



PARENTING FOR MORAL GROWTH

SOCIAL, EMOTIONAL, AND ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES FOR INDEPENDENT
SCHOOL PARENTS

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The Power of Half

One Family's decision to stop taking
and start giving back

The story of the Salwen family – a very successful Atlanta couple and their two teenagers who decide to sell their 6,500 square foot home and donate half of the proceeds to charity – is one of extraordinary generosity and commitment. That Kevin Salwen and his daughter, Hannah, have written a book about their philanthropic journey and been interviewed on the *Today* show makes clear that their family service project was atypical and newsworthy. Extensively researching

and then funding the work in Ghana of the non-profit Hunger Project with an \$800,000 donation is on a whole other level than handing out food at the local soup kitchen or gathering household items for Goodwill (both of which the Salwens also did). The narrative of their grand gesture would both inspire and instruct any family interested in doing less taking and more giving, even if on a less ambitious scale. But what I find extraordinary about their story is

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SCREENS

In a recent article in the magazine *Exchange*, Susan Linn, psychologist at Judge Baker's Children's Center and Harvard Medical School and Director of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood, describes her observations of two couples, both parents of a toddler, having dinner in a restaurant. She writes:

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how it captures and defines the way effective parents respond to their kids’ natural developmental progression in ways that foster moral growth for all involved. Of course, implementing these parenting strategies need not involve selling the family home.

Kevin and Joan Salwen possess the number one prerequisite for parenthood: they can take a deep breath and take a life-changing risk. Kevin, a columnist for the *Wall Street Journal*, gave up interviewing Washington power brokers and flying on Air Force One to found a start-up magazine. Joan, who rose to the top at Accenture while successfully balancing work and family, left the boardroom for the classroom as a teacher at Atlanta Girls School.

The couple’s story makes clear that they strive to be thoughtful providers for their children. They invest in their huge suburban home in part so they can host their kids’ end-of-season volleyball and baseball parties, as well as fund-raisers for Habitat for Humanity. They send their children, Hannah and Joseph, to Westminster Schools, where as a fifth grader Hannah was involved in a service project feeding the homeless that becomes the “pilot light” fueling her passion to help others. But as Kevin describes in the opening chapter, evocatively titled “The Treadmill,” the predictable trajectory of two driven, hard-working parents leads to the unintended consequence of unexamined consumerism and a busy family schedule that runs counter to taking time for reflection.

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“Screens” continued

One family came equipped with a bright red portable DVD player. Their son was immersed in Thomas the Tank Engine, a highly-regarded television program for preschoolers, throughout their meal. He was completely silent and oblivious to his surroundings, absent-mindedly chewing on the morsels of food his mom fed him from her fork. His parents were able to enjoy their meal uninterrupted. They were even able to carry on an extended conversation, an admittedly rare experience for parents of very young children.

The other parents had a less peaceful meal. After their toddler reached the limit of his tolerance for being confined in a high chair, rather than distracting him from the urge to explore the sights and sounds of the restaurant, his parents took turns walking him around. Clutching a plastic spoon, he spent several minutes with his nose pressed against a case of fancifully decorated pastries. He made shoveling gestures with his spoon and held it up to his mom. “Are you giving me a taste?” she asked. “Yum!” Laughing, he did it again. “Up” he said, pointing to the top row of cakes. “That’s right,” his mom said. “The pink cakes are up.” “Down!” he chortled, bending his knees a little as he pointed to the bottom row. Holding his mom’s hand, he trotted back to their table where he was handed over to his dad, ending up back at the pastry case while his mom finished her dinner. With his parents’ help, his inborn capacity for playful exploration transformed the restaurant into a laboratory for exploring color, spatial concepts, and make-believe.

Parents should not feel guilty when they opt to help their children engage with safe, healthy media (or spare fellow restaurant patrons from a noisily unhappy child). In fact, given the

avalanche of images to which children are exposed from birth, the couple with the DVD player might be applauded for choosing high quality, developmentally appropriate content. However, as Linn is trying to make clear, a screen is still a screen. Sitting in front of one is apt to favor being passively entertained rather than creatively exploring the environment and directly interacting with other people.

That our children are growing up with rapidly evolving, ever-present media is a given. The effects of that media on the culture they will inherit, indeed, on the very way their brains and thinking processes will be shaped, is only partially understood and the topic of much speculation. Witness the title of a new book by Nicholas Carr. In *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains* (W.W. Norton, 2010), Carr turns to neurological science and recent cognitive research to explore how the media through which we gain information might “mediate” us. *The New York Times* recently featured the story of five neuroscientists spending a week rafting in the wilderness while discussing ways in which lives saturated with use of technology might change our thinking and behavior (“Your Brain on Computers: Outdoors and Out of Reach, Studying the Brain”). With no small irony the article reported that these sophisticated experts realized how habituated they had become to checking emails. It took them about three days of being unplugged and in a completely

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“Half” continued

In 2006, 14 year-old Hannah, having been struck by the economic inequality between a homeless man approaching the driver of an expensive Mercedes for a handout, responded with the idealistic, black-and-white analysis typical of many teenagers. She posed the rhetorical question that initiated the family project: “Dad, if that man had a less nice car then that man there could have a meal.” And as interesting as the observation is, and as far as it takes the Selwans, from their exclusive Peach Tree Circle neighborhood to rural Ghana, the real mileage of this book is in her parents’ answer. ■

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natural setting to get over the feeling of needing to access their inbox. Their break from the virtual world allowed them to rediscover the luxury of long, far-ranging discussions with colleagues and relish the opportunity for uninterrupted reflection on those same discussions.

But back to our kids and that avalanche of digital images. According to data collected by the FTC in 2007, children ages 2 to 11 see more than 25,000 advertisements a year on television, a figure that does not include product placement in popular shows (i.e., Bree, a character on *Desperate Housewives*, shows off her new Lexus to her neighbors). Add to that the advertising images children encounter on the Internet, cell phones, MP3 players, video games, school buses, and in school. Keep in mind that advertising to children and teens is associated with unhealthy values, consumption and behavior. Even if parents scrupulously adhere to the recommendation of the American Academy of Pediatrics that children under 2 not watch any television and that those older than 2 watch no more than 1 to 2 hours a day of quality programming, children will still be surrounded by ubiquitous electronic screens. Often those screens will feature images that encourage children to consume a particular product or reinforce “cradle to grave” brand loyalty.

How to respond?

Understand developmental limitations:

- children younger than 6 have a hard time distinguishing program content from commercials
- children younger than 8 might not be able to grasp that the purpose of a commercial is to sell a product

With younger children, work hard to:

- limit their screen time
- engage them in activities that involve self-directed, curiosity-driven exploration and creative play

With older children and teens:

- continue to set reasonable limits on screen time
- train your kids to recognize, question, and protect themselves from the influence of advertising that all those screens will bring into their lives

Says Nancy Willard of the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use (see a review of *Cyber-Safe Kids*, *Cyber-Savvy Teens* in the past Spring issue of PMG), “Children and teens are ‘hot prospects.’ Advertisers can track, trick and target them largely outside of parent awareness... The U.S. Federal Trade Commission is striving to address this issue. Industry is responding by providing greater transparency and user control. This will not work unless users become better educated. And given that the vast majority of adult users have no idea how behavioral

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Hamlet's BlackBerry

*Doubt thou the stars are fire;
Doubt that the sun doth move;
Doubt truth to be a liar;
But never doubt I love.*

(Hamlet, Act II, scene ii)

These are lines from a love letter to Ophelia attributed to Hamlet. Today's love struck teen would be texting. And no doubts remain about the stars. Consider the iPhone app that can identify constellations when pointed at the night sky.

New technology can seem decidedly futuristic. But common sense approaches to helping kids manage digital media aren't rocket science:

- Keep televisions and computers out of kids' bedrooms and in "public spaces" in the home.
- Turn off cell/smart phones when it's time to sleep.
- Impose time limits on screen time and discourage too much multi-tasking.
- Place a priority on family activities that emphasize direct interaction, physical activity, and time outdoors.

And even in a world crammed with onscreen images, kids are still watching their parents - live, up close and personal. Arguably the most powerful influence parents can have on their children's on-line habits is the model they provide in their own digital media use.

We know that balance and moderation are essential in all aspects of human experience, including time spent in front of screens. So how can busy, constantly connected, frequently overwhelmed parents adopt a more moderate approach to technology? In *Hamlet's BlackBerry: A Practical Philosophy for Building the Good Life in the Digital Age* (HarperCollins, 2010) journalist William Powers argues that parents first must question the desirability of living life in pursuit of what he calls "digital maximalism," that is to be constantly connected, "to merge, to live simultaneously with everyone, sharing every moment, every perception, thought and action with our screens."

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"Screens" continued

advertising actually works, the educational task is significant."

Begin by familiarizing yourself with what is meant by targeted or behavioral advertising. (Check out the "fact sheets" at the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood website: www.commercialexploitation.org). Then consider these suggestions Willard offers for parents and kids:

- Find and evaluate a privacy policy, especially on a social networking or personality quiz site. Hunt down the "opt out" to avoid profiling when possible.
- Find a banner ad on your (or your child's) profile that appears to be targeted based on specific information the site knows about you.
- Watch for advergaming - ads that are part of games on activity or virtual community websites.
- Watch for sites that engage in "buzz marketing" by encouraging you to send ads to your friends or "permission marketing" by encouraging you to "friend" a product or a company or sign up to receive ads.
- Use the Internet to research products and services. Find companies that provide helpful information. Support sites that provide you with the ability to control what personal information is collected and how it is used.

Time in front of screens clearly exposes kids to advertising practices designed to manipulate their values and desires. Plus, time spent in front of screens limits time that can be spent exercising, exploring, reflecting, and wondering. Help kids find some balance. If all else fails, consider a rafting trip in the wilderness. ■

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When it comes to how kids interpret the behavior of their parents and others in the world around them, Powers is blunt:

Kids aren't stupid, and they're especially good at spotting double standards. Everything they see and hear around them tells them that the screen is where all the fun and action are and where they need to go to thrive and succeed. The occasional news report (about) digital addiction can't undo thousands of others touting the "must have" gadget, the social network everyone's joining, and so on. Parents can lecture all day, but their moral authority is rooted in their own lives.

What can Mom and Dad know about this alleged life beyond the screen if they themselves never go twenty minutes without a BlackBerry glance?

By no means is *Hamlet's BlackBerry* a Luddite screed.

On the contrary, Powers depends on digital communication to make a living, and embraces the virtues and efficiencies of learning about and connecting with the world via the Internet. Furthermore, he doesn't see the distractedness, fragmentation, and restlessness we experience today as new and unprecedented. He carefully builds the case that throughout history, periods of rapid technological advances have highlighted the perennial "conflict between the exterior, social self and the interior, private one." Focusing on "The Seven Philosophers of Screens," – Plato, Seneca, Guttenberg, Shakespeare,

Franklin, Thoreau, and McLuhan – Powers illustrates that wise, visionary thinkers have repeatedly approached the innovations of their time so as to maximize benefit and minimize harm. They strategically chose how best to use new tools or new opportunities to interact with others. Powers concludes that for those of us living in the 21st century "to lead happy, productive lives in a connected world, we need to master the art of disconnecting."

For kids (and parents) today, the default mode is connection to the virtual crowd through screen and keyboard, or through the ultimate

hybrid, the touch screen. Seamlessly moving from tab to tab, link to link, icon to icon, Powers contends "we're eliminating the gaps when we should be creating them." He argues that we need "some space between tasks, respites, stopping places for the mind." He sees these "gaps," which often naturally occur in

“ ... we need “some space between tasks, respites, stopping places for the mind.” ”

moments of solitude when we quietly journey inward, as essential to developing personal depth and maturity. We must reflect on and value our separateness, and afford ourselves the regular opportunity to disconnect and be alone, before we can successfully be together. Powers notes, "The only way to cultivate a happier inner life is to spend time there, and that's impossible when you're constantly attending to the latest distraction. Attention deficit issues, internet addiction, and other technological maladies are all about being stuck in outward gear."

Early in *Hamlet's BlackBerry*, Powers asserts, "Someone who cannot tolerate aloneness is someone who doesn't know he's grown up. It takes courage to let go of that fantasy of childhood safety. The world may never seem so certain again, but what fresh air we breathe when we take possession of our own separateness, our own integrity. That's when our adult life really begins." Constant connection and togetherness can impede moral and spiritual growth. Parents may interpret their kids' ability to connect with them instantly via IM or text as increasing a child's safety, but Powers makes the case that the digital umbilical cord must be unplugged for natural growth to occur. And while a parent may be less anxious when her child is "safely" under her roof and in front of a screen, sedentary time spent inside a virtual cocoon puts a young person at risk in other ways.

In the last third of the book, Powers describes his own family's ongoing experiment with a Digital Sabbath, which involves turning off the Internet connection for the weekend. He amplifies the point that the ability to be comfortable when inhabiting a separate, interior world equates with psychological maturity, referencing psychoanalyst Donald Winnicott's essay, "The Capacity to Be Alone." Winnicott's work dealt with how a child develops emotional self-reliance when she recognizes that she can be safe and engage in separate activities even when not directly attended to by her mother, who may be present but attending to other things. Powers compares his experience of adjusting to "disconnected" weekends to that of a baby learning to play alone contentedly. He describes his family

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gradually no longer craving the on-line equivalent of a mother “interacting with us...making funny hand gestures and googoo sounds to keep us stimulated and entertained. In effect, we’d recognized that our screens were infantilizing our lives together.”

Despite that powerful value judgment, Powers acknowledges that no one size fits all when it comes to families negotiating ways to disconnect from the virtual world. Pointing to corporate attempts to increase productivity by mandating “no email Friday,” Powers determines that executive fiat to “just say no” haven’t worked. He offers as a model of a successful approach the one employed by Benjamin Franklin in responding to the social and informational overload of his time. Franklin took his own gregarious temperament into consideration and then tried to practice positive habits intended to curb personal weakness, capitalize on strengths, and ultimately increase his individual happiness. To create a ritual designed to limit or define times to be on-line, families must first be convinced of the creativity, relaxation, mindfulness, and pleasure in direct human interaction to be gained during the disconnect. In this regard, parents must put on their own oxygen masks before attempting to help the child sitting next to them.

Perhaps the most intriguing suggestion Powers offers for thinking about balancing life with and without screens is the notion of a “Walden Zone,” referring to Henry David Thoreau’s two year experiment living at slight remove from the bustle of Concord in an intentionally small,

sparely furnished cabin on Walden Pond. Like the Internet today, the telegraph brought the world to Thoreau’s doorstep. But his home was his sanctuary. This is not to say that we should ban digital media at home. Rather, we should intentionally organize media use in our homes so that it occurs where (and when) it makes the most sense to support healthy, balanced family life. Some areas of the home should be dedicated to activities that don’t involve digital technology. A screen-free “Walden Zone” might be:

- a quiet alcove where a family member reads a book, writes in a journal, or draws on a sketchpad
- a playroom where rowdy, physical activity is encouraged, or where family members go to practice yoga or play and dance to music
- a backyard or nearby park where parents and kids enjoy nature together, leaving digital gadgets behind

What matters is that we create and regularly enter our own version of a “Walden Zone.” When disconnected from the virtual crowd, Powers remembers, “I’m not just a brain, a pair of eyes, and typing fingers. I’m a person with a living body that moves through time and space. In letting screens run my life, I discount the rest of my existence, effectively renouncing my wholeness.”

Here’s to us all, parents and kids, living the good life in the digital age. ■

Do Kids’ Abilities Change, and Should I Push for Test Performance? *Yes, and No.*

Is it better to “know” that your child is bright? or average? or not intellectually gifted? or is it better not to know, but to “think” that young people’s abilities are malleable—that they change over time and depending on circumstances? The answer may not be completely either/or, but the evidence is mounting that the latter is better: that—despite a certain amount of intellectual ability that we know is genetic— there is much to be said for a firm belief in abilities being able to change over time.

A recent study showed that a parent’s belief about the ability of her child to grow academically (in this case the study was done with mothers) affects the way she works with her child on problems. Mothers who believed that abilities are relatively “fixed,” tended to exhibit more of two behaviors. They were more controlling when they worked with their child on a set of problems, and they were more focused on the child’s performance, meaning that they paid more attention to how the child might do on “the test.” On the other hand, those who believed in the malleability of children’s abilities supported the child’s autonomy more, and had more of a “mastery

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“Test” continued

focus” than a performance focus. A mastery focus is a concern that the child understand the problem and know how to do it, rather than on the results of a test. Some of us may think that the two are basically the same thing—indeed, if a child masters the material, he or she ought to do well on the test—but the difference in focus is of considerable importance.

“ ... the children of parents who have a mastery focus do better academically than the children of parents with a performance focus. ”

This information is from the September 2010, issue of *Developmental Psychology*, in an article by researchers at the Universities of Nebraska (Lincoln) and Illinois (Urbana-Champaign) who looked into how “Ability Mindsets Influence the Quality of Mothers’ Involvement in Children’s Learning.” The experimental design entailed mothers with the two mindsets described above: the “entity mindset” that sees children’s abilities as basically fixed, and the “incremental mindset” that views children’s abilities as changeable with some effort.

Three points about this article and the research it reports seem of special importance for parents. The most significant is that the children of parents who have a mastery focus do better academically than the children of parents with a

performance focus. In other words, there is a large body of research to show that focusing on performance —how you do on the test —undermines children’s motivation and affects negatively their performance in school. Children are both more motivated and more academically successful when parents are more concerned with how much they are understanding and how complete their understanding is.

A second point—and this was the issue in question in this article—is that our beliefs about the malleability of our children’s abilities seem to affect the point made in the paragraph above: they influence how we work with children on certain kinds of problems. If we believe that children’s abilities probably will never change, then we will have a greater tendency to deal with them in such a way that diminishes their motivation and negatively affects academic performance. Far better, thus, that we take a hopeful

“ If we believe that children’s abilities probably will never change, then we will have a greater tendency to deal with them in such a way that diminishes their motivation and negatively affects academic performance. ”

approach, in the belief (which seems to be more fact than belief) that our children’s inborn abilities can be enhanced, or not, depending on how we work with them.

A third point is more specifically related to moral growth in children. We have noted in *Parenting for Moral Growth* as well as in a number of other CSEE publications how essential autonomy, competence, and belongingness are in establishing a climate conducive to moral growth. Parents whose involvement with children supports autonomy and entails a focus on mastery are participating in the development of children with the building blocks of moral growth. ■

Moorman, Elizabeth A. & Eva M. Pomerantz (2010). Ability Mindsets Influence the Quality of Mothers’ Involvement in Children’s Learning: An Experimental Investigation. *Developmental Psychology*, Vol. 46, No. 5, 1354-1362.

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