t respect us and others, who in the final analysis end up not respecting themselves either.
If we are inconsistent and tentative—saying yes when we want to say no—we are not exactly the best guides for our kids.

“What [they] have … is a total lack of good example, of the kind of quiet, surefooted modelling that creates kids who do respect themselves, trust their emotions, and feel secure in their own minds, hearts, and homes,” says Schipani. “If they have no immediate example of self-respect, how are they ever going to gain it for themselves?”

We also end up with kids who, sadly, are not truly motivated to do their best.

“If [the parent] absorbs and excuses their failures, why would they need to try harder to avoid failing to begin with?” asks Schipani.

**TAKE CHARGE**

Being a good parent does not mean becoming aloof and distant. It does not believe that “children should be seen but not heard.” It does not use physical punishment, such as spanking, to strike fear so that children behave. Being a good parent means that we are in charge, and that includes being loving parents.

What is wrong with being our children’s *barkada* (buddies)? Sadly, many parents are even happy to say that what they do is not parenting per se, but peer-enting.

Well, being a peer means going down to their level, and while this is not wrong in terms of, say, teaching them arithmetic, it is a time bomb waiting to explode when we relate to them emotionally.

“Digging into their dramas, adding to the dramas, becoming a part of their world in an unhealthy way,” says Schipani. “Unhealthy because it puts you too far into the picture of your kids’ lives, and because it leaves a vacancy at the top, at the spot where someone—the parent!—needs to be in control.”

Control. That is the magic word. And we are often scared to wield it, afraid our kids will think we are tyrants. Or perhaps we are afraid of being left out. Sometimes we give our children gadgets not just because they succumb to the pressure of their peers, but also because we succumb to *our* pressure.

We lose control and relinquish it to our kids for various reasons. Perhaps we found our own parents too strict, and we swore to be nicer to our kids. Perhaps our kids are the repositories of our unrealized dreams, and we want to redo our own childhood. Perhaps we simply do not realize the insidious yet clever ways that advertisers of cell phones and tablets hook us and our kids.

Really, are we *that* gullible?

**We need to resist the urge to buy our children’s affection with devices, just because everyone else does so.**

Okay, perhaps not us parents. Hopefully, we didn’t buy the newest iPhone just because it supposedly has features we cannot live without.
But our kids most likely are not aware of how much effort goes into marketing each device, from “Unli” (unlimited texts/calls/Internet surfing) plans to freebies to the coolest look. We need to teach them to resist the lure of commercials. Is that feature really necessary? (Most likely not.) What is the warranty on that new device? What goes into the pricing of gadgets?

**KIDS AS PROJECTS**

We see our kids as projects. “We are so hyperaware of … every aspect of our child’s life that … we treat them as proto-equals whose opinions we want to solicit, believing that doing so will make them smarter and more capable,” says Schipani. “When all it does is leave them confused—and sometimes infantilized.

“If you catch yourself thinking that you have to jam more stuff… so that your child doesn’t fall behind, stop yourself,” Schipani says. “There’s simply no such thing as ‘falling behind.’”

Especially when it comes to technology. Gadgets today are so easy to use even for our children. Sure, some skills are harder, such as programming, creating, re-tooling, but frankly, practically everybody does the easy ones: gaming, social networking, tweeting.

What happens if we keep on following what other parents do with their kids? We “end up confused, dizzy, possibly miserable, and potentially cash-poor,” says Schipani.

We need to resist the urge to buy our children’s affection with devices, just because everyone else does so. When we resist our version of peer pressure, then our children can more readily find the courage and the will to resist theirs.

“Being in control is sometimes being uncool. But … the uncool-est parents raise the coolest kids.”

**LONG-TERM**

If we regulate our children’s media use, in the short term there may be tantrums and suffering. But in the long term, we will help our children develop into responsible people who can control media, and not the other way around.

If children are loved, with human attention and care given to them, then they are less likely to clamor for electronic devices.

“Adults are connecting more and more to devices, both at home and in the workplace,” pediatric occupational therapist Cris Rowan tells *BrainWorld* magazine. “In the absence of a functional attachment to an adult, children will attach to devices.”

In the end, all of us want the same thing: to bequeath to our children, in Schipani’s words, “the internal wherewithal to define their own hopes and dreams, plans and schemes.”
NESY SPEAKS
SAYING NO

We live in a “yes” culture where we think our job is to make our children feel good, happy, and entertained. We believe that they should not encounter difficulties or be rejected because they will lose their self-confidence.

One of the stumbling blocks we face on a daily basis is saying no and the ensuing battle of the wills that go with it. With a lot of resolve, it is possible to avoid saying no. With a bit of creativity, it is possible to substitute a yes for a no.

BABY

It may sound mean to say that the “no” word should start from the crib, but I have my pediatrician to thank for that.

As a baby, my son Ged was put on a regular feeding schedule instead of feeding on demand. Feeding was done on a three-hour schedule. Initially, I had to bear with the crying which was really heartrending for a new mother, but I found ways of soothing a fussy infant: gentle rocking, a bit of singing, soft murmuring. A plain, good old pacifier also did the trick.

The pacifier was rejected at first, but with time, my baby developed a friendship with it. Without even saying no, baby Ged had his firsthand experience with delayed gratification and the concept of following a schedule, which in later life would help us keep our sanity in this fast-paced world.

According to some experts, the average toddler hears the word “no” an overwhelming 400 times a day! I used to feel bad about saying no but, in time, I realized that it just has to be said.

“No” is part of the landscape when we set rules and limits so that our children will learn to be responsible and aware that there are consequences to their actions.

But the use of the word “no” undergoes a transformation with the gradual evolution of the infant to a child, a teen, and all the way to adulthood. The matters or issues that we say no to become more complex as the individual matures. The important thing is for our children to realize early on that “no”—whether spoken or implicit—is a part of life and they just have to learn to deal with it.

AT HOME

A telecommunications company uses the slogan “The strongest connections are at home” to market its products. Though the ads promote digital immersion, the catchline is a good groundwork for successful parenting.

Establishing a strong family bond by creating a close relationship with our children will make it easier for us to guide them properly so that they will be well-equipped to handle the outside world.
Much of disciplining requires a “no”. If done badly, sometimes it carries with it an undertone of being mean, cruel, or uncaring. Sometimes it may even elicit a “You don’t love me anymore” response. But if the connection between parent and child is strong, the “no” is understood by the child not as a sign of rejection, but a means of correction.

Connections are stronger if we spend time together with our children. This gives both parties the opportunity to communicate and discover things about each other.

Being a stay-at-home mom was a privilege that I made good use of, spending the majority of my time in guiding and nurturing my son even if I had a full-time caregiver.

It was by no means an easy task, because from the time Ged woke up to the time he slept, it was like being in an arena where a battle of wills takes place.

TERRIBLE TWOS

It is normal for a toddler to assert himself and try to see how far he can go. The second year of life is not called “terrible twos” for nothing. I soon found out that there is an art to saying no: Reframe it into a yes.

Back then, we lived in a townhouse and had a good number of kids around Ged’s age as neighbors: The sound of kids playing in the patio after lunch was like the Pied Piper’s flute. My son would always ask to join them in play.

“Mom, can I go out to play?”

“Yes, but you have to take a nap first.” I explained briefly the benefits of taking a nap.

It is instinctive to reply, “No, not now” but that normally leads to a long litany of “Whys?” which can be exasperating. In simple instances like this, the “yes” made a lot of difference in my son dutifully carrying out the scheduled nap.

At times it took an inordinate amount of patience to get across a point, because the discussion could be punctuated with whining, a bit of crying, and some negotiation. Giving at most two options to choose from was effective, because it made toddler Ged feel that he had some power over the situation.

For example, on days when he was not in the mood for the scheduled nap, I asked him to choose between two quiet indoor activities: storytelling or drawing.

Doing so was far better than getting into an endless argument on “Why do I have to sleep when I am not sleepy?”

TUNING IN

“Mama’s boy” was a label I was concerned about because of my closeness to my son, but Ged was equally close to his dad, which was a blessing.

I realized my fear was baseless, because when we enrolled him in nursery school at the age of three, Ged was the one who set the role that I was to play in the new chapter of his life.

He said that I should just drop him off at nursery school just like a school bus, go
home, and just pick him up at dismissal time. I was floored by this but very relieved that I did not have to deal with a clingy, crying little boy. I could feel Ged was trying to be brave and there were days when I could sense the anxiety as I brought him to school. With a little encouragement, he was all right.

Another privilege that I enjoyed in being a full-time mom was driving Ged to school every day. Sometimes my husband would pitch in, but I would say 70 percent of the driving duties fell onto my lap.

I did not consider this a chore because it was a very good time for Ged and I to connect with each other. The drive to school was an opportunity to condition him for the day ahead or to provide a confidence booster when he was faced with a challenging task.

The drive back was equally beneficial, because I could tune in to what needed to be done for the next day, plus the highs and the lows of the day and the playground adventures that Ged narrated with much enthusiasm.

Our chats were not a one-way street, because I would also share both light and heavy experiences of my day. The more serious ones I picked were those that I thought would enable him to be aware of the realities of life. My intention was not to scare him but to toughen him up. I was aware of my overprotectiveness and my way of helping him develop inner strength was through stories that would inspire him to be firm in spirit.

**SIMPLE LIFE**

Having a simple lifestyle is an advantage because there are fewer occasions to say no to. We explained to Ged that he cannot buy everything he wants because we are not rich. But we are comfortable. Comfortable meant we could give him a good education, holidays when we could afford it, exposure to sports like taekwondo, basketball, swimming, to see where his interests lay.

As a toddler, Ged grew up with Sesame Street, Batibot, and Disney as part-time babysitters—but with me around. I realized the hypnotic factor of television when I saw Ged one day behind the TV set, trying to figure out how to open the box so that he could get the Popeye toy in a Jollibee commercial being proffered by a hand on the TV screen. The ad made him believe that the toy was inside the TV box and that he could get it if he opened it. It took a lot of explaining to get the message across on how television works.

That was when my husband and I decided that limits had to be set and once Ged entered the big school, TV viewing would be limited to weekends.

**GAMING**

Exposure to game consoles in school was rather strong as most of the kids had one, but it was a long process and a long time before we got Ged one. When the console broke down, we welcomed its demise and no amount of convincing could make us get another one.

The console and the games were very expensive, which was a good enough reason for our son not to insist on the matter. We explained that our priority then was to get a desktop
computer that Ged could use for school.

We tried as much as possible to involve our son in the purchase of gadgets so that he could better appreciate and take care of them properly. The cell phones he had owned through the years were simple ones and we got his first laptop when he was already a college junior.

It was my idea to get the laptop as backup for our old desktop when he started working on a major school paper. I was afraid the old computer would break down and all Ged’s hard work would go to waste.

In the two years of college when he had the laptop, Ged only brought it to school a couple of times for a class presentation. He felt the laptop was burdensome to tote around and taking notes was easier with the usual pen and notebook.

**BUSINESS VENTURE**

Addiction to games was never an issue with Ged and the one and only time he went to a gaming place was for an all-night birthday party. After an hour at the dark and noisy venue, he asked to be picked up, to the dismay of the host.

Ged did not buy into the craze of RPG/violent games that were played in Internet cafés. His interest was collecting action figures, something we had a hard time curbing.

The toys were accumulated treats from us, gifts from doting relatives and rewards for achievements. They were mostly action figures of superheroes, NBA players, and wrestling characters. Little did we know that this hobby, which started in high school, would develop into a business venture for him now.

Since we gave him a very modest allowance, Ged had to save up for his wants. He had to find a means to fast-track getting what he desired by earning his own money. He started out with selling sports items (such as baller bands) that were the fad then.

Eventually, Ged attended toy conventions and hooked up with toy shop owners and collectors who were mostly older than he. His father became his consultant in business matters, guiding our son to initially focus on building the foundation for good business ethics and developing a keen insight into the people he did business with. As Ged started quite early, his dad taught him that profit was to be earned the right way and that greed was not good for his business.

**SPIRITUALITY**

As parents, we need to be value-oriented, resolute, and patient. We have to be firm in instilling values and patient in waiting for the results of our efforts.

Spirituality is requisite to value formation, so prayer and eventually, going to church was part of our early lessons. The preparation for joining us at Mass on Sundays started with teaching our son the proper decorum in church. He was very well-behaved as a little boy. There was only one instance when he got fidgety at Mass, and a firm squeeze on his thigh from his dad, with no words uttered, solved the problem.
Devotion encouraged by the Ateneo Grade School, like the First Friday Mass in honor of the Sacred Heart, is a rite which Ged observes up to now.

The practice of religion is crucial in setting the tone for morality especially with the youth of this generation. Prayer is the quiet time that they need in their activity-filled world.

**ULTIMATE DECISION**

In the name of discipline, we went through thousands of “no’s” up to the time our child was mature. “No” is now in the form of advice and the ultimate decision is his.

I had lessened my nagging, because at a certain age, it no longer worked with my son. Keeping silent would take effort, but we continue to hope that what we have taught our son early on would bear fruit.

We felt that our exposing Ged to different sports at a young age was in vain, until we saw the result of our efforts. From a couch potato, Ged has become a health buff, involved in kickboxing, jiu-jitsu, and working out in the gym.

Ged is now a teacher, and even if we felt there were matters which could contribute to his growth in the profession (such as further studies), we held back from pressuring him. In 2012, he decided to pursue his master’s degree in Education at a pace that would allow him to work and do business at the same time.

Parenting is a long work in progress. We cannot rush it and no target date can be set for its accomplishment. We make efforts to guide our children toward the right path and we make mistakes along the way.

Nurturing a good relationship is a good foundation because discipline is best accomplished when the bond between parent and child is strong. Setting a good example should never be overrated because our children’s eyes are always on us. Always, always, be patient and persevere.
When Children Resent Gadget Rules

IN OUR SURVEY, these are students’ answers to the question: “Do your parents have rules about the following digital issues?”

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rule</th>
<th>% of Males Who Say Yes</th>
<th>% of Females Who Say Yes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Porn</td>
<td>60</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet time</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaming time</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Website content</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cell phone budget</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV/video time</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TV/video content</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Violence</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>44</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gaming content</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Music content</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Forty-eight percent and 44 percent of male and female students, respectively, say that their parents monitor them to see if they follow house rules. By the way, 82 percent of parent respondents say they monitor their children.

» NOT A POPULARITY CONTEST

We want to avoid our kids resenting us. But some resentment is inevitable. Parenting is not about being popular with our kids. Parenting is about guiding and setting rules and boundaries.

We need to make sure that our self-worth is in place and will not crumble when your kids start acting hostile. When we say no, it is normal for them to feel resentful and angry sometimes.

But we know it is our responsibility to enforce well-thought-out rules firmly and with respect. If our children are upset, we have to make doubly sure that we do not shout or scream. They are just normal teenagers feeling upset about new house rules.

» TYPICAL CONVERSATION

 Mom: It looks like you’re mad about our new house rule on the amount of time you may spend on the computer.

 Son: Yeah, it’s unfair, my friends have unlimited use of computers! Why can’t I use the computer as long as they do? I hate your rule!
Mom: I know you’re upset about how your friends can use the computer as much as they want and that you don’t like our new rule.

Son: I don’t like the new rule! You’re controlling me! You’re destroying my life!

At this point, we need to continue to keep our cool. Let us not argue with our child. Instead, we continue paraphrasing, which is part of effective listening. Our kid needs us to listen to him at this point. We are the adults here.

Mom: It looks like you feel we are imposing a very unfair and unrealistic rule on you, and that is making you angry.

Son: I hate you! I hate you! Why can’t you be like my classmate’s mom?

I hear you. You hate me now for this rule. But it will help me to know: What’s the importance of the computer to you? What is it about the computer that you really like? It would really help me to understand where you’re coming from. I want you to be happy, I know you need the computer for something, and I want to talk with you how to fill that need. Can you just let me know when you would like to talk next time? You can tell me in person or send me an email. I am worried about your school grades because it looks like you are spending five hours on the computer, and I cannot understand why, so please help me understand.

Son: (No response)

If things do not improve, this might be an indicator that we need to work on, first, our relationship with our child. If no communication transpires, it is a signal that we do not have enough influence over our own child.

†RELATIONSHIP CHECKLIST

We need to make regular time to listen to our kids, at least in their first twelve years. The following checklist contains points to assess our relationship with our children:

- Regular one-on-one dates (at least twice a month) with each child to get to know each child better
- Regular chats at home (at least three times a week) to understand the uniqueness of each child
- Affirming each child’s contributions, efforts, accomplishments
- Actively listening to each child’s concerns and stories
- Speaking to each child in a gentle and friendly matter
- Setting up mutually agreed-upon house rules
- Renegotiating house rules when needed
- Correcting behavior through consequences and not punishment
- Maintaining a generally pleasant family and home atmosphere
- Having a strong and loving bond with the spouse
These are key ingredients in creating a positive family relationship. If we can fulfill at most only six items, then our ties may not be as healthy and strong as we think, which can explain, for example, the resistance the mother in the sample dialogue is experiencing with her son.

We have to work on the points we are deficient in fast (based on the list). Our influence in our children’s lives may not be enough.

Time is important. When we do not give time, when we are not affirming and appreciating, when we do not listen and talk properly, or when we do not have realistic house rules and we use punishment, shout or threaten, we will likely have a difficult time influencing our kids and establishing a positive relationship with them.

In our book *Helping Our Children Do Well in School*, we have given more detailed pointers on what to do. It will take time before we attain a better relationship with our children (usually six months to a year), but we need to keep working at it. We can also seek professional help if needed.
A Christian Home

By Mae Esguerra-Sy

Mother of two, entrepreneur (Babinski Baby)

We live in a Christian home and we make it clear to our children, Maxine and Maia, that rules are made in order to protect them, just like how God gave rules and laws to His people for their safety, because He loves them. We tell them the rewards of obedience to the rules and the consequences and punishment for disobedience.

When comments arise, like, “It’s not fair …” or “How come my classmate is allowed and I’m not?”, I explain to our children about I Corinthians 10:23 as simply as I can: “I am allowed to do anything, but not everything is good for me.”

Aside from disallowing violent video games at home, we have trained our girls to do their duties first before watching TV or playing with gadgets. We limit their screen time to an hour a day. When their grades are low, this privilege does not apply. Also, our girls cannot bring gadgets during play dates.

My husband Merlin, an IT specialist, and I approve and screen the apps and games first, before our children can download them. We, as parents, play an active role in our children’s gadget use—either we casually converse about the game with them without being intrusive, or we watch them play.

In short, we, parents, still control the gadgets.

We help our children manage their time well. We make a hierarchical checklist of their daily activities, ranking the most to the least important things so our girls know which ones to do first. Physical activities like biking and playing on the lawn with the dogs are important. Playing video games and watching TV are last on the list.

Pets play a big part in our home. Getting our children involved in taking care of pets helps them develop responsibility, empathy, and compassion.

As a family, we also go fishing. My husband is a fishing aficionado, and the children have their own gear. Fishing teaches us patience and love of God’s creation. We have all the bonding time we need as we wait for the fish to bite. Fishing is also an opportunity for all of us to be in touch with the environment, and we explain to our girls the need to protect our world.

Fishing teaches us perseverance. If we don’t catch any fish, then we try and try again. When fish is finally caught, we take pride in our hard work.
The Self-Worth of the Digital Child

IN THE BOOK The Filipino Family Surviving the World, child psychologist Ma. Lourdes “Honey” Carandang says, “The best gift we can give our children is a healthy and positive self-concept.”

Children’s self-worth comes from the messages of other people, since we are not all born with a healthy sense of self-esteem. Children may be smart, they may be good athletes or performers, but certain areas of who they are as persons may remain unsettled.

There may come a point when they can no longer handle the vicissitudes of the outer world, because they lack the crucial ingredient to help them navigate through life feeling, “I can!”

We need to be accepting of our children as individuals, capable of becoming truly themselves, free from labels, negativity, and put-downs from significant adults. Children who lack self-worth tend to seek other outlets to make them feel accepted. They may display attention-seeking behavior, gather affirmations at any cost, escape negative realities in risky ways, or engage in activities that may harm them.

>>ESCAPE

Today, the virtual world has become a frequent escape for children with poor self-worth. They use different portals to create a world that is suited to their needs, such as social-networking sites, gaming, online forums, virtual communities of specific interests, etc.

When our children manifest problems, we can look at important influences on where they might have picked up the problematic behavior: the home, peers, from media.

Take the case of Jerome (not his real name), a Grade Two student Ichel handled. Jerome had behavioral concerns in school. He did not comply with school work. He would go around the class, do extraneous things at his desk, and disrupt the teacher with laughs and comments any time he wanted to. He did not perform well in class, complaining that things were boring and he was not interested. “Ang hirap!” (It’s so difficult!) and “Hindi ko kaya!” (I can’t do it!) were common remarks.

Jerome got into fights with his classmates. He also used mature words, such as private body parts, mentioning them casually to his peers as he made fun of them.

According to his mother, Jerome looked up to his father, who unfortunately, treated him differently from his sisters. While the father acted lovingly toward the girls, he easily got mad at his son, putting him down in every way.

Father and son only connected with each other through gaming. An avid gamer, the father bought a PSP for himself, and also played with his son, something the mother allowed so both of them could have time together.

But when Jerome’s problems persisted, the mother learned that her husband
encouraged his son to play *Grand Theft Auto*, a mature game with violent and sexual undertones. The father saw the whole thing as only a game, but together with the director, Ichel told him about how the scenes and language could be misinterpreted, and how they could corrupt young minds.

Ichel strongly recommended that the parents control their son’s game use.

Aside from detoxing Jerome from mature gaming, the parents needed to connect with their kid, and be positive role models for him. Thankfully, the mother took the initiative, re-tooling discipline strategies not only for her child but also for her husband.

The journey had many ups and downs, but with a lot of prayers, Jerome’s mother persevered, and Ichel and Jerome’s teachers saw notable results as the months passed. Jerome’s behavior and attitude in school improved considerably.

**KEEPING SCORE**

The self-worth of any child is a key to every stage of their development. Our children need us to help them develop as persons, endowed with unique strengths and weaknesses, capable of being the best they can be.

A lot of us, though, seem to be lacking in self-worth. We live lives of quiet (and often, not-so-quiet) desperation. This is how science writer Jeffrey Kluger describes a common scenario in *Time*:

If you’re on Facebook, there are more than 1.1 billion other people who can mainline their good times—their new car, their big house, their vacation that you’d have to save 10 years to take—straight into your brain. Half a billion people on Twitter can do the same, a punchy 140 characters at a time. The very setup of social media provides another way to keep score. You’ve got 50 Twitter followers? Great, but your best friend has 500, and Lady Gaga, in case you’re counting, has 38 million. In the *Time* poll, 60 percent of respondents said they do not feel better about themselves after spending time on social media, and 76 percent believe other people make themselves look happier, more attractive and more successful than they actually are on their Facebook page.

**DEVELOP SELF-WORTH**

Carandang cites the following points to help our children develop their self-worth.

First, we look at ourselves and check if we are helping or hindering our children’s growth. If we are the latter, then our concerns with self-esteem result in negativity on how we treat our kids or other people. Our words and actions can immensely affect our children’s identity and self-worth.

Second, we avoid labeling. We cannot call our children *pasaway* (disobedient), hyper, or stupid just because we want to correct their behavior. We can correct our children in positive ways, specifically on behavior they manifest, without putting them down as people. Instead of labeling, we can be facilitators toward what positive behavior we want
our child to achieve.

Third, we act in an authentic way. We do what we say, we walk the talk. More than listening to us, children learn more from what they observe. They imitate what we model. They also keep us on our toes, by reminding us of our promises or the words we say. Thus, being true to who we are, what we say and do is an important key in making children develop their sense of self-worth and grow to be positive, happy, confident, and competent.

In our survey, 65 percent of students say that relating well to parents makes them feel good and 58 percent say that relating well to teachers makes them feel good.

If our kids have a good sense of self-worth, it would be easier for us to maintain positive connections with us. Despite of the influx of technology, they would not need to be too much into games, in the loop through the latest mobile phones, be online all the time, or get affirmations through social-networking sites.

The real world they live in is filled with positivity, with opportunities to be accepted, with the support to bounce back from mistakes. While our children may use technology to make life more convenient, they will not make the online world as their life.
A father is usually stereotyped as either strict or lenient. I’m a hands-on dad, and I am a combination of the two, especially when it comes to digital and multimedia use.

I love watching TV and movies. I love video games. But I realize that for now, I have to curb these activities because I have kids to raise.

I enjoy watching videos with Migo and Maia during their toddler years. I allowed them to watch one whole movie, but they had to watch it together. The problem arises when each kid wants to watch his or her own show. I manage this situation by not letting them watch anything until they agree on one movie.

At times, it is so convenient to just let the tube babysit them: when I’m dressing up or fixing something, or when the kids don’t want to take a nap.

Lately, I have allowed them to help me with what I’m doing. Yes, it takes a lot more time to get things done, but at least I get to spend time with them and they’re unplugged. If they don’t want to sleep, I let them play or doodle.

Playing with mobile games and apps is a treat for my kids from their two titas (aunts). I manage this by always asking them to ask permission from the titas, and how long they are allowed to play. The kids themselves set the timer.

I enjoy playing video games but I have learned to put this off for the meantime so that my kids won’t see me engrossed in them. I have also avoided downloading these games on my smart phone.

One summer, I borrowed a Wii console from my cousin. It was a treat for our kids (and us parents). I was able to have them have a taste of the video experience so that they wouldn’t feel left out if and when their classmates talk about it.

The same goes with video arcades. We give our kids a few minutes to just punch the keys on some arcade games (without tokens). But if it’s basketball, bowling, air shuffle, or any physical game, then we use tokens.

Modeling is a very effective tool in managing our kids’ gadget use. They should see us using gadgets only whenever we’re working, checking out pictures on Facebook, or browsing through the latest books in Amazon. When we dine out, we don’t give them gadgets to play with, but rather have them doodle on their drawing pads and swap stories with one another.

As a dad, I’m glad we’re managing our kids’ gadget use: we see them being more creative in playing, doing arts and crafts, and actively running around the house (and on the streets with playmates). Seeing them have fun brings back warm memories when we were kids and all we wanted to do was simply play.
Health Risks from Technology Abuse

THE INTERNET WAS founded twenty years ago but the computer/mobile applications (apps) industry is only a few years old. Statistics reveal that within that short span of time, more than 40,000 kids’ games were developed and made available on iTunes. The plethora of games precipitates the excessive use of technology for both children and adults.

In the United States, a 2010 Kaiser Foundation study reports that the youth spent more than seven-and-a-half hours per day using smart phones, PCs, TVs, and other electronic devices. This stretches to more than ten hours, including overlap usage of various electronic devices simultaneously. The Cooney Centre, which specializes in children’s media, reports that two-thirds of kids aged four to seven have already used an iPhone lent to them by a family member. The Centre labels this the “pass-back effect,” the reluctant zone between denying and giving gadgets to our children.

South Korea is one of the most digitally advanced nations in the world. A government study shows that an estimated 2.55 million people are addicted to the smart phone, using them for more than eight hours per day. An alarming 160,000 South Koreans between eight to nine years of age are addicted to the Internet, using their smart phone, tablet, or personal computer.

To top it off, the issue of “digital obesity” is now being addressed by the state education system. The government plans to educate children as young as three on ways to avoid spending too much time on digital devices as well as the Internet.

South Korea now provides counseling programs and treatment for an estimated 2 million people who are addicted to online computer games.

The games and apps industry is aware of the consequences of playing too many games. Manufacturers have issued warnings related to prolonged usage of their systems. For instance, Microsoft warns about the effect of spending too much time on their Kinect system, saying doing so may lead to overexertion. Nintendo uses the character Princess Peach to suggest to players of the Super Mario 3D game to take occasional breaks from the screen because of possible harmful effects of 3D on our children’s vision.

But statistics and warnings continue to be ignored. Health and injury problems associated with computer and keyboard use continue to rise. The physical as well as psychological effects have multiplied as people all over the world continue to surrender to the lure of technology.

**EYESTRAIN**

Eyestrain is the number one complaint of heavy screen users. Staring at the glow from the screen for prolonged periods, and too much eye movement and refocusing strain eye muscles.

According to the Minnesota Optometric Association (MOA), gamers and users of personal computers for work are both at risk of an affliction called computer vision
syndrome (CVS). CVS is characterized by very dry eyes, headaches, eye irritation or pain, squinting, excessive blinking, increased sensitivity to light, and difficulty in focusing.

Screen exposure includes watching TV, surfing the Net and playing video games. Straining the eyes is a primary reason why some children now need glasses much earlier in life.

**HEARING LOSS**

An Australian study shows that almost 70 percent of young adults aged eighteen to twenty-four, and 72 percent of those in the twenty-five to thirty-four age bracket, suffer from ringing in their ears, medically known as tinnitus.

The maximum volume created by gadgets such as MP3 players and Bluetooth headsets is equivalent to a jet plane taking off nearby. This destroys the sensory cells that convey auditory information to the brain.

The most common cause of hearing problems is the use of headphones and ear buds. The loud blare of music in malls and clubs and at concerts also impairs hearing.

**WRIST INJURIES AND CARPAL TUNNEL SYNDROME**

The extensive use of the wrist for clicking a mouse button or the motions associated with gaming controls results in overworked tendons in the arm and the wrist. The tendons and the tissue covering them become inflamed and sore.

The pain that ensues from repeatedly making certain movements is symptomatic of a condition commonly known as repetitive strain injury or RSI. It is also known as occupational overuse syndrome (OOS), cumulative trauma disorder or work-related upper limb disorder.

The possibility of RSI to progress into the debilitating carpal tunnel syndrome is significant. Carpal tunnel syndrome (CTS) is caused by the constriction of the median nerve which runs through the middle of the wrist. This nerve controls the thumb up to the inner half of the ring finger. This affliction slowly develops in people thirty years and older, but teens are also at risk if they overdo gaming or keyboard use.

CTS symptoms begin as minor tingling sensations, progressing slowly to numbness and pain that reach up to the elbow. The last resort for CTS is surgery and the post-surgery effect is the possibility of lessened dexterity of the hand and wrist.

**TENDONITIS IN THE THUMB**

“Nintendo thumb” and “BlackBerry/iPhone thumb” are forms of repetitive strain injury caused by the continual use of the thumbs to press the buttons of mobile devices and game controllers.

Keypads of mobile phones, keyboards, and game controllers are often used in awkward positions or with excessive force (as in the case of gaming). The result is muscle imbalance caused by more pressure placed on the thumb part as compared to other parts of
Symptoms can range from tingling and numbness to nagging pain in the fingers. Complications can lead to tendonitis or bursitis.

**NECK AND BACK PAIN**

Poor posture like slouching while using the computer for a long period of time can result in back, neck, shoulders, and arm pain. Sitting for long hours with the computer screen at the wrong angle can cause stiffness and slight hunched back.

The same injuries are caused by constantly looking down at mobile devices like the cell phone or tablet. Over time, the neck tends to lose its natural curve and may cause distortion of the bone.

**OBESITY, HIGH BLOOD PRESSURE, CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE**

On average, children spend five to six hours a day on sedentary activities like TV viewing, using the computer, and playing video games. Sadly, the rest of the time is not spent on sports or physical activities either.

While seated in front of the TV, children are barraged with TV commercials selling high-calorie and sugar-laden, fast-food meals as well as snacks. Studies show that children exposed to too much TV are more likely to patronize food products advertised than those who are not exposed to them. This has contributed to the escalating rates of obesity in young children all over the world.

In our survey, around half of students say they often eat junk food or fast food and 14 percent say they often miss meals.

According to the World Health Organization, childhood obesity has been called “one of the most serious public health challenges of the twenty-first century” and this holds true for both rich and poor countries.

The dangers of obesity cannot be taken lightly as it can harm nearly every system in our children’s body. The heart, lungs, muscles and bones, kidneys and digestive tract can be affected, as well as the hormones that control blood sugar and puberty.

Obesity can also affect the social life and emotions of our youth as they deal with the stigma of being labelled fat.

Moreover, the odds of remaining overweight up to adulthood are higher, which in turn, increases the risk of disease and disability. Obesity may speed up heart-disease problems arising from Type 2 diabetes, high blood pressure and high cholesterol levels.

These were formerly considered health problems only of adults, but now, obese children are also at risk. The risk is even higher for those with a family history of these diseases. What more if our kids continue to lead sedentary digital lives?

In 2011, the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) states in its Policy Statement on
Children, Adolescents, Obesity and the Media: “Parents [should] limit total noneducational screen time to no more than two hours/day, avoid putting TV sets and Internet connections in children’s bedrooms, co-view with their children, limit nighttime screen media use to improve children’s sleep, and try strongly to avoid screen exposure for infants under the age of two years.”

What happens if AAP guidelines are not followed? In a study of more than 700 seven-to twelve-year-olds, children who had more than two hours a day of screen time (and walked fewer than 1100 pedometer steps per day) were three to four times more likely to be overweight.

On the contrary, “preschool-aged children who ate dinner with their parents, got adequate sleep, and had limited screen-time hours had a 40 percent lower prevalence of obesity than those exposed to none of these routines,” says the AAP.

**NEUROSES**

Anxiety, phobia, and delusion are examples of mental and emotional disturbances, all symptoms of neuroses, which can arise from overuse of technology.

Social media as well as the indiscriminate use of information on the web have been known to cause the onset of neuroses. Looking up illnesses or diseases on the web can make us believe that we are seriously ill. This can lead to severe anxiety and depression.

Uploading videos that go viral may make us believe that we are famous. Phobias can result from bullying on social sites like Facebook.

**POOR SLEEP**

Online activities can be so engaging that they can keep us awake till the wee hours of the morning. It then becomes difficult to turn off our brain. Playing an exciting game two to three hours before bedtime can cause sleep and memory problems.

“Although parents perceive a televised program to be a calming sleep aid, some programs actually increase bedtime resistance, delay the onset of sleep, cause anxiety about falling asleep, and shorten sleep duration,” states the 2011 Policy Statement of the AAP.

“In children younger than three years, television viewing is associated with irregular sleep schedules,” the Statement continues. “Poor sleep habits have adverse effects on mood, behavior, and learning. Although the effects of media on infants’ cognitive and emotional development are still being explored, there are ample reasons to be concerned.”

The screen’s ambient glow can affect the release of melatonin, the sleep chemical. This is detrimental to the health of our children, for whom sleep is necessary for physical and mental well-being.

According to University of Sydney researcher Ron Grunstein, head of the Centre for Integrated Research and Understanding of Sleep, the blue light of screens has an alerting effect. The studies at the Centre reveal that people who use electronic gadgets get less
sleep, with young people particularly at risk.

“You are potentially creating a new generation of insomniacs who are almost addicted to technology,” Grunstein tells the South China Morning Post.

In August 2013, Taobao, the largest e-commerce site in China, came up with an “Insomnia Map of China.” The map showed that those who were most likely to buy sleep aids like ear plugs or eye masks were the young (twenty-nine years and younger), who lived in megacities like Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Shenzhen, and Hangzhou.

The irony? Almost 23 million people visited Taobao online between 11 p.m. and 5 a.m., when they should have been asleep.

ACCIDENTS

We are four times as likely to be involved in an accident when we drive while talking on a phone, says University of Utah professor David Strayer. When we text while driving, the risks double: We are eight times as likely to be in an accident.

More than 90 percent of American teens say that they do other things while driving, such as talking on the cell phone, channel surfing, using MP3 players, playing loud music, eating, interacting with friends—even if they find these activities distracting. Seventy-five percent of teens say they text while driving.

“Teen drivers tend to be at risk for trying to multitask,” says Strayer. “They’re just learning how to drive, so some of the things that a more experienced driver might have automated or [have] become habitual are still quite effortful for a teen driver … unfortunately, for the teens who are probably just learning to drive, they’re also probably the most likely to be multitasking, either using a cell phone, or an iPod, or text messaging.”

Thirty-eight states in America ban texting while driving, while thirty-one states ban talking on the phone by novice drivers.

In 2011, a seventeen-year-old Massachusetts teenager was the first in the state to be convicted of texting while driving. He crashed head on into a truck, killing the driver and seriously wounding two others. On the day of the crash, he sent 193 texts, including some a few moments before impact. He was sentenced to a year in jail, forty hours of community service, and suspension of his driver’s license for fifteen years.

Distraction is not limited to driving; distracted walking is also on the rise. More than 1,000 people had to go to the hospital in 2011 in the United States for injuries they sustained while walking and chatting or texting on a cell phone or other devices. Some people walked into poles or lampposts, others stumbled into a ditch; still others, horrifyingly, walked straight into train tracks or traffic.

Environmental psychologist Jack Nasar of Ohio State University did a study at intersections in schools and found that students talking on cell phones are more likely to walk in front of cars than those not doing so.

“I see students as soon as they break from a class, they have their cell phones out and they’re texting one another. They’re walking through the door and bumping into one
another,” says Nasar to the Associated Press.

Research at Stony Brook University in New York compares the performance of people walking across a room to a target (a sheet of paper taped to the floor), first without distractions, and then, while texting or talking on a cell phone. More subjects who talked on the phone walked slightly slower and went off-course than those without distractions.

But the texters fared worst. They walked slowest, went off-course 61 percent more and overshot the target 13 percent more.

ADDICTION

In Britain, research on the social-media habits of eighteen- to twenty-five-year-olds shows that the nation’s most obsessed Facebook users log on to the site over twenty times a day. They spend a daily average of eight hours online, the equivalent of a full working day.

The psychological costs are numerous: stress, narcissism, distraction, short attention span, violence, isolation, lack of social skills, lack of privacy, higher level of deceit, warped sense of reality, lack of social bonds and empathy, lack of social/sexual boundaries, among many others.

EXREME CASES

In Merseyside, North West England, fourteen-year-old Dominic Patrick spent an entire day kneeling down with his legs tucked under his body playing computer games. One of his calves became swollen. He felt needles and pins in his legs which prompted his father to take him to the doctor. He was diagnosed with Deep Vein Thrombosis (DVT) caused by blood clots in his leg. He required hospital treatment.

In 2007, a twenty-eight-year-old South Korean male died of heart failure because of exhaustion after reportedly playing Starcraft for fifty hours in an Internet café. According to the police, he did not sleep and eat properly during this marathon session. He was brought to the hospital when he collapsed, but he died shortly after. He had been fired from his job because he kept missing work to play computer games.

A three-day online gaming session caused the death of a thirty-year-old Chinese male in the outskirts of Beijing, China in 2011. He barely ate or slept in that span of time and lost consciousness in an Internet café. He was rushed to the hospital but could not be revived. He had spent more than 10,000 yuan (around 70,000 pesos) on gaming the month before he died.

In 2010, a South Korean couple (a forty-year-old man and a twenty-five-year-old woman) were arrested after they let their real baby daughter die while they raised a virtual daughter called Anima in the game Prius Online. The couple fed their real infant just once a day, while they spent twelve hours at a time in an Internet café. Ironically, Prius encourages players to interact with Anima in order to help her to get back her lost memories and to feel appropriate emotions.
Yvonne Luna and Family

VIGILANCE

Yvonne Luna juggles career and home. Juancho, a high-school sophomore in the semi-honors section, and Jaime, a Grade Seven student, both study at the Ateneo de Manila. An accounting graduate of the University of the Philippines, Yvonne was encouraged by her parents to continue working for the family business even after she got married to Denis, who is in IT/programming. Denis has a degree in Geology, but after graduation, he discovered that his interest lay in computers. He went to the National Computer Center for further studies.

When Yvonne was pregnant with her eldest son, her father brought a computer to her house to set up a home office. When the boys started studying, Yvonne brought them to school and her mother helped her out by picking them up at dismissal.

Yvonne closely monitored the studies of Juancho up to Grade Five, but she let go a bit earlier for Jaime. She borrowed the Learning Activity Sheets (LAS) used by the previous batches, copied them or typed them out, and generously shared them with other parents. In turn, they would share Singapore Math books for Jaime’s lessons. These enabled Yvonne to guide her sons in advance for the coming school year. Yvonne also saw to it that they were well prepared for long exams by making reviewers for them.

“I would monitor their homework and see schedules of quizzes,” Yvonne says. “Then I would let the boys answer one or two LAS from my files as review. From there, I would be able to see if they know the lessons already or if they need to focus on a particular lesson for mastery.

“I don’t tell them that they have to get perfect scores,” Yvonne continues. “I just say that I know they can do it if they try hard enough. In English class, for example, the boys just need to go back to the story to get the answers in the quiz. If they say that they made many mistakes in a particular quiz, I ask them what happened. Sometimes, they will say they were careless or they got confused. At least now they would know how to answer the questions if these appeared again in the quarterly exams. And I always tell my sons that there would still be other quizzes where they could make up for the low score they just received.”

Denis supports this when it comes to the boys’ study habits. When he has time, he helps the boys review for the exams, since the reviewers have answer keys. Jaime consults his father regularly for Computer Education questions. Juancho has asks his father’s help with PowerPoint.

Denis knows that studying is a priority for the boys, and he helps Yvonne remind their sons that no computer games or gadgets are allowed prior to and during exam week. Since the High School has different exam schedules than the Grade School, this may be harder to do. For instance, Juancho may be playing PS3, but Jaime can’t play yet because exams are still scheduled for the following week. So Yvonne just tells her son that his exams will soon be over and he will have his turn to play afterward. “So far, it works,” Yvonne says.

Yvonne has set schedules and rules for her sons. She reminds them to finish all their
school work first before engaging in other activities. Bedtime is 9 p.m. for Jaime; Juancho sleeps later because he has a heavier work load in high school. But when Yvonne feels that Juancho is staying up too late, she tells him, “Kuya (big brother), mind your sleeping time or you will get pimples again.”

Bedroom doors are never locked. Yvonne is glad that she does not have to enforce a no-sleepover rule for the boys, because by choice, the two boys do not like sleeping over at friends’ houses.

The family has one computer located in a common area, and the boys take turns using it. They have a laptop, two iPads, and a PS3 console. Juancho has his own cell phone. Gadget use is not allowed on weekdays.

On weekends, the boys have to eat breakfast first and take a bath before they can use gadgets. Yvonne worries about the effect of too much screen time on their eyes and constantly tells them to give their eyes a break. She is very conscious of vision problems because they come from a family who needed to use eyeglasses at an early age.

The rewards most often requested by her sons are games and apps which her husband evaluates first before giving his approval. Denis and Yvonne try their best to filter the games that the boys are exposed to, since they find most too violent. Consequences for lapses are grounding from the computer and withholding the use of the PS3, which Yvonne says is “torture” for the boys.

Passwords are shared in their household because Yvonne believes it is important to guide her kids on responsible computer use. Jaime readily shares them with his mother, saying he may forget them. Juancho was surprised one time when he discovered that his mother knew his passwords, because he had almost given up hope on accessing his e-mail account.

When his mother said, “The password is XXXXXX,” Juancho asked how she knew it. Her reply? “Maybe you mentioned it to me a long time ago.” That was that.

Too much information is readily accessible, even that which may not be appropriate for their age. She asks Juancho every now and then “Kuya, there might be naked pictures (in that website)”, or “Kuya, there might be porn” so that he will be aware that these practices are not right.

Yvonne says Facebook or social networking in general is a big distraction for students. She agrees with an article she read that Facebook is a “time stealer” because it eats into the boys’ study period. Sometimes Juancho gets sidetracked by Facebook posts. While he does discuss projects and homework on Facebook, like most high-school boys, he tends to read other posts and open other tabs while waiting for a reply from his groupmates or classmates.

Calling herself a silent observer, Yvonne does not regularly check her son’s Facebook account, and she does not “like” or post comments on his page. If she ever asks Juancho if she can post, his answer would be, “Mom, that’s creepy.”

What worries Yvonne is, like most of us, Juancho has Facebook friends who are not really close to him. These so-called friends are the ones who may send questionable posts (naked pictures of women, foul language, etc.). She hopes that Juancho does not get to see
all of the posts, but she reminds to watch his language and posts because “you don’t know who might be looking at them.”

Yvonne’s sons are normal kids who like saying they’re bored. When gadgets are not allowed, they say they are bored. When it is not one boy’s turn on the PS3, he will say he is bored. She does not take this complaint seriously and tells the boys to go and find something to do. They occasionally take walks around the village as exercise but there is not much time for physical activity. Juancho is into art and loves drawing while Jaime is into chess. Jaime is also artistically inclined but is quite shy.

According to Yvonne, Denis is the quiet type. But when he sees the boys giving their mother a hard time, he only has to raise his voice a little and somehow the boys stop being *makulit* (pertinacious). But there are also times when Yvonne has to say, “Dad, please remind them to …” and he willingly obliges.

Yvonne and Denis are focused on raising their sons to be responsible adults in this digital age through vigilance and proper guidance. Their high aspirations for their two sons are reflected in the effort they place on good study habits, including appropriate media use.
Why Family Meals Are Essential

DURING A MASS at the Immaculate Conception Academy in 2011, Cardinal Chito Tagle said,

It makes me sad that many families share a meal only once a week. Others are at home and eat at the same time, but each one has a personal television. Each one gets a plate of food and then faces the TV. Father watches basketball. Mother eats while sobbing through a telenovela. The child eats while playing computer games. The plate has become the basic unit of the meal.

Tagle reminded us that

a family is where people have decided to give each other the gift of a loving presence … that transforms … and empowers. Love is the most powerful agent for transforming lives, but love and care need presence, communication, sharing memories, telling stories, eating together, and weaving together shared lives as one happy stream.

With each member of the family doing his or her own thing on his or her own device these days, communication, and therefore, solidarity, are much weaker. “Less connection—the real kind—means that families aren’t able to build relationships as strong as they could be, nor are they able to maintain them as well,” says psychologist and new-media expert Jim Taylor in his book *Raising Generation Tech*.

Children will feel less familiarity, comfort, trust, security, and—most important—love from their parents,” Taylor says. “There is also less sharing, so parents know less about what is going on in their children’s lives and, consequently, have less ability to exert influence over their children. Parents also have difficulty offering appropriate supervision and guidance, and, at a more basic level, they are less able to model healthy behavior, share positive values, and send positive messages to their children.

Love means sharing meals together. In 2003, our team studied Ateneo High School student achievers and found that most of them regularly eat dinner with parents and siblings. During family meals, successes are shared, and problems nipped in the bud.

Family meals also help in character development. Columbia University’s Center for Addiction and Substance Abuse says that the more frequently children have dinner with their families, the less likely they are to indulge in addictions such as cigarettes, drink, drugs, and early sex.

Thankfully, in our survey, 90 percent of students say they spend time eating with family.

**Family meals help in character development.**
On January 2012, upon signing Proclamation 326 to mark the fourth Sunday of September as “Kainang Pamilya Mahalaga” Day, President Noynoy Aquino said, “Having a common family meal encourages parents to stay connected with their children and understand the challenges they face.”

Writer and speaker Francis Kong, with the help of Lucky Me Noodles’ Shellane Dy, came up with the book *Famealy Matters: 50-Plus Stories of Everyday Intimacy at the Family Dining Table*. Fifty-eight contributors discuss the importance of sharing family meals in their lives.

Queena was honored to be included, and talked about how family dinners are a habit, where members bond and communicate, both in the family she grew up in and the family she has now.

**HEALTH AND VALUES**

Rep. Sonny Angara and wife Tootsy use family meals to encourage children to eat healthy early on, by modelling healthy habits themselves and by devising games if needed.

It is not always easy to persuade our children to eat fruits and vegetables … When reasoning doesn’t work, we get creative. Our favorite [game] is ‘20 Questions.’ [Our daughter] Ines has a curious mind so she gets quite engrossed in the game and finishes her food without realizing it. The extra benefit from involving the entire family in the game? Instant bonding!

Recording artist Billy Crawford recalls that dinners would stretch to two or more hours, “an entertainment show and an interview all in one,” where he and his father would get up and dance.

And the values you can pick up! It’s where I learned table manners, proper etiquette, and giving thanks to the Lord for providing us with wonderful meals … Everything else stemmed from that. For example, I became more considerate toward others, serving them food first before myself.

Waltermart founder Wilson Lim feels that family meals are where young ones imbibe values.

When we say grace before meals, this teaches the little ones about Christian values we hold dear. Likewise, our Sunday reunions enable us to bond with the younger generation, as my grandkids help out in the kitchen by baking breads and cookies for dessert.

_Travel Magazine_ associate publisher Monique Buensalido extols open communication.

You know those oh-so-serious, life-altering family talks you see in soap operas? We hardly have any, because we talk to each other all the time during meals. We can talk about career moves, relationships, investments, presidential candidates,
even the RH Bill. By learning about [my family’s] opinions and values, I’ve learned about and formed my own. By being with them during mealtimes, I’ve learned how to become my own person. My foundations are in my family, and my family’s foundation is at our table.

Fashion photographer Raymund Isaac says, “[At dinner] we would laugh about the silliest things, for my mother was a very opinionated woman, but in a good way.” Isaac’s mom would say: “My nagging you is a sign that I care. If I didn’t, then you wouldn’t hear a peep from me. But because I love you, I want to give you the wise counsel that can keep you forewarned and forearmed in your life.”

“We learned so much from the countless [meals] we had as a family,” Isaac says. “My mother’s ‘sermons’ may not have meant anything when we were young, but the wisdom these imparted stuck like crazy glue in later years.” Nowadays, Isaac is “starting to sound like her.”

LEARNING DURING MEALS

GMA 7 Chairman Atty. Felipe Gozon says:

Mealtimes give parents the chance to know—and be updated on—what is happening with their children on a daily basis. These also provide the perfect opportunity to give guidance and advice when needed. In the past, my wife [Teresa] would ask the children what happened in school and what lessons they had. The latter hardly noticed that my wife was actually reviewing their lessons for the day because she made reviewing what they learned in school seem fun.

Tourism Secretary Mon Jimenez says:

Family meals have never been harried or hurried. In fact, these became lengthier and more leisurely as my children were growing up. I remember being the quizmaster who loved to put all of them to a test. My wife [Abby] and I would engage their minds by holding trivia quizzes on any subject under the sun … I encourage all families to find time to sit down and eat together. Ninety percent of everything you learn about each other will be at the dinner table.

National Book Store marketing director Xandra Ramos-Padilla says:

The adult conversation around the table [in the past] would inevitably turn to the business concern of the week. Perhaps this is how we grandkids subliminally absorbed the ins and outs of the business life of retail. Perhaps this is also the reason why today we are all helping with the family business, in one way or another.

Education Secretary Bro. Armin Luistro says that family meals were a “learning laboratory,” for having experienced hunger and deprivation during the war, our elders trained my
siblings and me to finish everything on our plates. We would patiently wait for other family members to sit at the dinner table; we would not start unless everybody was there.

Children who spend time with their parents during mealtimes have a very good sense of self and are well-rounded. It is because mealtimes are when we develop social graces and discipline, practice acts of generosity, and establish intimacies. These things we will never learn in school but are crucial in developing our emotional quotient—a factor that is indispensable for a child to transcend his egotistic sense of self-centeredness.

**MINIMIZE DISTRACTIONS**

Movie star Sharon Cuneta says:

Because family meals take place in a casual setting, there is no pressure—guards are down. Children open up to you in a more relaxed manner … We have casual conversations and then slowly, you find out what’s going on in their lives. ‘Yun pala there are important issues being brought up, and you are suddenly given a chance to offer your support.

It’s not enough to ask them how they are. You have to be detalyado (detailed). You try to dig deep, probe, talk about things that interest them … Today, there are just too many distractions like toys and gadgets but you have to deal with that s… and set rules at home. For us, it’s no TV during weekdays—only a couple of hours on iPods. At magkasama kaming lahat!” (We’re all together!)

Basketball player Chris Tiu says:

We do not have a TV set in the dining area because my parents believe that it’s best to give each other 100 percent attention. Cell phones are also discouraged, unless one urgently needs to make or take a call. No one is allowed to leave the table, too, unless there’s a valid reason. This is one rule that I’d happily follow because it is at the dining table where we share personal stories, talk about various issues, and just have a fun time together!

Children’s advocate Cathy Babao says:

Never come to the dining table angry or upset. Stress and animosity must never have a place at the table so that food and mealtimes will always be associated with good memories. The few times in my life that I’ve sat at the table upset over something … always gave me a bad stomach afterward. This is why I have always taught my children to dump the negativity elsewhere, in a creative or productive manner, before coming to the table because the gut absorbs everything, both the happy and the sad.
We do not have a TV set in the dining area because my parents believe that it’s best to give each other 100 percent attention.

»CONNECT WITH KIDS AND GRANDKIDS

PLDT senior vice-president Butch Jimenez says:

Aside from eating with your kids, take time to eat with your children’s friends! … It makes your kids accept you more as one of them, and it gives you a chance to understand the world your kids live in … The world is changing or, I must say, has changed. As one author puts it, ‘Parents have become immigrants of this generation, kids are now the natives.’ With the proliferation of social media, the Internet, smart phones, and digital interactivity, parents seem to have been boxed out of the norm. So if you’re trying to understand what is going on, if you’re trying to connect with the digital generation, food is still your most potent weapon.

ABS-CBN Publishing CEO Ernesto Lopez says:

One tradition that we are trying to establish is for my children to say at least two nice things about each other at mealtime. This is because I noticed that my kids had a tendency to tattle on, and constantly whine about, each other. I took the cue from a teacher in Assumption who had eight children. She would tell her children to catch each other doing something good so that they could report about it during mealtimes.

This practice has caused a shift in their attitude—from complaining about each other to complimenting each other. The same habit also gives me the opportunity to bless them and offer something positive about their behavior instead of reprimanding them for their shortcomings.

Vice-President Jejomar Binay never eats alone. His children and their spouses, with his thirteen grandkids, share the Binay house in Makati, with eating together a family tradition.

I find listening to stories from my grandchildren time well spent. While they may compete for my attention sometimes, I always make sure I give [them] all … equal time. I have nicknames for all of them, and they call me Tatay. I always remind them to say grace before meals and to finish their food. The older ones bring their plates to the kitchen sink, something they learned from me.

»KEEP MEALTIMES SACRED

TV host Boy Abunda says:

Parents and children benefit from spending much time together—not just quality
time, but quantity time. Life is not just about quality. You won’t always have quality moments, but you can make as much time as possible to spend with your family, be it a simple stroll in the park or a meal together. The family must likewise stay together—even have meals together—during the good times and the bad. Just being there is enough. This practice prepares parents and children for managing even the trying moments they may have in the future.

Honorable Consul of Malta Paul Aquino recalls that when he was growing up, their family always ate together but when martial law was declared in 1972, family gatherings became limited to Wednesdays, the only time the family could visit brother Ninoy in jail. Right now, family meals are held on Sundays, complete with food, discussion, and prayer.

Our family get-togethers are big on fun, and the more common topics of discussion are the goings-on in local and global politics. The debates can get heated but never rancorous. On the contrary, it’s the candid and continuous exchanges of ideas that have strengthened our bond as a family. My advice to my kids now that they have their own families is that they should designate a date and place where they can meet regularly and share a meal. Once they have decided on this, they should stick to it and hold it sacred.

Coca-Cola vice-president Atty. Adel Tamano says:

Sometimes when we are forced to be away from our family because of work, we think, well, this is for them anyway. Our job supports our family. While that may be true, we should also consider that our family, particularly our small children, will benefit much more from our time and attention than from our overtime pay. Our economic goals shouldn’t rule over our family’s spiritual and developmental needs … Great families aren’t effortless affairs where everyone gets along perfectly; great families make a commitment to spend time and engage with one another—such as in family meals.

KaBayanihan Foundation founder Atty. Alex Lacson says:

Family meals and prayers are the two most sacred activities in our family. No one is excused. No one must be late or is allowed to leave early. Each one is always expected to share stories … The family meal is like a battery charger. We get so much love, encouragement, and support from one another around the dining table. And when we get up after each meal, we feel wonderfully recharged for the day—and wonderfully connected to the people we love.
Integrating Technology in Xavier School

SCHOOLS OFTEN MAKE the mistake of assuming that when computers are brought into the classroom, teachers become irrelevant. After all, when students have the world at their fingertips, then they can access information their teachers are not even aware of.

Technology can help students make sense of complex topics, and learn at their own pace. For instance, Khan Academy videos, with little of the distracting razzle-dazzle found in most websites, can deepen math and science learning. Technology can provide updated information faster than printed textbooks, a feature that is particularly useful in time-sensitive subjects such as Social Studies. Technology can certainly catch the attention of easily bored students, especially if the teacher is uninspiring, unprepared, or simply incompetent.

Technology is never meant to replace the teacher, but rather to supplement and enhance learning.

But studies around the world reveal that no one beats the passionate, motivated, inspiring teacher. Good teachers teach well, with or without technology. Poor teachers teach badly, with or without technology. But the best teachers vary their methods based on the different needs of their students. Sometimes they use PowerPoint, at times graphing calculators, sometimes websites, other times just a plain chalkboard.

Instead of forcing all teachers to go high-tech no matter what, sensible schools provide them with various options, and train them on how to discern when to use which one.

SUPPLEMENT, NOT REPLACE

“From the start, technology is never meant to replace the teacher,” says Galvin Ngo, head of Xavier School’s NExT team, “but rather to supplement and enhance learning.”

NExT stands for, appropriately enough, New Experiences with Technology.

One advantage of using computers, according to many schools, is that instead of carrying heavy bags, students now just bring a single lightweight device.

“Many parents tend to think this way,” says Ngo. “But for us, it is not so much about school bags as it is about enriching learning. We are not doing away with traditional methods.”

So far, Xavier students still do math exercises using pen and paper. Problems are solved on (paper) notebooks or on (paper) textbooks.

“Sometimes technology is helpful, such as doing a presentation to a big class,” says Jessica Demegillo, a member of the NExT team.

“But we don’t need to use tech all the time,” says Ngo. “If a topic needs pen and
paper, then we use pen and paper.”

Demegillo gives an example of how low- and high-tech can enhance each other. “Our English teachers first teach communication the normal way; afterward, we can introduce [video-conferencing] apps such as FaceTime.”

“Sometimes technology is used as a hook for the lesson,” says Ngo. “But it cannot stop there. Educational technology must be grounded in real teaching strategies to promote deeper discussion and critical thinking.”

Take Mind Maps. Students brainstorm ideas on a topic, then make associations among them by using diagrams on paper or on the board.

Now Mind Maps can also be done on screen. But in whatever case, students are the ones doing the thinking.

**Sometimes technology is used as a hook for the lesson. But it cannot stop there.**

**WELL-THOUGHT-OUT PROCESS**

How do teachers know when and how to use technology? How do they know which devices, websites, or tools are appropriate for their classes?

This is where research comes in, and a whole lot of experimentation.

Technology integration in Xavier School is based on Ignatian pedagogy, after Jesuit founder St. Ignatius of Loyola.

“We learn how to learn,” says Ngo.

First, context: When, where, how does good learning take place? Second, experience: What happens in the real classroom when certain methods are applied?

Third, reflection: Which strategies best suit the given environment?

Fourth, and last, action: What actions do we take based on what we have learned in the first three steps?

“Contrary to what many people think, we did not fast-track tech use in Xavier,” says Ngo. “We took incremental steps, and the process took many years.”

Several schools have leaped into technology, with mixed results. Gadgets break down, servers overload. Students misuse tablets, publishers lack quality e-books. Teachers are not prepared to use tech in their lessons.

The seduction of technology is such that various schools, parents, government and business groups believe that the sole introduction of tablets or laptops will somehow miraculously become a magic pill for instruction and learning.

Xavier School took a lengthy but sensible approach. The process started in 2006, with the encouragement of former director Johnny Go, SJ, an experienced tech user. For two
years, selected faculty researched and experimented on varied ways of integrating technology into learning.

Then, in school year 2008–2009, some components of what eventually would turn out to be the One2One Learning Program were tried out on selected classes in (Apple) Mac Labs. In One2One, each student is provided a device for his use.

Not surprisingly, One2One was a huge hit with students, but more importantly, the experience gave the teachers evidence that they were on the right track.

Again, Xavier School took its time. Instead of requiring all students in all grade levels to get their own laptops immediately, in school year 2009–2010, the school selected only one class—an honors English class—to use MacBooks for the entire year.

Meanwhile, interested faculty were encouraged to make use of MacBook Carts—carts with MacBooks that have apps for learning in class—with devices to help them use tech in handling different subjects.

TRAINING AND SUPPORT

School year 2010–2011 was a turning point, with the official launch of Operation NExT. The NExT team visited model schools abroad, to identify best practices in integrating technology, particularly that of Apple. So NExT is double-pronged: IT personnel provide on-demand tech support; and Computer Education personnel offer training to faculty and staff. In order to make One2One work, each facet is as essential as the other.

Many schools, in their rush to computerize their campuses, have neglected to update their infrastructure. Teachers complain that they waste time waiting for web pages to upload.

Xavier School is one of the most wired campuses in the country, with the high school fully wired, and middle school in the process of being so. Yet hardware improvements are still ongoing. “Since 2010, we have begun a major upgrade,” says Ngo, “including the purchase of access points for each classroom.”

“We cannot just say, here is the technology, bahala na (let’s just wing it),” says Ngo. “If we are serious about promoting tech, then we don’t want teachers and students getting frustrated. Or else we lose their support, and our efforts fail.”

Aside from hardware, the NExT team also delves into the software.

“We need to keep abreast with the changing needs of students, and to encourage and support teachers, especially those who are having a hard time coping with tech,” says Ngo. “We need to listen to their concerns, and act as a bridge among students, teachers, parents, and administration.”

We cannot just say, here is the technology, bahala na.

TEACHERS AS FACILITATORS
Schools often force teachers to wield technology for technology’s sake, without much preparation. So teachers just use PowerPoint and download videos, treating these as entertaining gimmicks to catch student attention.

In Xavier School, there is no coercion involved. Teachers are encouraged, but not forced, to use technology. Ngo stresses the importance of preparing teachers in this regard.

“Teachers should understand the goal and rationale of tech integration,” Ngo says, “so they do not veer away and use tools inappropriately, and make teaching worse.”

“We are not just teaching technical skills,” says Demegillo. “Teaching is not just making good presentations.”

For, in the digital age, the role of the teacher has also changed. Often the teacher acts more like a facilitator than a traditional instructor. Suppose a teacher directs students to a website.

“We wonder, in this case, does the teacher really teach?” says Ngo. “Not in the traditional way. But when the teacher sources information from experts online, then the teacher deepens learning.”

“It is impractical nowadays to just be a ‘teacher’ inside the classroom,” says Franco Addun, who teaches Social Studies in middle school. “The twenty-first century is forcing teachers to [also] be facilitators. Rather than only teaching [in the traditional way], the teacher-facilitator focuses more on directing and guiding the acquisition and processing of information inside the classroom, with the use of technology.”

Facilitators should “provide opportunities for students to actually immerse themselves in tasks,” says Addun, “and plan activities so they can maximize their experience, with optimal results.”

This sentiment is echoed by Elsa Santos, who teaches Christian Life Education in high school. At first, Santos was hesitant about using technology.

“I can teach without technology,” Santos says, but technology “has given a voice” to all her students. On screen she can see everyone’s ideas, and all students can join in the discussion.

Many students are more liberated online. We need to discuss with them the dangers that can happen.

»DIGITAL CITIZENSHIP

In 2011, all second-year high school students, plus those in third year in the International Baccalaureate track, brought MacBooks to school. iPad Carts replaced MacBook Carts, and were made available for the entire school. The year after, another batch brought iPads, and that has been the case ever since.

Not everything is smooth sailing, not when gadgets can be used for purposes other than learning. A no-gaming policy exists, and students caught gaming on campus get a disciplinary warning. Facebook, Twitter, and game sites are blocked by a secure firewall.
To discourage students from using extraneous apps during classes when screens are facing away from the teacher, teachers roam the classroom, and some enforce random screen checks. Think of these like random drug tests which are effective deterreents to misbehaviour. Also, in high-tech Xavier, students are not allowed to bring cell phones at all, unlike most other schools.

Several schools require computer classes starting from Kindergarten (and parents and teachers complain that students never learn to write by hand). In Xavier, computer classes start in Grade Four, after students learn how to write in cursive. Keyboarding is introduced, mainly through typing games. Students learn proper posture and ergonomics.

Right now the NExT team wants to equip students with more of the skills they need as digital citizens, such as digital literacy, ethics, and online safety. For example, when students make videos to be posted online, they are not allowed to include any personal information, such as their real name, address, etc.

“Many students are more liberated online,” says Ngo. “They may even have a different persona. They may not think first before posting something. We need to discuss with them the dangers that can happen.”

“High-school students analyze case studies,” says Tess Torralba of the NExT team. “We guide them on how to handle online information. We have a module with guidelines on how to prevent and deal with cyberbullying.”

Such are the responsibilities of schools in our wired world.
Teaching Social Science with Tech

By Franco Nicolo P. Addun

Social Science teacher, Xavier School

CORE IDEAS

I follow four core ideas in using technology to teach Social Science.

1. Bridge the gap.

With technology, we can bridge the gap between the learning styles of twenty-first-century students and the content of Social Science. It is a common misconception among students that Social Science is a boring or dull subject; the use of technology redefines their mindset.

By capitalizing on how students best learn today, through technology integration, we are able to teach Social Studies in a new way.

2. Become a teacher-facilitator.

Technology can redefine the role of the teacher into that of a facilitator. With the presence of search engines and almost all information present and accessible, our role inside the classroom has significantly been reduced.

It is impractical nowadays to just be a “teacher” inside the classroom; the twenty-first century is now forcing us to be “facilitators.” Rather than only teaching as teacher-facilitators, we focus more on directing and guiding students about the acquisition and processing of information inside the classroom, with the use of technology.

Technology allows us to create a virtual classroom outside the physical one.

3. Individualize instruction.

We can use opportunities to individualize instruction. With their own iPads or laptops, students now have more room to choose how they would like to learn. They can choose to watch videos, read articles, use applications that allow visualizations, and more. These devices allow students to learn by doing their tasks individually, with many resources available to them.

4. Create a virtual class.

Technology allows us to create a virtual classroom outside the physical one.
Learning is not limited to the classroom. The learning process must be continued even after class hours, and technology is a vital part of fulfilling this. There are a lot of learning websites nowadays that offer opportunities for teacher-facilitators to extend the physical classroom online.

I use a learning website called Edmodo (www.edmodo.com) which allows me to create virtual classes. I use this website to post materials like handouts and PowerPoint presentations, assign homework, and engage my students in discussions and surveys.

Edmodo also serves as a venue for students to ask questions so that they will never feel disconnected from the learning process. Since it utilizes the same interface as Facebook, students are comfortable while learning.

Let us focus more on positive feedback while giving constructive criticism to encourage students to continue using technology for learning.

**CORE CONCEPTS**

I follow three core concepts to ensure effective and memorable learning: Experience, Feedback, Self-Design.

In Experience, we let students experience a situation by providing opportunities for them to actually immerse themselves in tasks that require the use of technology. We plan activities so that students can maximize their experience with optimal results.

In Feedback, we give comments or suggestions immediately whenever possible. Let us focus more on positive feedback while giving constructive criticism to encourage students to continue using technology for learning.

In Self-Design, we allow the students to look for answers to their questions using technology. We encourage them to decide on how to explore and learn things. Let us remain open and flexible as to how they come up with their ideas.
Using iPads in Filipino Class

By Reagan Austria,
Filipino teacher, Xavier School

It has always been a big challenge for us Filipino teachers to motivate our students into studying Filipino. But thanks to the advent of technology, and through the help of NExT (Xavier School’s New Experiences with Technology. See page ___), we were able to gain their interest by integrating different apps into our lessons.

Filipino is a language course, and basically involves sets of writing, speaking, reading and listening exercises. For Grade Six in School Year 2011–2012, our students did photoblogging during our lesson on pang-uri (adjectives), applying the word processing they were taught in their computer subject.

Students listened to podcasts and audio recordings via Ubuntu when they studied tula (poetry). They produced vlogs as an alternative to writing, allowing them to generate and explain ideas, and communicate their stories.

Since we are at the height of screen technology, we have been experimenting with how iPads can further engage our students while they learn the needed skills. iPads are powerful because of the many apps offered in the market (many free, some purchased).

Blogging, vlogging, and podcasting can be easily done. Story-telling is now made even more enjoyable via apps like PuppetPals and Toontastic. Generating ideas and making connections are now easily shared and presented with the help of Idea Sketch and Mindomo.

For school year 2012-2013, we conduct literature classes on synchronized iPads, via apps like Socrative and Nearpod.

In the past, animation was simply seen on TV and movies. Now it has become a common tool in classroom teaching and learning.

Animation

In the past, animation was simply seen on TV and movies. Now it has become a common tool in classroom teaching and learning. Animation as a Learning Tool, a module brochure by VIA University College in Denmark, says that through animation, “children develop skills and competencies in storytelling, visual communication, cognition, emotional ethic and aesthetic aspects, observation and sensitive aspects, concentration, and problem-solving and innovative aspects.”

With Web 2.0, animation is now produced easily and inexpensively. Once
limited to specialists, animation has now become accessible to teachers and students, even without intensive technical training. Two examples are Go!Animate and FluxTime Studio.

In the website Box of Tricks, the writer describes how he made use of the Go!Animate program as an assessment tool for his German language class, an alternative he used instead of asking his students to write a dialogue on paper or exercise book.

FluxTime, a program that has online and stand-alone versions, promotes animation through projects such as the Liverpool History Animation intiative, European Animation project, and a competition called Mission to Titan, which students from ages four to fourteen participated in.

Animation provides a sure means to capture and sustain student interest in class, given that many young people grew up watching animation on TV and in movies. However, the effectiveness of using animation and other Web 2.0 tools in classroom teaching and learning will always depend on the type of learning experience that we teachers design for a class.

We need to familiarize ourselves with our students’ context and interests so we can help provide a learning environment where instructional and learning tools (like animation) can best be used to meet the learning objectives set for our class.

Milen Aviles and Family
KEEPING VALUES INTACT

Raising children takes on an added dimension when a family is uprooted and moved overseas. Exposure to a different culture is enriching and interesting, but adjustments have to be made. Facing challenges head-on is one thing that Milen Aviles and her husband Medel are well prepared for. They had started value formation in their children when they were still young.

Moving to Dubai years ago was a career move that Medel took when their youngest son Moses was only five years old. Their second son Martin was then in Grade Two at the Ateneo de Manila and Martha was a fourth-grader in Rose Hill. In Dubai, the children were enrolled in an international school, which had a different system from our local schools. Tutors were unheard of because with a mere twenty to twenty-three students per class, the teachers were able to closely supervise each student’s progress.

Problems were addressed immediately. When students turn in sloppy work, the parent is advised right away. Milen did not find the need to supervise her kids’ study time as closely as she used to do in Manila.

The Aviles household rules went with them all the way to Dubai. When the children get home from school, the time between 3:30 p.m. and 5:30 p.m. is spent for eating snacks, doing homework and projects, and hanging out with each another. The two hours
are media and gadget breaks; the desktop computer is only for homework.

On Saturday mornings, from 9:30 a.m. to 12 noon, no television and gadgets are allowed, as the entire family takes a leisurely breakfast and spends more time together, except when the children have scheduled sports activities.

Gadgets and cell phones are not allowed on the dinner table. Bedroom doors are not to be locked so that Milen is free to look in on what her children are doing anytime. Her daughter sometimes lapses but Milen knows that she is just trying on clothes and taking pictures.

The children all end their day by reading before they go to sleep. It does not matter to Milen how long it takes them to finish a book as long as they read a part of it every night. She believes that in time and with much exposure, they will grow up with good reading habits.

Martha can now discern what books are appropriate for her age. Once, Milen saw a book written by an author very popular with young adults and asked if Martha would like to get one. Martha declined, saying that some parts of the book are not proper for her age.

Martha, Martin, and Moses are more into sports than into gadgets. Though they each have a cell phone, some of them are hand-me-downs from their parents. The boys are not into online gaming; Milen says she sees the two boys playing games only with one another. Martha has her own MacBook only because it is a school requirement. Otherwise, all the kids use a common desktop located in an area where Milen can see them while she is doing chores.

Martha does social networking, but only moderately. Sometimes the children try to multitask on the computer, with a number of windows open at one time, but Milen issues a reminder.

The only other gadget the children own is an old iPod. Martha downloads features about fashion, while the boys love to watch funny videos on YouTube.

Milen sees to it that she is in on what the boys watch. She tells them that just because something is funny does not mean that it is okay to view it. Lately she has banned them from watching a certain show because of the crude language.

A challenge of living in a rich country is the exposure to too much materialism. The parents make sure that their children are taught the value of hard work. Rewards have to be earned. When Martha was twelve years old, she asked for a BlackBerry for her birthday. Unfortunately, her grades were not good enough so Milen said she could only get it after her grades went up. Martha respected her parents’ decision, did what she had to do, and got the coveted phone six months after her birthday.

Since shopping malls abound in Dubai and the children are exposed to wealthy classmates, they are surrounded by constant temptations. Milen is always around to guide them and her daughter has learned to be prudent, heading to the sale rack for her clothes.

Since the children are closely monitored, Milen has not encountered serious disciplinary problems. The two boys constantly bicker, but this is normal between brothers. She says that when she gets mad, her “homilies” are enough punishment for
According to Milen, too much talking is not effective. Sometimes, the natural and logical consequences have to take place—“If you do not study, you fail” and the lesson is learned the hard way.

Another chapter of their life is about to unfold as Medel’s new posting requires the family to now move to Singapore. A new country entails a new set of challenges, but with strong bonds, the Aviles family faces the future with confidence and hope.

DEEPER READING


FluxTime Studio. (2010). Animation for kids: Create animation online with FluxTime


About the Authors

Queena N. Lee-Chua, Ph.D. graduated from the Ateneo de Manila University in 1987, with a degree in BS Mathematics, summa cum laude. She also received a master’s degree in Counseling Psychology and a doctor’s degree in Clinical Psychology from the same university, where she is now Full Professor.

Her weekly column Eureka! appears in the Learning Section of the Philippine Daily Inquirer. She also writes a monthly column Homework for Working Mom Magazine. She has written more than forty books on mathematics, popular science and IT, education and psychology, family businesses, and inspirational stories. She used to host the TV show Fun with Math on PTV-4.

A sought-after speaker for schools, government, civic groups, and businesses, Queena is also a consultant to government and nongovernment projects. A past governing member of the National Book Development Board, she specializes in mathematics and science education and learning psychology, popular math and science.

Queena has garnered many awards, among them the The Outstanding Young Filipinos (TOYF), The Outstanding Women in the Nation’s Service (the TOWNS), the Metrobank Foundation Outstanding Teachers Award, the Department of Science and Technology’s Great Men and Women of Science, Outstanding Young Scientists (the OYS), and the Carlos Palanca Memorial Awards for Literature. She was also featured in Asia Inc. Magazine’s Who’s Hot in Asia, and the Philippines’ 25 Incredible Women in Marie Claire Magazine. In 2010, with a Malaysian scientist, she became the first person to receive the Third World Academy of Sciences Regional Prize for Public Understanding of Science for the East Asia, Southeast Asia, and the Pacific Region.

She is married to Smith and they have a son, Scott, who has won math and essay contests, including the Palanca. Scott is also the author of Top 10 Travels series, which was a finalist in the 2011 National Book Awards.

Ma. Isabel Sison-Dionisio, M.A. graduated from the Ateneo de Manila University, with a degree in BS Management. After a stint in corporate human resources, Maribel completed her master’s degree in Theological Studies, majoring in family ministries. Maribel has worked in the Center for Family Ministries Foundation and at the Reintegration for Care and Wholeness Foundation.

A frequent speaker in workshops and seminars, Maribel appears regularly on TV programs. She writes a relationship column with her husband Allan, a doctor, for Working Mom Magazine. In 2004, Maribel co-authored with Queena Helping Our Children Do Well in School and its companion manual, which garnered the National Book Award.

Maribel and Allan run The Love Institute, and they have three children, Rafael Ignacio, David Francisco, and Angelica Marie.

Nerisa C. Fernandez graduated from the College of the Holy Spirit in 1972, with two degrees, an AB and a BS in Management. She worked in the Market Research Department of Procter and Gamble Philippines, but became a full-time homemaker when her son
Gerard was born.

When Gerard entered the Ateneo de Manila, Nesy became an active parent volunteer, and in 1996, has particularly volunteered her time and efforts in Pathways for Higher Education. In 2007, with Queena and Maribel, Nesy co-authored the book *Magaling ang Pinoy! How and Why Filipino Public School Students Achieve*, which won the Loyola Schools Outstanding Scholarly Work with Social Impact. Nesy is married to businessman Ramon Fernandez III, and they have a son, Gerard, who is now teaching in the Ateneo Grade School.

**Michele S. Alignay, M.A.** is a registered guidance counselor and is currently pursuing her PhD degree in Family Studies at Miriam College. She completed her BS Psychology degree from the University of Sto. Tomas in 1998, and a master’s degree in Family Psychology and Education from Miriam College in 2008.

Ichel has worked as a guidance counselor for grade-school children in St. Pedro Poveda College, Assumption Antipolo, and Miriam College Grade School. Now she is a private counseling practitioner for teens, kids, parents, and families. An associate of The Love Institute and the One Core Center, Ichel is a counseling consultant and conducts sexuality programs for schools.

A columnist for *Kerygma Magazine*, Ichel is a frequent resource person on psychology, and has appeared in various TV and radio programs.

Ichel is married to Custer Alignay, and they have two children, Miguel Iñigo and Mikaela Isabel. Ichel can be contacted at ichel.alignay@gmail.com.