



Virtual Child

THE TERRIFYING TRUTH
ABOUT WHAT TECHNOLOGY
IS DOING TO CHILDREN

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Introduction - Why You Need To Read This Book

Over the past decade pediatric occupational therapists working in school-based settings have witnessed an astounding increase in incidence of referrals for young children (Davidson, 2010). Back in the 1990s as a school-based occupational therapist, I managed a small caseload servicing a moderate to severely disabled population with diagnoses such as cerebral palsy, autism, down's syndrome, spinal bifida, and brain injury. Now referrals consist of predominantly printing and reading delays, attention and learning difficulties, and significant behavior problems. This sudden influx of child referrals into understaffed and wholly unprepared education and health care systems, has caused considerable workload management stress. In order to provide assistance to these children, well-meaning educators and therapists have placed these children into diagnostic categories with profound and far reaching consequences. The past decade has truly borne witness to profound changes in children, and its now time to ask the question: "Why"?

About five years ago, I started to query the role of technology use by children as a plausible cause in the rising incidence of child impairments, and began to get curious and ask questions. Not surprisingly, I found that a large number of the children on my caseload who were referred for physical, mental, social or academic problems were high users of entertainment technology. I became alarmed when I began to realize that the education and health systems were possibly misdiagnosing children who had technology addictions, with mental and behavioral disorders. While the child indeed may have exhibited developmental delay, obesity, mental illness, aggression, adhd, or learning problems, in many cases these impairments were caused from technology overuse. Missing the salient causal factor misdirects the intervention. As many of these diagnostic categories assigned to 21st century children are psychiatric in nature, many of these children also receive psychotropic medications (stimulants, anti-depressants, anti-anxiety, sedatives, and/or anti-psychotics). The role of technology overuse as a causal factor for this observed phenomenon of over diagnosis and medication, has neither been recognized nor addressed during my time as a school-based therapist, and goes largely ignored by health and education professionals even today.

The health of children is a determinant of societal success, and 21st century children are far from healthy. Research reported in this book will reveal a shocking 14.3% of Canadian children have a diagnosed mental illness (Waddell, 2007), and many are taking adult psychotropic medication that has never been proven effective or safe with adults, much less tested on children (Zito, 2000). 30% of Canadian children are developmentally delayed (Kershaw, 2009), and 15% are obese (Tremblay, 2007). Half of grade eight children do not have the literacy skills necessary to secure a job (National Center for Education Statistics, 2010). Soaring child aggression is creating behavior management problems in classrooms and at home (Small, 2008), which has been implicated in the recent classification of media violence as a public health risk by the medical and psychiatric community in the United States (Huesmann, 2007).

It gets worse. Chronic high adrenalin and dopamine transmitter levels from video game use, cause further stress to human physiology (Small, 2008). At 7.5 hours per day average use of entertainment technologies (Kaiser Foundation, 2010), children are not participating in activities they need to optimize their growth and success. Addicted to technology, socially isolated, unintelligible speech, maldeveloped, sensory hyper-vigilant, failing in school, depressed and anxious, taking “neurotoxic” psychotropic medications...the sustainability of our children is truly now in question. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends children use no more than 1-2 hours per day of entertainment technologies, and the National Association for Sport and Physical Education recommend children participate in 2-3 hours per day of unstructured play. Studies show that “green space” and exercise improve cognition, attention and learning abilities. What can parents and teachers do to reverse this worrisome trend? Could it be so easy as to just tell our children to go outside and play?

Readers will find that *Virtual Child: The Terrifying Truth About What Technology Is Doing To Children* contains not only facts related to the impact of technology overuse on children, but also contains a detailed, clear and concise plan for counteracting this impact. Bringing together key players through the formation of teams including parents, teachers, health professionals, government, researchers and technology production corporations, will form the foundation for change. Employing numerous effective and efficient strategies and initiatives proposed in this book, to be enacted in home, school and community settings, will form the operating system for change. Bringing the fast tracked “technology train” back to the station at this point in time is integral for forming evidence based action plans needed to move forward in a responsible manner.

I’ve developed a concept termed *Balanced Technology Management* where homes, schools and communities work together to manage balancing technology use with critical activities children need to grow and succeed. This concept is described in detail in the third section of this book and suggests children, parents, health and education professionals practice abstaining from all forms of technology for one hour per day, one day per week, and one week per year. During these times without the influence of technology, participants are invited to explore alternative activities to build child performance skill and confidence.

Our best “bang for our buck” and first step will be found in the education of children through implementation of media awareness programs in school-based settings. I believe in the power of the child, and if children can experience greater health and productivity by balancing activity with technology in school-based settings, then they will be empowered to take these concepts home and demonstrate them to their family and friends. With our foundation teams working to employ *Balanced Technology Management* initiatives that support a new way of being for our children, and our children taking these concepts home, we can enact the changes needed to ensure sustainable futures for all children.