

## Electronica: Learning Curve for Parents

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A lot has changed since my childhood! I am of the generation that was very excited to use the first computers to come to my high school in the early 1980's. Even in rural New York State, I don't think we were far behind the rest of the country. Those computers were cumbersome desktop behemoths with small, fuzzy screens. In that era we hadn't yet heard of cell phones, we still listened to music on cassette tapes or vinyl, and kept in touch with friends from afar with longhand letters on stationery. I don't pine for those times – I make good use of today's technology – but I'll bet I'm not alone with these memories.

While many of us remember a paper and analog world, those born more recently know only a digital, electronic world, and each successive generation takes it more for granted. Slow at first, the pace of electronic advancements has become dizzying, bringing about a communication revolution and offering constant, unprecedented access to the world – 24/7 reality. This rapid evolution makes for a steep and continual learning curve. Steep and continual because just when we master the latest electronic updates – sometimes even before we become familiar with them – they are enhanced or replaced with something newer, faster, more efficient. It's exciting! And it can be overwhelming! For parents and for kids.

The human body, mind and spirit are not yet evolved to be **on** around the clock, something that today's technology **is** capable of doing. Technology is a huge experiment, possibly changing the nature of human development, pushing us to evolve. Children have always been learning how to make sense of their world, how to attend, prioritize, sort, retain, recall, communicate, constantly arranging new information into their existing schema – it is their work. And now their work has this new dimension.

As the parent, you know your child best – his or her emotional maturity, what material he or she can handle – and you play an active role in determining safe and healthy boundaries that work for him or her. Support young kids in making decisions about small things so that they are practiced and empowered to make good decisions as the stakes become higher and they move beyond the parent sphere. Good supervision does not necessarily mean hovering over the family computer. Healthy behaviors are best taught by example. You can model mindful, balanced use of technology – separating work from leisure, allowing time in your life for physical activity and conversation, as well as routine chores and non-techno interests. Avoid using technology as a babysitter. Take time to listen to

your child. What is on his or her mind these days? Point out the approaches that media uses to engage and hook us. Encourage kids to take a break from MySpace and YouTube and texting to explore other interests. Children of all ages need time for free play which is essential to their cognitive, physical, and social and emotional development and well-being.

You may find that your children are more techno-savvy than you! Parenting kids who are at ease with all things electronic requires flexibility and openness to the constant evolution of the medium. Invite them to show you their favorite websites, ask them to teach you something new, inquire where they got their information. You don't have to keep pace, but it is a good idea to be aware of the breadth of information that is available to your child at any given moment. Today's children have at their fingertips a private world outside parental observation. Kids can seek information and answers to questions on topics that they may feel ashamed or embarrassed to discuss with you. The media is a powerful force in shaping human attitudes, behaviors and values, and children of any age are still developing their thoughts, their sense of self, and forming their perceptions of the world. Foster healthy communication with your child – keep the lines open for conversation and discussion. Give them the information *you* want them to have on important topics.

Parenting children in a technological age is not all weighty and disconcerting. One could easily generate a long list of positive attributes of electronics. And throw in a hearty dose of good humor! Most things in life are more manageable when we can laugh at them and at ourselves, and parenting is no exception.

<http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/The-Effects-of-Electronic-Media-on-Children-Ages-Zero-to-Six-A-History-of-Research-Issue-Brief.pdf>

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