

The internet stole my children

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My background includes training in psycho synthesis, Adlerian counselling and humanistic psychology. I founded the British Association of Anger Management (BAAM) in 1997, co-founded the Centre for Men's Development in London and have written a couple of books on anger management. I have been working in the field of counselling including anger and stress management for the past 20 years, so when it comes to angry parents and children, I have witnessed a lot over the last 18 years of frontline experience.

www.angermanage.co.uk/facilitators

Communications technology is seductive. As a society we are becoming dissociative. Children are more likely to be drawn in and become over-attached to online activities if their parents are themselves distracted and unavailable. Often I have observed a deadlock if parents try to force their children out of the virtual world. To break this vicious circle of withdrawal and anger the solution is for parents to join their children on a journey into emotional intelligence and mutuality; to find one another through sharing the enjoyment of non-virtual activities.

Having had a few months to reflect on writing this article I came to realise that I don't think the internet stole just my children, but it also stole most of my good friends as well. Then I started to recognise that as I was observing conversations in pubs or over meals dwindle into interrupted episodes of mobile phone checking, I too was colluding with the same need for distraction, dis-engagement; I was even relieved to have it.

The internet and the virtual world are reshaping our lives, our communications, our brains. And so we are becoming in many ways more passive and inactive. But if adults show so little self-control around technology, how can we expect children to do any better? And why would they want to listen to us if what we are pushing for is emotional engagement? Or, if the idea of that terrifies you (and them), how about settling for a simple conversation? It seems we live in a world where because we have lost trust in the social space that connects us, just chatting and 'shooting the breeze' can no longer be tolerated; as if we are frightened of empty space.

I'm an anger management specialist. As a leading expert in the field I am often the first port of call for parents with angry children. Sometimes teachers concerned about a child's behaviour and growing

hostility towards other kids and teachers contact me. They all want support for a child to be better behaved and more co-operative.

The importance of presence

When people first phone me in distress to discuss their concern I ask them two questions. How much time do their kids spend on the internet and gaming daily, and how much quality time do they spend with their child? By quality time I explain I mean time spent fully engaged in activities that interest your children, even if it does not interest you. In an ideal world we would love it if both parties enjoyed it just as much, but in the real world, not every adult can charge across a playground. The point is that most parents know that most children want to feel connected to their parents. The question then is, what's getting in the way of connecting?

Usually the parents I'm dealing with say their child spends four to five hours online or playing computer games every day. And that is just the time they are aware of. Often long after parents have gone to bed the child will still be online, consumed by social media (chatting to friends) or playing games, watching films or listening to music. In my experience

most of the families I work with don't tend to spend any quality time with their child and even when they are around them they are not fully present, being in the moment with their child, focusing on what they are saying and doing and not thinking about something else.

Overloaded parents

It's completely understandable that the primary reason why parents don't feel present with their children is because they spend almost all their time, day and night, working, doing chores and making sure that the family functions smoothly. This is time-consuming and energy-sapping, so no wonder they complain they often don't even have time for themselves. Mostly, the only quality time they get to spend with their children, is on holiday; some weekends and school holidays. Life is busy busy busy!

Children get angry with parents because they want their parents to be present for them and children yearn for connection and attention. Should this not be available for them, children will simply get hijacked by an exciting virtual paradigm that captures their imagination and equally distracts them from the painful reality that a core emotional need is not being met. The internet offers everyone an opportunity to escape reality; maybe just to switch off, chill out and disconnect from the everyday humdrum of life. Or more darkly, to dissociate from a desolating lack of care, support and the witnessing of another human being that is a basic human need.

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My view is that in such circumstances, human beings do whatever they can to distract themselves from painful feelings. And not just children, but adults and parents as well. Can you imagine how it would be if we shifted attention away from technology and used it instead for conversation, sharing school work, helping with household chores, meditating or being still, reading, or doing yoga, sport or exercise? I can hear almost every parent scoffing at the very idea of trying to get young teenagers to engage in such things. But how utterly life-changing it would be; how much healthier we would be psychically, emotionally and academically.

The virtual world offers an escape route; a way of avoiding things we don't want to engage with. Adults can choose this option but young people are not so free, because their boring, demanding and controlling parents expect them to relate. Yet the more controlling and demanding parents become, the more the young person yearns to escape their demands. And the more distant and out of reach a child becomes, the more it triggers parents

to become even more insistent. It's a catch 22 vicious circle. The challenge for parents who want to break this negative spiral is to find ways to assert their boundaries, encourage co-operation with young people and not manipulate them.

The addictive nature of this virtual paradigm

Online activities and gaming can seriously damage your health, largely because of their addictive nature. It is not easy once drawn into the compelling virtual worlds they create, to stop being attracted back there, and eventually to be manipulated, dominated and controlled by them. A rather more radical view of addiction comes from Dr Gabore Meta who in *Realm of the Hungry Ghosts – Close Encounters with Addiction*, presents his view that addiction has its roots in high levels of stress, anxiety and shame.

The typical symptoms of internet addiction are very similar to those you would expect in of other sorts of addiction. Do you recognise any of them in yourself or your child?

Emotional symptoms of online addiction

Feelings of guilt; anxiety; depression; dishonesty; denial; euphoric feelings when in front of the computer; unable to keep schedules; no sense of time; signs of stress; isolation; defensiveness; argumentative and aggressive; hostile; impatient and irritability towards themselves and others; apathetic when it comes to doing certain things not involved in being online; avoiding doing work; avoidance of all kinds; agitation and irritability; lack of accountability.

Short-term and long-term effects of an online addiction

Online addiction has short-term effects that include unfinished tasks and forgotten responsibilities. Long-term effects are seen more in the physical symptoms such as weight gain, backache, neck pain, carpal tunnel syndrome, and vision problems from staring at the screen. It can also lead to bankruptcy, if the time spent online is focused on shopping, gambling and gaming. Technostress is a term being used to designate stress or psychosomatic illness caused by working with computer technology on a daily basis.

'The modern family is isolated, with each person wrapped in his or her own 'techno-cocoon'. Just take a look at what the typical family looks like at the end of the day ... Mom preparing dinner while checking the answer machine, head glued to the portable phone while she returns calls. One child is playing games on the computer in

his bedroom, another is talking on her own phone, and the youngest is playing Nintendo. Dad comes home later from work and goes immediately to the computer.....In many homes we are seeing a loss of communication and a major shift in the power balance in the family.'

Weil and Rosen (2004)

Sleep and blue screens

The blue light emitted by smartphones and tablets is thought to interfere with sleep, possibly because it reduces natural production of melatonin. Add to this the lack of bedtime routines in busy working homes, and the impact of late nights and high sugar drinks with or without caffeine. All will tend to make sleep problems worse.

30% of children will suffer with sleep problems during their childhood, costing millions of pounds

According to the *Daily Telegraph* (Walter, 2017) more than 8,000 children under 14 were admitted into hospital in 2016 with a primary diagnosis of sleep disorder, up from less than 3,000 in 2006. This has increased year-on-year for nearly 20 years. According to Children's Sleep Charity, some 30% of children will suffer with sleep problems during their childhood, costing millions of pounds in doctors' appointments and presumably, because good sleep is now recognised as so important for long-term health, storing up future problems for the NHS.

Self-assessment: is your child an internet addict?

Answering positively to five out of the eight questions may be indicative of an online addiction.

- Are they preoccupied with using the internet?
- Do they think about their previous or future online activity?
- Do they have the need to be online longer to be satisfied?
- Have they made repeated but unsuccessful attempts to cut back, stop or control their internet use?
- Do they become moody, restless, irritable or depressed when they stop or decrease their internet use?
- Is their time spent online longer than what they originally planned?
- Does their online use negatively affect a significant relationship, education, career or job?

- Do they conceal the extent of their internet usage from family or others?
- Does the internet serve as an escape from problems or relief from a bad mood?

Some solutions

Here are a few strategies that you can consider with caution:

- Share your concerns about how you experience your child as being absent, but don't shame or blame them (which is what parents tend to do). Talk about how you feel, and how you are affected by this disconnection. Tell them you recognise that you can also sometimes not be present with them. Give yourself permission to be transparent and vulnerable. That's often the healthiest place to start.
For example: 'I feel sad that there is so much distance between us now and I am aware that I have not been very present and available to you as and when you need me. I feel guilty about how little time I have given you and there is no excuse for it. I love you and miss you and I am hoping that together we can find a way for you to not spend so much time gaming and online. Let's explore some things that we can do together. Here is my list. Would you try and think about a list too? I hope that between us we can create time and make dates to do these things together. How does that sound to you?'
- Start to become more aware of what your children are consuming. Consider the effect this content is having on their health and wellbeing. Once you have some sense of the effect it's having on them you can start to negotiate how to reduce their time on the activities affecting them.
- You also have to decide, based on their age, whether what they are doing is okay. Here you need to do your research with other parents because most children are exploring and watching what their peers are doing or watching. Then negotiate what is healthy for them and what's not healthy for them, based on your own research and facts. Once again if they are addicted to something specific you need to negotiate how they wean themselves off. Most young people do not actually know what's healthy for them or not until of course it's too late. Do your research and observe their behaviour and how it's also impacting their health and wellbeing.
- You will then have to contract how much time they can spend online. As with any addiction there can be no going cold turkey. One of the things you are both going to have to agree on is how much time your child can spend online. It is about finding a strategy to wean them off and it needs to be replaced with other healthy activities, which you can both agree to do together. It's vital that whatever you agree gets signed and sealed and delivered on. No mixed messages

because that's what they are expecting you to give them and they have heard many promises and commitments before.

- Explore a range of activities you can do with your child and create space to discuss that with them and include them in the decision-making process. Make it as much fun as possible. The whole family will be nourished by doing new things. Get creative and engage them with coming up with solutions too. This is empowering for everyone.
- Set and agree times when they can go online.

Please, once you have made an agreement, **do not** let them manipulate you into changing your mind.

Our job as parents is to mentor and guide our young people through life's adversity

Even at its best, being a parent allows you only to witness and steer another being's ship for a very short period of time. The parent's task as steersman is neither to over-pressurise nor to fall into a pit of shame when something goes wrong. Life is full of upsetting and

distressing things. Our job as parents is to mentor and guide our young people through life's adversity. To do so we must learn to be aware of our own feelings and fully embrace them. If we can communicate with kindness and honesty it helps our children learn to articulate and navigate their own emotional life. By reducing our need to hide and hide from distressing feelings, we lessen the need for distraction.

This journey requires us to develop an internal narrative of our own, and to have coping strategies and creative outlets. In this way we can start to be more open with our young person and so explore their emotional terrain together. When it works we get to share the high moments and to hang in there with the harder ones. What you will be building is a mutual emotional intelligence; something of great value which they will refer back to for the rest of their lives. I guarantee you it will beat any computer game.

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Walter S (2017) Surge in children being admitted to hospital for sleeping disorders with many kept awake by technology. *The Telegraph*. Available at: www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/03/04/surge-children-admitted-hospital-sleeping-disorders-many-kept (accessed 27 February 2017)

Weil M, Rosen L (2004) Available at: www.technostress.com/tsconversation.htm (accessed 27 February 2017)

Transformative innovations for health: a gathering of change-makers

A one day joint working conference organised by Westminster Centre for Resilience, the Scientific and Medical Network and the BHMA

The neatness of medical science is unravelling. 20th century medicine focused on smaller and smaller parts with astonishing success: triumphant in infections, deficiency diseases, with surgical excisions and transplants, intensive care and anaesthetics. But 21st century medicine is confronting whole person (indeed whole society) problems: chronic degenerative and inflammatory diseases, stress-, environment- and lifestyle-mediated diseases, addictions and psychological disorders. Bio-technical single-solution approaches won't cure them. If, as has been said, the future is already with us but unevenly distributed, where might we find seeds of the new paradigm?

This working conference, jointly hosted by Westminster Centre for Resilience, the Scientific and Medical Network and the BHMA, will bring change-makers together to celebrate the future.

Speakers and workshops to be announced soon so keep an eye on:

www.centreforresilience.co.uk <https://explore.scimednet.org> <https://bhma.org>

Saturday 18 November 2017, University of Westminster, London