

Wired But Disconnected

Americans are wired as never before. Almost all households own at least one TV, and one VCR or DVD player. One-third of young children have a television in their bedroom, as do two-thirds of pre-teens and teens! Nearly 80% of American households have cable or satellite TV, as well as a computer. More families have Internet access than have newspaper subscriptions. More than 50% of households have a video game player, and video game sales exceed \$10 billion annually, five times children's book sales.

Children spend more time sitting in front of some sort of screen than any other activity besides sleeping. The average American child spends about 5 hours in front of screen-based media (TV, computer, video games) every day, nearly 3 hours of which is television. Given current averages in screen viewing, by the time a child reaches the end of high school he or she will have spent 40% more time in front of a screen than at school. By the time a child reaches the age of 70, he or she will have spent between 7 to 10 years of their life just watching TV.

We're raising a generation of children wired but disconnected. Screen time is time usually spent alone. Even if other children are present, watching television together is no more than shared aloneness. Trust in others is built by having shared experiences, and as our screen time increases, our trust in others decreases.

As technology advances, it seduces American children, and their parents, with more sedentary temptations. Screen time displaces more active and meaningful pursuits, such as exercising, playing with friends, and reading. The average American child now only reads 45 minutes per day, *including* time spent reading at school! Little emphasis is placed on reading at home as parents are too often themselves captivated by screen media.

Sedentary screen time is *directly* related to obesity. Children who watch an average of 4 or more hours of screen media daily have a 30% risk of obesity (not just overweight). The rates are even higher if the child has a TV in their bedroom. Children averaging an hour or less daily of screen media have only a 7% chance of becoming obese. About one-third of cases of childhood obesity could be prevented by limiting screen time to a weekly average of one hour or less daily.

In the life of a child, family is the most important influence - but television is not far behind. Through television, and through other screen media, the minds of our children are being handed to advertisers and corporations.

Our children's window on the world is now largely through the eyes of advertisers. The average American child sees over 20,000 commercials each year. As corporations are placing greater emphasis on building brand loyalty, children are the easiest prey.

Through TV, they see a world of fast-paced, entertaining commercials with glamorous people and cartoon characters convincing them that happiness comes from having things they don't really need, and from eating foods that aren't at all good for them.

Children view TV with far less skepticism than most adults, and are thus vulnerable to advertising. Children under the age of 8 are not usually able to discriminate between commercials and programming, and do not understand the intent of commercials as being to sell products. The AAP does not mince words when it says that "advertising directed toward children is inherently deceptive and exploits children under 8 years of age".

Advertisers exploit the innocence of children by selling feelings of friendship and happiness. Kids are made to feel as if they need the product to be truly happy, and that until they have the product everyone else in the world is having fun without them.

In our materialistic and consumeristic culture, childhood innocence has become overmatched by corporate omni-presence. Anyone wonder why our kids are getting fat?

Did You Know?

Saturday morning children's programs have an average of 11 commercials per hour. Half of these are for foods, 90% of which are high in fat, added sugar, and/or salt. Little wonder kids are craving the foods least healthy for them.

Logos and cartoon characters on diapers, Band-Aids, Barbies, baby bottles, and counting books. Hero athletes, celebrities, and cartoon characters on TV food commercials. Toys or figurines in fast food kid meals. Advertisers know that when kids see characters they recognize and adore on food products, they demand these products from their parents.

Over \$15 billion is spent annually on marketing to children. It is deplorable how food producers seduce children into eating foods good for profits but bad for health.