Children Need Imaginative Play


"[The] erosion of childhood concerns me and computers seem like a river in flood washing away the soil that roots children to the natural world."

David Sobel is the director of Teacher Certification Programs at Antioch New England Graduate School in New Hampshire. He is also the author of four books on children's learning and education. In the following viewpoint, Sobel argues that computers and other technology are being foisted upon children in order to prepare them for life in a technologically sophisticated world. According to Sobel, this goal may seem praiseworthy, but the glut of technology at a young age commonly means a loss of traditional childhood experiences and imaginative play. In Sobel's view, children need to experience the natural world and learn by interacting with it, instead of passively absorbing information from computers and television.

As you read, consider the following questions:

1. According to Sobel, roughly what percentage of children are playing outdoors after school?
2. What skills does the author say "mature" out of children's interaction with concrete materials, caring adults, and managed peer groups?
3. About how many hours of combined television and computer-use time does Sobel think is appropriate for children?

Have you seen the advertisements? The four-year-old sits propped on a couple of pillows gazing into the computer. She is bathed in soft, multi-colored light while the rest of the room is in shadow. The light suggests alpenglow, the radiant magenta softness that high peaks catch from the setting sun while the rest of the landscape is subdued in twilight. The computer glow is supposed to be subtly beautiful; this is a moment of quiet reverence and thoughtful contemplation. The computer industry has discovered a new market—preschool-aged children....

If they can get kids hooked on computers and software at an early age, then manufacturers can be assured of 60 years of techno-consuming. It is just like Louisiana Pacific's practice of planting seedlings to harvest after four decades of growth, and it may be producing the same kind of monotonous monoculture in our children's minds.

A founder of a small school in northern California described his concerns about the computer issue to me. All the parents sending their children to the school had a deep ecological consciousness and were very progressive. But as soon as their children were in first grade they wanted to know, "When is the school going to get computers?" They couldn't really articulate why they thought computers were important for young children, but they were anxious to have their kids jump on the bandwagon so they would not get left behind.

Capitalizing on these latent fears and parental concerns, the advertising hook is, "If you love your child, buy her a computer!" But does the computer really make your preschooler smarter, happier and healthier? Or does it numb
her brain and make her just another contributor to the globalization of a consumer-oriented, ecologically destructive culture?

The Lost Joys of Childhood

Regrettably, it is not so clearly black and white. Rather, to paraphrase [singer] Judy Collins, "Something's lost and something's gained in computer use everyday." When children in and out of school are using computers, they are not doing something else. If we understand what they are not doing as well as what they are doing, we will be in a better position to decide what place computers should have in children's lives.

I got a perspective on the after-school situation from talking with an environmental educator who works with a group of fourth graders in Keene, NH, our small city surrounded by parks and woods. This past spring she read the children Alice McLaren's *Roxaboxen*, a book about children creating a fantasy town while growing up in the American West in the 1930's. It is a simple portrait of independent, imaginative play. "Oh, those children are so lucky. I wish we could do that," was the children's response. My friend was surprised. She had assumed the children would easily identify with the children in the story, so she asked them what they did after school. Of the 16 children in the class, two of the children were not allowed to go outside, four said they watched TV or talked on the phone, six went to the recreation center to play video games, and four played outside. If this is a representative sample, then only 25% of nine-year-old children in our safe, all-American city are out playing in the neighborhood after school.

This resonates eerily with a child's comment collected by Richard Louv in research for his book entitled *Childhood's Future*. When Louv asked a group of fourth graders whether they liked to play indoors or outdoors better, one fourth grader responded, "I like to play indoors better 'cause that's where the electrical outlets are." I do not have to tell you what they are playing inside, do I?

This erosion of childhood concerns me and computers seem like a river in flood washing away the soil that roots children to the natural world. Elementary age children, now more than ever, need opportunities to be in their bodies in the world—jumping-rope, bicycling, stream hopping and fort building. It is in this engagement between the limbs of the body and the bones of the earth where true balance and centeredness emerge....

Technology Can Rob Children of Creativity

Like television, computers encourage our children to become couch potatoes. The sophisticated processes of critical thinking, problem-solving and kinesthetic coordination appropriately mature out of children's interaction with concrete materials, caring adults and thoughtfully managed groups of peers. Luring children into the world of pure information and electronic images alienates them from experience and disembodies their learning. But in concert with active learning, computers can enhance the educational experience. In all things, moderation.

I will never forget sitting next to Joseph Chilton Pearce, the noted author of *The Crack in the Cosmic Egg* and *Magical Child*, at a presentation about educational software. *Storybook Weaver*, an integrated graphics and word processing program for children, was on display. To make a picture you choose from a variety of landscapes—skies, mountains, rivers, yards—and then you choose people, animals, buildings and the like to fill out the image. It is all clip art. Then you can add text to the pictures and with a bunch of these you create a story. Unfamiliar with this kind of software, Joe Pearce was taken aback. As he watched the presenter flip through a variety of prefab landscapes, his eyes filled with tears. "This isn't imagination or creativity, it's just ..." and he was
overcome with sadness. Drawing pictures and making up stories is something that most children take to with little prompting. If the software does it for them, are we stealing away the image-making capacity from children? Does *Storybook Weaver* just encourage children to become consumers of externally produced images?

Let us make it acceptable for parents and teachers to just say no to significant amounts of television and computers until children enter adolescence. Childhood is short enough; there is no need to hasten its demise with exposure to soul-depleting electronic media. In my household, we figure it is a good idea to immunize our children against the onslaught of mass culture by allowing our children three or four hours of combined television or computer use per week. This avoids the forbidden fruit effect and gives us good material for dinnertime conversations. And in place of electronic media, let us work for dynamic classrooms and safe neighborhoods. I say we start a new movement called *Take Back the Afternoon* that advocates for real, old-fashioned play, at least a couple of days a week. Perhaps we can create our own bandwagon.

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