How Waldorf School Media Policy Fosters Children's Healthy Development
By Richard Freed

My clinical practice is increasingly a forum for children and teens who suffer because their lives are spent with digital machines, and little else. These kids are often in great emotional pain, fail school despite being capable students, or are caught up in destructive addictions to video games, social media, and phones. It's heartbreaking to see these children and teens suffer from symptoms that could be prevented if our society better understood the effects of wired lives on kids' health and well-being.

More recently, the world is recognizing the danger of raising children with lives focused around screens, as the often tragic consequences are now highlighted in the popular press. This contrasts with the prior decade in which our mainstream culture was caught up in the supposed promise of expanding kids' use of digital devices. During this earlier period, outside of academic journals, there was virtually no discussion of the adverse effects of children's overuse of screens. One clear exception: Waldorf Schools and their media and tech policies.

For decades, Waldorf Schools have been prescient in naming the risks of children growing up immersed in problematic screen and phone content. Moreover, Waldorf Schools have also highlighted a non-content issue that is often overlooked: how kids' lives spent with screens displace vital childhood developmental experiences. Interestingly, while Waldorf School media/tech policy was considered conservative years ago, it is increasingly recognized as consistent with what science says are the lives kids need.

Nonetheless, powerful tech industry and marketing forces are more determined than ever to sell parents and schools on the benefits of putting kids before screens and phones. These messages are compelling and contribute to common myths about children's screen and tech use. In this article, I will outline a number of these digital-age myths and illustrate how science proves their undoing. We will also see how Waldorf Schools and their media policies provide a powerful antidote to these myths and point the way towards the childhoods young people need.

The Myth that Technology Brings Families Together

An Apple Christmas-time TV commercial suggests that purchasing kids an iPhone will bring them closer to family.[1] Similar marketing suggests that giving kids tablets and other devices is an effective means of building family bonds. Such promotions have contributed to parents providing children digital devices at ever earlier ages, with U.S. kids now typically getting a smartphone at 10 years of age.[2]

However, the message that the industry sends about the impact of gadgets on family contrasts with what many of us witness for ourselves in restaurants and other public settings, as children captivated by digital devices barely engage with or even notice their parents. The dramatically negative effects of screens and phones on family togetherness is also apparent in my clinical practice. I see a procession of depressed preteen and teen girls who are contemplating suicide, making cuts on their arms and thighs, or have taken too many pills because they "can't take it anymore." For the past five years, when I ask these girls how they spend their time at home after

school, , the great majority report an eerily similar scenario: “I come home, grab a snack, and then I’m in my room on my phone for most of the night.” Asking these girls about daily time spent with their family, they are often puzzled by the question, responding, “Ahh… We don’t really hang out… I’m just usually on my phone.”

Research indicates that the more time kids spend using the Internet for entertainment, the less time they have with their parents.[3] And a study in the journal *Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine* shows that kids who spend more time using the computer for amusement are less attached to their parents.[4]

The misunderstanding of the impact of smartphones and other digital devices on family is made even more dangerous by a culture that less recognizes how important it is for children and teens to maintain a strong bond with their families. Too many parents I work with have been convinced by pop-culture pundits that kids, as they reach their preteens and teens, should disconnect from their families to spend their lives with peers online. While it’s great for kids to have friends, their connection with parents and other caring adults is even more essential to their emotional health.[5]

There are a number of reasons why children need their parents more than their peers, but the heart of the matter is that kids, even teens, shouldn’t be receiving their primary “parenting” from other kids. Parents are better suited to raise younger and older children for obvious reasons: they are more mature, experienced, and are of possession of a developed adult brain – all of which allow them to guide kids through what are often rough times. Moreover, there’s the matter of investment. The sad truth is that it’s developmentally normal for kids to turn their backs on one another—even when needed the most. In contrast, parents are invested in their kids in ways that their peers can never be.

The consequences of mistaken beliefs about the impact of gadgets on family and how important family is for kids have been tragic. Dr. Jean Twenge’s research, described in her recent *Atlantic* article, “Have Smartphones Destroyed a Generation?,” reveals that teen girls’ increasing immersion in social media, smartphones, and other devices appears to be a primary reason this generation of girls is experiencing high rates of depression and suicide-related behaviors.[6]

Waldorf School media policy helps parents by pushing back against the digital immersion that is so hurtful to family. Through its recommendations to limit children’s screens and phones, especially when kids are young, Waldorf Schools encourage the distraction-free experiences children need to bond with parents and other caring adults. Ensconced in the loving structure of family, kids are much better able to navigate the challenges they inevitably face.

The Myth that Entertainment Technologies Promote Kids’ School and Life Success

The digital-age formula tends to be different for boys than girls, but it’s also quite destructive. Preteen and teen boys are brought to my clinic by parents who are convinced that their sons have a learning disability, attention deficit, or some other diagnosis that will explain why they are failing classes in spite of doing very well in their earlier years of schooling. Again, a careful examination of kids’ afterschool schedules is often profoundly revealing. Boys tell me, “I come home, put my stuff away, and hop on my game.” I’ll ask them what else they do for their

evenings: “That’s it, I’m on my game… well, sometimes I watch videos of other people playing video games.” No reading, time with family, playing a musical instrument, or homework… just video games and screens for amusement.

Many parents are less aware of the risks video games and other entertainment technologies pose to kids’ learning success. Popular news sources often claim that kids need heavy exposure to digital devices from a young age to be fluent in a technology-filled world. For example, parents are told that video games teach kids strategy, problem solving, and improve important brain skills. Even if parents don’t quite believe these claims, because the risks that gaming poses to kids’ academic success are scantly publicized, many parents have few qualms about allowing their boys to immerse themselves in gaming.

But the research is remarkably clear. Claims that video games, social media, or phones teach children skills that actually benefit them are highly suspect. On the other hand, the science is quite clear that the more time kids spend using screen and phone technologies the worse they do in school—something which is enormously important for their future success.

Remarkably, the Learning Habit research surprisingly reveals that even relatively short periods of screen and phone use pose risks to kids’ learning success. Researchers found that after about 30 to 45 minutes of daily screen time (considering computer, TV, phone use, texting, etc.), kids’ academic performance went south. And the drop is precipitous: High-school age kids who spend 4 or more hours with screens per day receive grades that are a full grade point lower (e.g., A- to B-) than kids who spend 30 minutes or less per day with screens.[7] A number of studies also specifically connect kids’ use of video games to lower academic performance.[8]

Because boys in the U.S. spend significantly more time playing video games than girls,[9] it’s not surprising to see boys underperform academically as compared with girls. In fact, boys receive significantly lower grades than girls, from elementary school through college.[10] This is having a dramatically negative effect on boys’ chances of life success. Today, 56% of college admissions are granted to young women as compared with only 44% to young men.[11] Moreover, boys’ overuse of gaming continues to hurt them as they grow older and leave school. A National Bureau of Economic Research study shows that the reason many young men aren’t working is because they are choosing to play video games instead.[12]

Why do children’s and teens’ wired lives pose risks to their school success? Because kids’ overuse of devices displaces important activities that foster school success—including reading, writing, and time spent with homework.[13] Sadly, not only are kids distracted by devices at home, but also at school. A London School of Economic study found that high school kids who are allowed to use phones at school receive significantly lower test scores.[14]

So how can parents foster their children’s academic success? And how can we help kids learn to grow up to use technology productively rather than be consumed by digital playtime? Waldorf Schools’ policy of encouraging parents to set strong media limits at home together with the schools’ policy of introducing technology as a tool for specific applications in middle or high school is an effective means of not only promoting kids’ academic and life success, but also their productive tech use.

Consider a child who has a desire to grow up to work in the high-tech industry. To some, it would seem imperative to expose this child early on to digital devices. However, the sad reality is that kids tend to use their gadgets for entertainment applications such as video gaming and social media, not learning purposes.[15] And there are consequences when young kids start gaming:studies show that the younger kids are when they begin gaming, the more likely they will develop obsessive gaming habits that are often harmful to academic success.[16]

What's a better way to prepare children to use technology productively as young adults? It's helpful to consider the demands of working in the high-tech industry. For example, the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics says that the odds of becoming a computer programmer are much greater if one has a college or advanced degree[17] (this is also true of many other high-tech positions). So, if a college degree is important, it's important to consider the criteria colleges use to decide upon admissions. It's definitely not expertise in video gaming, social media, and texting, but rather proficiency in learning basics taught in Waldorf Schools, including reading, writing, math, and problem solving.

There's another way that Waldorf School media policy fosters kids' academic success. Research is clear that *school connectedness*—a measure of how much kids feel a bond with school as well as teachers and staff—is a powerful driver of kids' emotional well-being *and* academic success.[18] Today, many teachers in public schools report that the phones kids bring to school not only distract them from learning but also from forming positive connections with teachers. Many of us can remember special teachers who brightened our days and encouraged our desire to learn. Waldorf Schools, by not allowing kids to use phones at school, foster kids' connections with teachers that in turn promote their emotional resilience and academic success—two qualities that will benefit their chances of living a productive life.

The Myth that Kids Know More Than Parents About Tech

Today, many parents don't see good reason to set limits on their children's use of screens and phones. Why is this so? A number of these parents have been deceived by perhaps the most harmful of all digital-age myths: the *digital native/digital immigrant* belief. This belief, put forward years ago by video game developer Marc Prensky, holds that kids are "natives," or experts with tech toys and screens, simply by virtue of growing up surrounded by gadgets, while their relatively less tech-savvy parents are "immigrants," who will always be a step behind kids.[19] According to this belief, parents' appropriate role is to buy their kids lots of devices and essentially walk away.

Turning the traditional family hierarchy on its head, the digital native/digital immigrant belief marginalizes parents and teachers as technologically incompetent and maintains that kids are better judges of how they should use their devices and time. The result has been an explosion in the amount of time this generation of kids spends playing with screens, as U.S. teens now spend on average 6 hours and 40 minutes each day with screens for amusement.[20]

Unfortunately, the native/immigrant belief runs directly counter to what science tells us is the most effective type of parenting. Studies consistently show that both younger kids and teens

benefit greatly from *authoritative parenting*, the parenting style that has received the most research support (other approached don't even come close).[21] Kids raised using authoritative parenting are happier, have higher self-esteem, are more engaged in school, and do better academically than kids raised with other parenting styles.[22]

Authoritative parenting encourages parents to be strong on two dimensions: *responsiveness* and *demandingness*. Being responsive with their kids means that parents are engaged, involved, and loving, while being demanding means that parents set high expectations for kids and strong limits to back these up. Clearly, parents' ability to be responsive is diminished when kids' lives are consumed by devices. When families are in my office, parents often raise concerns that their kids refuse to emerge from their rooms. Turning to kids, I ask them what they are doing in there, "I'm on my phone (video game, social media)," kids reply.

Applying the *demands* kids need is admittedly challenging in a modern-day culture that has become quite permissive about kids' use of devices. Yet, it's important to put today's more permissive parenting in context, as it contrasts with how kids have been raised for most of human history.

In this respect, the documented family practices of 19th century settlers on the American frontier are reflective of the environment humans have experienced since the beginning of our time on earth. It was clear to parents during this period that children needed to actively participate in work if their family was to survive. The thought that a teen, or even younger child, should spend much of their lives playing with gadgets at the expense of productive activities or engaging with family would have been impossible to fathom. Today, deceived by the digital native-digital immigrant myth, many parents don't believe they have the right to set strong limits on kids' devices.

One of the best ways for parents to overcome the challenges of guiding children's use of devices is by doing what parents have long done: work together as a community to support one another. In my experiences with Waldorf Schools, I see parents coming together to decide on the best ways to raise healthy kids. In such environments, children and teens are much more likely to accept screen limits because they understand their classmates have them as well. Likewise, parents are more likely to stand strong themselves when their school community supports their efforts.

The Myth that Technology is Not Addictive

The final myth that I'll highlight is that entertainment technologies are not addictive. "It's just kids having fun. What could be the problem?" Such is the message from the tech industry and a number of media pundits, many of whom are sponsored by industry. It's an effort to normalize kids' lives spent with screens and phones, even though this represents a dramatic change in childhood from prior generations and poses significant risks to their health.

It is in fact "normal" for kids today to live their lives with screens and phones. However, modern culture too often confuses "normal," which only means typical or common, with something positive. For example, in the 1950s and 60s, it was completely "normal" that almost half of U.S.

adults smoked cigarettes. Rather than go along with what's considered "normal" in the raising of children, it's far more advantageous to look at what science tells us promotes or poses risks to their development.

One hazard that research is revealing about kids' tech use is addiction. After considering a mountain of evidence, the World Health Organization (WHO) recently named *Gaming Disorder* as a diagnosis, putting it in the category of "disorders due to addictive behaviors."[23] Essentially, health professionals now recognize that video games pose the risk of addiction. Many researchers are also demonstrating that social media and smartphones pose similar risks.

At present, the World Health Organization's position contrasts with that of U.S. psychiatry, as its chief guidebook, *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders,* or, *DSM-5*, classifies internet/video game addiction as a diagnosis that needs more research before it could be fully accepted.[24] However, U.S. psychiatry has been slow to recognize the scientific consensus that addiction is not about a substance as much as about the brain's response to certain substances (e.g., cigarettes) or certain behaviors (e.g., gambling or video game use). As an example of its being late to the table, U.S. psychiatry didn't recognize gambling as an addiction until 2013.

In contrast, internet/video game addiction has long been considered a diagnosis and public health problem in China, South Korea, and Japan. And for more than a decade in my clinical practice, I have seen clear signs of internet/video game addiction. Well-meaning efforts by parents to set even moderate limits on kids' devices lead kids to explode with rage or turn with hatred on themselves. Parents frequently call the police to protect themselves from rageful kids, or kids threaten to kill themselves and are psychiatrically hospitalized because they can't see living without continual access to their phones, social media, or video games.

How is it possible that certain technologies pose the risk of addiction? One answer is neurological. Brain imaging studies reveal that video gaming triggers the release of the reward-based neurotransmitter dopamine at the same level as when a person receives an intravenous shot of amphetamine.[25]

Another reason that we shouldn't be surprised that children are consumed by video games and social media is that their product development is increasingly driven by psychologists and other behavioral experts who employ *persuasive technology* to hook users.[26] Persuasive technology (also called 'persuasive design') works by deliberately creating digital environments that users feel fulfill their basic human drives—to be social or obtain goals—better than real-world situations. Kids spend countless hours with social media and video games—in pursuit of "likes," "friends," game points, and levels—because it's stimulating; they believe that this makes them happy and successful, and they find these activities easier than doing the difficult but developmentally important activities of childhood.

Tech addictions are devastating for children and teens. Kids' relationships with parents can be severely compromised or even destroyed. Intellectually capable youth are often denied their potential, eking out an existence in their parents' homes as adults, dependent upon their families for support. Unfortunately, the treatment of such addictions is not always successful, and

children often refuse help. It is therefore vital that we do all we can to prevent our kids from being swallowed up by these powerful digital machines. The science is clear that this is helped by limiting children's exposure to addictive technologies such as video games when they are young. This is not an easy task, but it's made easier by the supportive media policies of Waldorf Schools.

The Fight for Childhood

While this article has focused on the health effects of children's lives spent with screens and phones, it's important to consider what's also at stake. Sure, we need to concern ourselves with kids' profound overuse of entertainment technologies and their unhealthy content. But we also need to understand that these powerfully seductive, sometimes addictive, technologies are crowding out kids' vital developmental experiences. What this means is that this discussion isn't just about the struggle over kids' use of screens and phones, it's also about the fight for childhood itself.

Waldorf Schools have long understood the gravity of our children's plight. They took a stand years ago on kids' screens and devices before it was popular to do so. And they have been on the right side of science on this issue for decades. Waldorf Schools now provide a supportive and effective forum for parents, teachers, and school administrators to come together to discuss and take action on this issue. Moreover, through their leadership on kids' use of screens and phones, Waldorf Schools offer hope for this generation of children.

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