



I observe Max, a thirteen year old boy who is playing with a Gameboy in the waitingroom. Lucky him—he doesn't have to feel uncomfortable with the fifteen-year-old girl sitting next to him. He doesn't have to say a word. He doesn't feel the need to connect with anything in the room, other than the buttons on his Gameboy. Without the Gameboy, his isolation

would draw him out, and make him look outside himself to pass the time. Right now, he is not experiencing the pleasure, or anxiety, of connecting with a peer.

Wait. He stops, and says to the girl "Yes! I just blew this guy up." They begin to converse about the game, the boy's eyes glued to the little box, the girl looking over his shoulder. With a long bored exhale, the girl, unnoticed, goes to talk with another child. The boy keeps shooting, oblivious. The moment is gone.

Jump ahead two years when Max's testosterone levels make him very interested in the girl sitting next to him. What kinds of social and verbal skills has he developed, in order to connect with her? How does he handle his anxiety if he has never had to before, without the help of a Gameboy to distract and absorb his emotions?

Children have only eighteen years to learn the complex skills necessary to live independently as social beings in our world. They learn these social skills mostly by doing. If children are spending valuable "free" time (time without adult mediation) involved with activities that don't exercise any skills necessary to form and maintain relationships with others, when are they learning these skills? Many of them are not.

Entertainment technologies provide stimulating experiences, pure fun and pleasure, and allow one to be alone. This solitude feels easier because they are in charge, they are the king of the play, they control the shots, they have it their way most of the time (unless you get shot down). There is no need to compromise, to converse, to have eye contact, to smile, to feel embarrassed, or sad, or even to feel the very isolation that the technology engenders. They may be with another child, interacting through the machine and talking about what is in front of them, but this simulates the "parallel play" of two-year olds. After age two, children are ready to develop the skills that help them to initiate, develop, and maintain vital relationships with others. Instead, children are learning through experience that happiness is derived from outside themselves through increasing the playing level, laughing at jokes on TV, watching a good movie, and feeling someone else's triumphs and worries.

Children are still developing and do not yet know how to get what they want from a peer or adult in a socially acceptable manner. They need to learn how to strike up a conversation without raising their fists or voices. They must learn how to

relax themselves, to wind down from intense emotions such as excitement and anger. They must learn how to entertain themselves, without someone or something else directing their choices and behavior.

Experiences such as cooperating with someone at kickball, sticking up for someone who is being picked on, helping two kids work it out rather than to fight, deciding who is on which team, and figuring out how to handle someone who cheats all contribute to social skill development. These skills of emotional intelligence are necessary for successful relationships, fulfilling careers,

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personal fulfillment, resiliency, and for mental health. The degree to which children are able to develop these skills, is the degree to which they are protected from mental and physical illness across their lifespan.

Why are our kids, especially our sons, drawn to these technologies? They're easier than "dealing" with another person. Haven't you ever wanted to "click off" an uncomfortable conversation you have had with a spouse, friend, acquaintance? How about obliterating a feeling? Yes, of course. Adults too, dive into technology, and other anesthetizing mechanisms, which serve to lessen uncomfortable feelings. But adults presumably have the necessary skills to solve problems, rather than click them away.

Look at the way today's boys and girls socialize. Boys are inside, alone or in front of a screen with another, against the walls on the playground during recess (in schools which allow them), hooked up to their little boxes. Look at the girls, laughing, chatting, teasing, being nice, being mean, playing. Boys, whose social and verbal skills already trail girls, are getting even less practice when they engage so singularly with technology. The social skills gap between girls and boys will widen as we enable our boys to spend their leisure time in nonsocial ways. Ask ten boys what they do for fun. The ones with the poorest social skills will invariably say something about their Playstation. Entertainment technology is especially seductive to children who do not know how to play with others, and thereby exacerbating their deficits because they socialize less.

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Let's take the batteries out of our children's electronic lives. Let's allow them to experience their feelings, their thoughts, other's feelings and body language, maybe even some boredom. Does Max have the necessary skills to start a conversation, or resolve a conflict should one arise? We hope so, but he certainly will not pick them up as long as there is a Gameboy in his hand.