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Camp Unplugged: Loosening the Digital Umbilical

by Christopher A. Thurber, Ph.D.

Young people between eight and eighteen spend an average of 6.5 hours a day absorbed in media — much of the time is solitary.

PRO-CHILDREN SOLUTIONS

Electronic technology has done a lot to make life more convenient. Sadly, the 1950s dream of having robots and computers do most jobs so that adults could work fifteen-hour weeks never came true. In fact, the seductiveness of new technology probably contributes to most Americans' working longer than forty hours per week. For many people, checking their e-mail outside of work hours is habitual. Others keep their cell phone handy to make and receive calls during time off. This summer, I regularly saw parents "on vacation" at the beach checking their e-mail on handheld devices while their children splashed in the ocean. Sure, these gadgets are convenient, but they easily blur the lines between work, play, and family time.

Electronic technologies also provide a mixed bag — sorry, stream — of media. Television programs, DVD movies, Internet sites, and video games are entertaining, often educational. On the other hand, unsavory content and time absorption are the two most frequently cited problems associated with these media. Research last year by the Kaiser Foundation concluded that young people between eight and eighteen spend an average of 6.5 hours a day absorbed in media. Most of it is electronic and much of the time is solitary.

So parents can be drawn into more work; children into more isolating, unwholesome screen time. Sound familiar? Probably. These are becoming such trendy laments in



21st century America that some of you may be tempted to stop reading here. But don't, because the rest of this article is about solutions. Not pro-technology or anti-technology, but pro-children, pro-camp solutions.

PASSWORD: THOUGHTFUL USE

Can there be any way out of the technology trap? Can there be uses of technology that connect, rather than disconnect people? What can save children from the (de)vices of the modern world? The answers, of course, are: Yes, yes, and camp.

Is it really that simple? Indeed. All it requires is thoughtful application of intentionally selected technologies. Whatever the technology, it must meet one of four criteria: efficiency, connection, education, and entertainment. Electronic technologies are particularly welcome when they save us time, nourish our relationships, teach us something, or amuse us in healthy, wholesome ways. If your next use of a cell phone, computer, digital music player, or handheld hybrid meets one of these criteria, without noticeably eroding one of the other criteria, then it has passed the "thoughtful" test.

These days, every camp uses electronic technology of some sort, from telephones to toasters. Even the most rustic and isolated camps use electronic technologies

for safety (e.g., GPS units, walkie-talkies, satellite phones) or publicity (e.g., Web pages). Evaluating a camp's appropriate use of technology no longer involves questioning whether it uses new technology, but how.

FAMIL-E-VALUES

Every family has different values and a different history with technology. For some, what camp offers is welcome relief from the burdensome yoke of electronic technologies. For other families, camp might offer tools that truly enhance interpersonal connections. As you consider each point, ask yourself what makes the most sense for your circumstances, your own family's values and history, and your child's development.

* TELEPHONES/CELL

. Calls are inexpensive, simple, and instantaneous. Nevertheless, some camps have a "no phone/no call" policy because they recognize that telephone calls exacerbate homesickness and erode children's independence. Although parents and camp directors may have phone contact, campers are not typically permitted to make or receive calls. (Exceptions are made for family emergencies, of course.) Some seven- or eight-week camps allow scheduled weekly phone calls. Again, this policy reflects the belief that phone contact is not a treatment for homesickness, nor should it

interfere with the growth in self-reliance most camps seek to promote.

* **E-MAIL.** Many camps allow parents to send e-mails to their children which are sorted and distributed with the regular mail. Like phone calls, these e-mails are inexpensive and simple, but unlike a call, children and parents don't hear the sound of each others' voices. As tender as real voices are in other contexts, such immediate contact while children are at camp reliably flares campers' homesickness (and parents' "kid-sickness"). By contrast, e-mails have the advantage of being more like a traditional letter. They are written, not spoken, so they can be handled and reread at will. And until recently, campers replied using traditional letters — most still do.

* **FACSIMILE.** Faxes used to be the ugly duckling of the tech world. Today, plain paper faxes resolve images almost as well as photocopy machines, and some camps are using faxes to send campers' handwritten letters to their eager parents. Potentially, a parent could send an e-mail to their child in the morning and receive a faxed reply in the afternoon. Potentially, this also creates an unnecessary burden for parents, children, and camp staff.



* **PHOTOGRAPHS.** Since the 1920s, some camps have published photographic yearbooks. Of course, families had to wait until Thanksgiving to receive a copy. The advantage of such a long wait was that it forced children to recreate a verbal narrative of the experience. These narratives not only helped parents understand their child's camp experience, they also helped children comprehend it, especially the parts that may have been challenging or confusing. Today, such narratives may be bypassed because camps are posting hundreds of digital photographs a day on their Web sites. Parents at home or at work can instantly view, purchase, and download photos of their child at camp. Of course, this can also create undue anxiety when your child is not photographed on a certain day, or appears not to be smiling in a certain snapshot.

* **VIDEO STREAMING.** You thought photos captured the camp experience on your desktop? What

about live digital video using Web cams placed strategically around camp? Whereas some camps see this as the ultimate way to give parents a window into their child's world, others see it as the ultimate way to rob children of an experience all their own. Even more so than the provision of photographs, this medium may create more anxiety than it was designed to quell and encourage children to bypass a truly interactive, personal narrative with their parents. Why write during camp or talk after camp when mom and dad already saw it all on their laptop?

RUN THE DIAGNOSTICS

In your search for the camp that best matches your child's interests and abilities, consider that the thoughtful application of electronic technology requires two things. First, it must meet one or more of the criteria of efficiency, connection, education, and wholesome entertainment without eroding any of the other criteria. Second, it must be in accord with the camp's stated mission. If a camp hasn't applied technology thoughtfully, consider other camps that have.

Any camp that passes these diagnostic tests must now pass two tough parent tests: First, does the camp's application of technology match your value

system? For example, the camp may provide live streaming video, thus providing a kind of connection and entertainment that is in accord with its stated mission of inviting parents to witness camp as it happens. But does this match your value system, which may include affording your child an opportunity to independently explore a new place and new relationships? Are you comfortable that someone could hack past the camp's Web site password and view camp activities, or does that threaten your sense of safety and privacy?

If the camp's technology passes your values test, the second test is this: Does the camp's application of technology give you an opportunity to take a break from full-time parenthood? As much as parents and children might miss one another, both say their relationship is stronger when they've had some time apart. However, if the camp's use of technology makes more work for you, it diminishes one of the benefits of time apart: respite for you.

WORTH THE WAIT

* Remember that camp is not the stock market or a breaking news story. It's community living, away from home, in a natural, recreational setting. Nothing needs to be transmitted at the speed of light. Plus, children are exposed to electronic technology all year. It's

nice for them to have a break during the summer.

It's also healthy for children and parents to talk with each other about their experiences after spending some planned time apart. Technologies should not crowd out the necessary psychological space for dialogue. The artificial needs created by new electronic technologies — to see and hear everything the instant it happens — are not always developmentally appropriate needs for our children. To wait a few days for a traditional letter to arrive, for example, gives parents and children alike the time to reflect, form new relationships, solve problems independently, and understand their emotions. In these ways, unplugging the digital umbilical promotes healthy growth and self-reliance.

WIRELESS INTERPERSONAL NETWORKING (WIN)

* An ancient technology — wireless interpersonal networking — has the advantage of being the most reliable, easy-to-learn, no-cost, virus-free option for children to connect at camp. In fact, camps were originally conceived — back in the 1860s — as the ideal connectivity

platform for wireless interpersonal networking. What is wireless interpersonal networking? It's an honest-to-goodness, face-to-face, totally free, real-time, one-on-one conversation between your child and another human being. Such networking has widespread applications for new camper-camper connections and camper-staff connections. The technology may also be transferred, without clumsy cables or costly upgrades, to camper-parent interactions, both in handwritten letters and post-camp conversations. This kind of connection is so precious and rewarding, it may be what you and your child remember best about camp.

Christopher A. Thurber, Ph.D., a board-certified clinical psychologist, is co-author of *The Summer Camp Handbook*. A proponent of the thoughtful application of electronic technology, Chris's latest project is hosting *The Secret Ingredients of Summer Camp Success*.



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www.serenbeplayhouse.com/shows-events/special-events

The Rock Ranch Easter Eggstravaganza!

Apr 8 11 AM – 4 PM

Schedule:

11:00 a.m. Easter Bunny photos (Bring your own camera)

12:30 p.m. – Easter Story presentation

12:45 p.m. – Egg hunts begin (Age-specific egg hunts will begin at staggered times at different locations across the ranch. Groups include: toddlers under two years old, ages two and three, ages four to six, ages seven to 12 and ages 13 and older) This free Easter Egg Hunt in The Rock, Ga. is our gift to the community. Children can hunt for more than 40,000 plastic prize eggs. This event will include a presentation of the Easter story from the Bible just before the egg hunt. Kids can also get photos with the Easter Bunny (no charge) at this popular Georgia event. Don't forget your camera! Concessions are available.

www.therockranch.com

Do you have an event for our calendar?
Email to deb@j4fd.com



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Dr. Ross Montgomery graduated from Valdosta State University, Cum Laude with a BS Degree in Biology. In 2013, Dr. Montgomery received his degree of Doctor of Optometry from the PA College of Optometry. Dr. Montgomery completed a residency at the Woolfson Eye Institute in Atlanta where he worked with expert ocular disease specialists. Dr. Montgomery is married to Erica Frederick, a life long resident of Peachtree City who is a graduate of Starr’s Mill High School. Dr. Montgomery enjoys fishing, outdoor activities, designing websites and spending time with his wife, family and friends.

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