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Technology and the Disintegration of the Family

Remember when we were kids? We used to play outside all day, riding bikes, building forts, playing games we would make up as we went along. We moved... a lot, and we used our imaginations...a lot. When we got home, we would sit down with our families and have dinner together at the dining room table, and talk about what we did during the day, who pushed us down and who made us laugh. Today's families are different. Today's families are very busy! Juggling work, home and community life has created a reliance on technology that has permeated our culture. While adults rely on technology for efficiency in their work and home lives, children rely on technology for play, limiting challenges to their creative mental systems, as well as their physical bodies. This loss of mental creativity, as well as physical exercise, has resulted in a host of children who are neurologically and developmentally delayed, with a variety of mental disorders and attachment difficulties. Diagnoses of Developmental Delay, Learning Disability, Autism, Aspergers, Sensory Processing Disorder, Developmental Coordination Disorder, Anxiety Disorder and Depression amongst children abounds.

As children are *connecting* more and more to technology, society is seeing a *disconnect* from themselves, others and nature. A 2004 Kaiser Foundation study showed that elementary aged children use on average 6.5 hours per day of TV and videogames, and over half of North American bedrooms contain TV's. As little children develop and form their identities, they often are incapable of discerning whether they are the "killing machine" seen on TV and in videogames, or just a shy and lonely little kid in need of a friend. TV and videogame addiction is causing an irreversible worldwide epidemic of mental and physical health disorders, yet we all find excuses to continue. Where 100 years ago we needed to *move* to survive, we are now under the assumption we need *technology* to survive. The catch is that technology is killing what we love the most...connection with other human beings. As the dining room table is slowly being replaced by a big screen TV, we are moving into a new age, an age where we will eventually see the disintegration of the family unit.

With the advent of technology we also have time pressures and stress. Cell phones ring constantly, email "bleeps", Facebook, MySpace and internet dating all require upkeep and maintenance. Studies have shown parents currently spend on average 3.5 minutes per week in *meaningful* conversation with children. Parents are working more hours now than ever before, often leaving children on their own after school and in the evenings to entertain themselves. Research has shown that if a parent perceives their child's world is unsafe, their children watch more TV and videogames, yet isn't this merely a *Virtual Safety*? While the allure and excitement of technology continues to advance, our children are being enticed into an addiction that we know very little about, and therefore cannot possibly see the future ramifications. What we do know is that TV and videogame use has causal links to increases in ADHD, learning disabilities, sexual promiscuity, addictions, aggression, obesity, and sleep disorders to name a few. Yet parents who have children that are experiencing these issues, are often the parents seen purchasing the next latest and greatest piece of technology for their children, completely unaware of the detrimental impact.

How can we live in a world where we know what's bad for our children, yet do nothing to help them? It appears that everyone these days, whether it's adult, child or even a toddler, is pulled into the "Virtual Reality Dream", where everyone believes that life is something that requires an escape. The Baby Boomers appear to have raised the "Me Generation" of children who are completely incapable of responsible behaviour, or the ability to help themselves. The immediate gratification received from ongoing use of TV and videogame technology, has replaced the desire for human connection. A sad state of affairs indeed. We would rather watch the latest episode of a sitcom, as opposed to asking our child what sort of difficulties they might be experiencing in school, or problems they might be having with their friends.

It's important to come together as parents, teachers and therapists to help society "wake up" and see the devastating effects technology is having not only on our child's mental and physical health, but also on their ability to learn and sustain personal and family relationships. While technology is a train that will continually move forward, knowledge regarding its detrimental effects, and action taken toward balancing the use of technology with exercise and family time, will work toward saving our children, as well as saving our world.

Cris Rowan, is a well-known speaker and author to teachers, parents and therapists throughout North America, and recently created the new *Zone'in* and *Move'in Programs* www.zonein.ca to address sensory and motor delays in elementary school children. Cris is speaking in Edmonton Nov. 28 and Toronto Dec.3, 2007. Cris has a BSc's both in Occupational Therapy and in Biology and is a Paediatric Sensory Specialist. Cris has written numerous articles for international journals, is in the process of completing her first book, and teaches family seminars at Simon Fraser University and the Haven Institute.

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