

For Parents, Educators and Mental Health Professionals Who Care About Teens

A Special Segment:

1 PARENTING IN THE DIGITAL AGE

This issue of The Practical Parent focuses on issues raised by our teens living with digital media. Parental reactions to the nearly 11 hours daily our teens spend connected to digital media ranges from enthusiasm and involved curiosity to polite resignation or downright combat in the home. Michael just delivered the keynote address at the annual Marin Country Day School "Tech Fest," and a segment of that presentation is provided here. We hope you find this Practical Parent

3 ASK MICHAEL...

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FEATURE ARTICLE

Parenting in the Digital Age

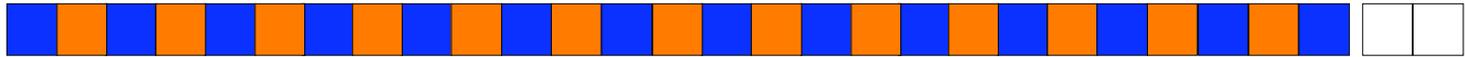
The following are highlights from a much longer keynote address on Parenting in the Digital Age: Challenges/Opportunities.

The message of tonight, though, is that we ought not be, in our anxiety and wonder, too distracted by the content, to forget about the digital technology delivering the content. The content is really important. And what we do and don't do with the content is important; it's very important. But I have to say that I'm inclined to agree with Marshall McLuhan when he wrote 46 years ago that the "content of a medium is just the juicy piece of meat carried by the burglar to distract the watchdog of the mind." In discussing our topic tonight, "Parenting in the Digital Age," I'm inclined—in the spirit of mutuality and bi-directionality—to be asking *not just what our teens are doing with digital media, but what digital media is doing with our teens.*

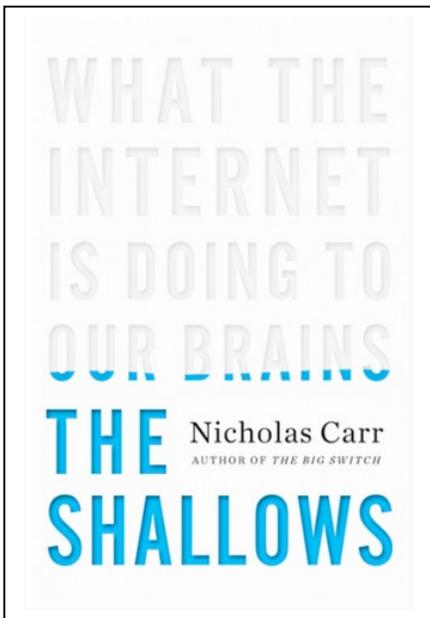
Teens are trying to figure out who they are and want to be, engage primarily with others their age to create, maintain and modify their emergent identities and

want to know what it is going to take to be loved—by themselves, others and the world around them.

Wondering and worrying about whether the world around you "loves" you is what philosopher Alain de Botton called *status anxiety*; and it is almost completely impossible for teens to escape. It is safe to say that at no other time in human history have electronic media been involved in these processes of identity formation, socializing and status acquisition, assessment and maintenance. Teens live in digital media. It is everywhere and will become more and more seamless in the lives of our children. Digital media offer, in the words of the 2010 Kaiser Report on Media in the Lives of Teens, "...the most powerful force in young people's lives today ...in providing a constant stream of messages about families, peers, relationships, gender roles, sex, violence, food, values, clothes and an abundance of other topics too long to list." (Continued on page 2...)



Parenting in the Digital Age *(continued from page 1)*



So what happens when you take a being that has the characteristics of a teen and put them together with technologies that have the characteristics of digital media and the Internet? First we have to know about the characteristics of teens, namely:

1. Teens are capable of intense persistence in their behavior;
2. Teens are hyperfocused on what is and is not “normal” and their brains signal danger at peer and other disapproval for straying too far from the norm;
3. Teens think a lot about who to be and how to be “me;”
4. Teens do not yet have fully developed executive functioning skills;
5. Teen abilities around short- and long-term memory encoding is still “under construction” and often dependent upon principles of “salience detection;”
6. Neurological plasticity is a defining hallmark of the adolescent brain and their capacities are highly changeable based upon environmental influences;
7. Teens need parents close and on “stand by” even as they push them away;
8. Teens need parents and close others nearby to help them understanding, articulate and manage their emotions;
8. Teens care deeply about what others think of them and;
9. Teens have high levels of physical resilience but can be highly unaware of the limits of this resilience.

Advances in digital video technology are, within a few short years, going to allow real-time access to anyplace on the earth, at any time. Entire generations of teens are going to grow up not knowing what it is like to *not* see people when they talk to them, or to see what’s happening in a particular

area of the globe. This is going to occasion fundamental changes in the way teens experience time and space. Teens assess most incoming information in reference to how much they like or dislike it—its packaging, the cognitive load it places upon their brains, etc.—they prefer pleasurable, high-reward, low-effort activities, in general. Teens use social networking—and like it immensely. It is not just a tool; the intense persistence of the teen turns it into a *way of life*, precisely because it registers as so highly salient, because of its structure and purpose in helping teens do what they have always done—figure out and express who they are and want to be. In *The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains*, author Nicholas Carr observes that “...knowing what we know today about the brain’s plasticity, if you were to set out to invent a medium that would rewire our mental circuits, as quickly and thoroughly as possible, you would probably end up designing something that looks a lot like the Internet.”

Worried about their difficulty with transitioning off of digital media? How hard is it for them to get *your* attention when you’re on your computer? How hard is it for you to put down the Blackberry or the iPhone? How’s your work-life balance? What do you do, that your kids can see, *that cannot be rushed*? What do you do, that your kids can see, that demonstrates non-technological means of understanding, articulating and managing your emotions? One of the main points of this talk is how powerful modeling and shaping is in forming human behavior. Your children are watching you and want frequent examples from you of *how, when and whether to unplug.* ❖

(NOTE: See Page 4 for Resources)

IT’S NOT THAT WE TEND TO USE the Net regularly even obsessively. It’s that the Net delivers precisely the kind of cognitive and sensory stimuli—repetitive, interactive, intensive, addictive—that have been shown to result in strong and rapid alterations in brain circuits and functions.

Nicholas Carr, *The Shallows*



Parents and Teens Ask Michael...

Dear Michael,

My son got benched from his soccer team because of poor grades and he's now on academic probation. We're worried he's going to give up on everything because he just lives for soccer and I just don't know whether he'll even go to school if he's not allowed to play sports. We've looked into the district rules and there are exceptions for some students, meaning that some students are allowed to still play if they file an appeal. I don't really know if it's the right thing to pull him from soccer, even though I know that he should have consequences for not doing well in school. What do you think?

Thanks,
(Almost not a) soccer mom

Dear Almost Not A Soccer Mom,
In the end, it's a question of balance. If a student is failing classes, and their academic standing at the school is at stake, then allowing them to continue failing while they play sports is usually untenable. Yet full sports participation can be made contingent upon reaching more reasonable or moderate academic goals. Sports participation can be withheld for discrete periods of time, by mutual conversation and problem solving with the student, parents, teachers and coaches. For example, it can serve as motivation to a student to tell them:

"We know you love playing soccer and don't want to remove this from your life. It helps you feel good and you're good at it. But failing your classes isn't a reasonable option, either. For this week, we want you to attend your tutoring more often and use your practice time to refocus on what isn't working with your History class. You have a History quiz this Friday. Meet with your teacher and tutor; spend the week asking for help on this and if you and your teacher feel you've made some really positive progress in the class this week, we're open to you playing on the team next week. Your

coach supports this and wants you to do well on and off the field."

For this to work, coaches have to support the students' efforts to reprioritize and balance their lives...and not instigate their own kind of "punishment" by telling the student he or she is "letting the team down" or that attending practice and participating has to happen, no matter what. "The show must go on," is an attitude that arguably works for collegiate and professional sports but confuses a high school student athlete who is struggling academically, socially or otherwise and needs help rebalancing his/her life. I have strong views on the subject.



Here are 8 Reasons to carefully weigh restrictions on sports participation as a response to academic, social or familial problems:

1. Involvement in sports offers a bulwark against depression. Exercise fights depression by activating the neurotransmitters — chemicals used by nerve cells to communicate with one another — associated with avoiding depression.
2. Kids do better in all areas of their lives when they feel better about themselves; sometimes if kids do well in sports and find acceptance, skill improvement and increased physical confidence, this can translate into more perseverance in areas that are lagging behind.
3. Exercise can be one of the most effective ways to decrease stress
4. Removing sports as a "punishment" for flagging grades sends the wrong message.
5. Removing sports as a "punishment" for misbehavior can send the same wrong message.
6. Coaches can play a role in guiding students when they are no longer listening to parents or teachers.
7. Playing sports is more than playing sports; it's also about:
 - Teamwork/social cooperation
 - More complex perspective taking (thinking about how you effect others and vice versa)
 - Understanding the inexorable link between "thinking" and "doing"—in other words, it demonstrates the real value of perseverance and practice;
 - Problem-solving
 - Asking for help and accepting help from others, as well as sacrificing for others
 - Friendship building and maintenance.
 - Building positive activities in one's life.
8. Playing sports is not always opposed to doing schoolwork.

We receive far more letters than we can ever answer...so please don't take it personally if you don't get a personal response. All submissions for "Ask Michael" should go to: Michael@practicalhelpforparents.com



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Selected Resources on Parenting in the Digital Age

- Children, Teens, Families, and Mass Media: The Millennial Generation. R. Kundanis. Mahwah, NJ: L. Erlbaum, 2003.
- Cognitive Surplus: Creativity and Generosity in a Connected Age. C. Shirky. The Penguin Press, 2010.
- Distracted: The Erosion of Attention and the Coming Dark Age. M. Jackson. Prometheus Books, 2008.
- Generation M2: Media in the Lives of 8- to 18-Year-Olds. Kaiser Family Foundation Study, 2010 (online at <http://www.kff.org/entmedia/upload/8010.pdf>).
- Generation MySpace: Helping Your Teen Survive Online Adolescence. C.M. Kelsey, Marlowe & Company, 2007.
- Hanging Out, Messing Around, and Geeking Out. M. Ito et al. The MIT Press, 2010.
- Longing and Belonging: Parents, Children and Consumer Culture. A. Pugh. University of California Press, 2009.
- Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project. M. Ito et al. The MIT Press, 2009.
- Media and Society in the Twentieth Century. L. Gorman and D. McLean. Blackwell, 2003.
- Mediated: How the Media Shapes Your World and the Way You Live in It. T. DeZengotita. Bloomsbury, 2005.
- Raising Teens. A. Rae Simpson, Harvard University Press, 2001.
- The Shallows: How the Internet is Changing the Way We Think. N.G. Carr. W.W. Norton & Company, 2010.
- Totally Wired: What Teens and Tweens are Really Doing Online. A. Goodstein. St. Martin's Griffin, 2007.
- Watch This, Listen Up, Click Here. D. Verklin and B. Kanner. John Wiley and Sons, 2007.
- "Zero to Six: Electronic media in the lives of infants, toddlers and preschoolers." Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, Fall, 2003.
- Uncommon Sense for Parents of Teenagers. M. Riera. Celestial Arts, 1995. ☒

About Our Organization...

Founded by adolescent specialist Michael Y. Simon, MFT, a high school counseling director, noted speaker/educator and psychotherapist in private practice, Practical Help for Parents provides real-life solutions as you parent, support and understand the teens and pre-teens in your life. PHFP offers informative, entertaining, research-based

workshops for students and parents, keynotes and presentations to high school and middle school parents, teachers and administrators; access to online Practical Help Tips, articles, web resources and; program development and consultation to mental health professionals, policymakers and schools/school districts. ☒

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