



The on-screen generation

Are you up to speed on a DS? Are you messaging on MSN? What's your top score on Burnout 3? And if your child zones out on screen time, are you worried? Words **Piers Ford**

Wired-in, online and hooked-up; mobile in one hand, games console attached to the other, earbuds plugged in... 21st century child is the hub of their very own communications network.

Of course there's a sense of pride in our kids' dexterity. But even the most techno-savvy parent feels a nagging disquiet about the sheer amount of time their kids spend in the virtual world.

What are they actually doing, we wonder? What kind of relationships are they building across their 'social media': their blogs and vlogs; message boards and podcasts; and interactive games? How does this communication work? And how will they navigate those rites of passage – how to share, to negotiate, to mediate – that used to be the stuff of playground life?

It is these sorts of vague, ill-defined concerns that

they are spending a lot of time interacting with others (using chat rooms or MySpace, emailing, messaging) then they're doing what young people have done since time immemorial – finding their place in a world of peers. The methods may be different but the goals are traditional," he explains.

So that's the academic view: don't panic.

Lay good ground rules from the start

Concerns do start early, though. Journalist Catherine Cooper bought her four year-old son a Leapster (a games console for younger users) when his flying fingers threatened to delete important files during furious CBeebies games on her PC. Catherine says he is still too young to use the computer in a social way, so those sorts of worries lie in the future.

"My only concern would be him spending too much

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weigh heavier with many parents than specific worries about the perils of the internet, and paedophiles in chat rooms. In fact Professor Kevin Durkin, from the University of Strathclyde's department of psychology, says their research shows that parents are less worried about their children playing computer games than they are about issues such as the state of schools, or the availability of drugs. That said, he understands parents who are concerned about the time their children spend with new media. But he believes there are grounds for reassurance.

"When kids are highly motivated by challenging activities, they're learning and developing skills. If

time on it and not learning to play normally and interact with other kids," says Catherine. So his parents limit the time he's allowed to half an hour a day. Catherine admits that she'd be devastated if she realised her children spent more time wired into their virtual world than communicating with their parents. "That's why I will continue to set limits," she asserts.

Catherine is laying down the ground rules early, but many parents find their good intentions under pressure. Their delight at their kids' ability to give them a lesson in, say, Power Point presentations turns into anxiety about the extent to which electronic games and 'social media' dominate family life.

“Trying to pull your kids out of the media is akin to trying to pull them out of the 21st century”

Cathy Scholfield, a researcher for a property development company, has two daughters aged eight and 12, who have grown up in a highly technology-literate environment. They've each had their own iPods for a couple of years, long since bought Nintendo consoles with their pocket money, and check their emails and chat nightly on MSN using their parents' PC and laptops. The oldest got her first mobile when she started high school, but her sister has already negotiated a two-year advantage and will acquire mum's hand-me-down when she's 10. Cathy's reaction is a typical mixture of awe and alarm.

“They never read instructions for any device!” she says. “It is totally instinctive. For them, all these things are just an extension of their fingertips and the manuals are hotwired into their grey matter.” Cathy is doubtful about the extent to which “social media” are helping her daughters to develop communication skills. The exchange of one-word comments, smiley icons and YouTube enclosures via email doesn't amount to conversation as we know it, she believes. As a busy mother she appreciates their entertainment and distraction value, but she also worries about eyestrain and the addictive nature of computer games. She's noticed that tempers are more frayed after prolonged usage.

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“It all seems to be too much about visual and aural stimulation, and instant gratification,” says Cathy. “What a good thing it was to sit on the bus on the way to see a friend, remembering the 10 things you had stored up all week to tell them. When kids met, they could have a two-way conversation, face-to-face, eye-to-eye! Instead of just a few grunts because it's all been said in 'txt'.”

Cathy admits her frustration is based around a perception that communicating online and via texts is essentially an isolated and lonely process. But Kevin Durkin suggests that while there is still very limited research on the quantifiable benefits of virtual communications in childhood, those who agonise that ‘things were different in my day’ are worrying unnecessarily.

“It depends to some extent on the age and personality of the child,” says Durkin, “but in the main I would say they are developing pretty much the same kind of relationships that they develop in face-to-face interaction.”

Indeed, a lot of the people that children interact with through new media are people they see in their everyday worlds as well.

The new media tend to supplement rather than displace traditional ways of keeping in touch with peers.

Professor Durkin also points out that playing games via networks is a co-operative activity. “You have to depend on, and accommodate, other people for things to work. Even if you are intent on ‘killing’ each other!” he says.

He rejects the idea that computer games are making kids physically inactive as over-simplistic. Rather, he suggests that physically active kids will choose media that resemble their physical activities, making their virtual world mirror ‘reality’.

“The world is changing rapidly and the media are key to many of the changes,” he says. “Trying to pull your kids out of the media is akin to trying to pull them out of the 21st century. By all means encourage additional activities, but it's likely to prove counterproductive to condemn modes of communication that are part of the natural order of things for today's young people.”

Find out what the kids are up to... and be impressed

And parents may not be as out of touch with their children's techno-lives as we fear. Some enforce a strict trade-off between screen time and physical activity. When Rosie Hardstone's 11 year-old son wanted to play on the computer with his friend, she made them go on a 10 minute run up the nearest hill and back.

A survey of 11 to 13 year-olds carried out especially for *With Kids* by Q Research showed that by far the majority of parents know what gadgets their kids own and have a clear understanding of what they are used for. While less than 30 per cent of kids admit to chatting with their parents via instant messenger, almost 60 per cent of boys and more than 40 per cent of girls do play on games consoles with their parents. And if 51 per cent say that they spend more time with their various gadgets than talking to their parents during the week, at least that leaves nearly half of them who don't, which surely is good news.

Life coach Patricia Carswell, who specialises in consultancy for mothers, says the key to stress busting is to talk to their children about what they are doing when they're glued to a screen.

“Often they're pleasantly surprised,” she says. “Some children I know create complex, and very funny, cartoons on their computers; others play strategic games far more advanced than good old Monopoly.” Of course many are mindlessly chatting on MSN and Bebo, but it's not so different from chatting on the phone, which was quite acceptable in their parents' generation.

She challenges us not to be afraid of this brave new world. “There's a good reason why children find it so compelling – it can be thrilling and creative and open up channels of communication that make the telephone seem positively antisocial.” ■