THE GUIDE TO PARENTING IN CYBER SPACE

Digital immigrants and digital natives.

According to internet expert Dr. Kimberly Young there is a new dynamic in today's parent-child relationship: digital natives vs. digital immigrants. The terms digital immigrant and digital native were originally coined by Mark Prensky and designate people born in the digital era (generation X) and people born before the digital era (baby boomers). It is important to understand not all digital immigrants and all digital natives are created equal. Some digital natives are tech savvy, creative, and gain advanced problem solving skills. However, there are many natives who do not have knowledge or talent with computers or any inclination to understand the cyber world largely due to the absence of opportunities to explore technology.

Likewise, digital immigrants are not created equal. According to Dr. Young, digital immigrants fall into three major groups:" *avoiders, reluctant adopters, and enthusiastic adopters."* Avoiders prefer a lifestyle that leaves them relatively technology-free or with minimal relationship to technology. They tend to use land lines, do not own or want a cell phone, and avoid using e-mail. Reluctant adopters understand technology is a crucial part of today's world and they try to engage with the technology. This group feels uncomfortable in the digital world because they believe they lack "techy" intuition about how to navigate cyberspace. Enthusiastic adopters are the immigrants who easily keep pace with digital natives and fully embrace and enjoy new tech gadgets and tech challenges.

According to Dr. Kimberly Young the following represent the major differences between the immigrant and native generations:

Digital immigrants prefer to talk on the phone or in person whereas digital natives prefer to connect through texting, chat rooms, Facebook, or by playing online video games.

Digital immigrants text sparingly and tend to view texting as a distraction or an annoyance. Digital natives text far more than they call and are generally disinterested in the time involved in making a phone call (FYI: 40% of teens can text with their eyes closed).

Digital immigrants prefer synchronistic communication or communication that occurs in real time. Digital natives prefer a synchronistic or sequential communication.

Digital immigrants are accustomed to and generally like to use manuals with clear steps. Digital natives typically cannot relate to manuals and tend to solve problems intuitively.

Digital immigrants assume they will work their way up the employment ladder in a linear fashion while remaining in one career. Digital natives tend to try many careers and aspire to balance between their social world and their employment world. Natives also prefer flexible hours and opportunities to work remotely, i.e., from a café or on the weekend.

Digital natives tend to enjoy spending time with people face-to-face, in clubs, at dinners, or at sporting events. Digital natives prefer to connect online in chat rooms, social networking sites or through video game platforms.

Digital immigrants prefer the use of proper English. Digital natives use texting and instant messaging shorthand.

Digital immigrants tell friends about a trip on the phone or with an in-person slide show of photographs. Digital natives tell friends about trips by posting albums consisting of photos/videos/music online through Facebook, MySpace, or YouTube.

Digital immigrants tend to think digital natives are wasting their lives online. Digital natives believe that many aspects of their life are intrinsically connected to being online.

Digital natives tend to address one task or even one pleasure at a time. Digital natives prefer multitasking or switch tasking -- moving quickly between studying, texting, DVD watching, Facebook, reading, etc.

Digital natives are concerned about physical safety, such as kidnapping, assault, robbery. Digital native's safety concerns relate to online behavior such as texting inappropriate pictures ("sexting"), cyber stalking, identity theft, and privacy invasions such as the hijacking of e-mail accounts or social networking sites.

Digital natives versus digital immigrants: multitasking.

One of the most contentious areas between digital immigrants and digital natives (parent and child) is multi-tasking or switch-tasking. Parents witness their children doing homework while text messages zip back and forth, videos upload or stream, Facebook profiles are being updated, twitter is being checked, internet browsers are open, and music jumps out of iTunes.

When it comes to complex cognitive activities, research suggests the brain oscillates between two or more tasks or "hops" from task to task. Research also suggests the brains of teens and young adults seem to be able to hop better or faster between tasks when compared to older adults. Younger people's reaction times are generally faster and this aptitude now appears to be enhanced by the techno-culture in which they live. The brain's of digital natives, which are known to have high levels of what is referred to as "plasticity," have adjusted to complexities of multitasking.

Intuitively, it appears those who multitask unlikely to comprehend, digest, and remember important information. However, research on the effects of multitasking on retention and comprehension is still in its infancy and thus we really do not have conclusive results on this issue. A recent experiment at Stanford University concluded "multitaskers" *are not skilled at multitasking*. Certainly, the problem of being distracted by media is a concern both in school settings and work settings. As a result, some Fortune 500 and Silicon Valley companies have instituted what they call the "topless meeting." Which refers to gatherings were laptops and other mobile devices like blackberries and iPhones, are banned in order to increase participants focus, attention, and productivity.

The fight is on: the clash over technology

Once concerned or worried about their child's relationship to cyber space many parents argue, criticize and threaten to take computers away. This response creates a protracted and ultimately useless power struggle. Parents are concerned for the welfare of their children and do not understand their children's "online" lives. They fear their children are wasting their lives with meaningless online activities and will, as a result, be unprepared for the workforce.

On the other hand, digital natives, feel misunderstood and alienated by their parents. From a child/teen's perspective they are making use of and enjoying the wide array of digital media opportunities. Telling a digital native not to use technology is similar to telling an art lover not to go to museums. The attempt by parents to try to minimize the value of online opportunities fails to make sense and feels like an illogical and hostile intrusion to the digital generation.

When parents take away computers or disconnect the internet some children/teens actually respond with violence. Others fall into depression. Most of the time children/teens find ways to connect with the web and play games by going to a friend's house or at an Internet café.

The seven stages of parent-child technology conflict:

1) Parents fear how much time there child/teen is spending on the net or gaming.
2) This concern leads to parents criticizing and minimizing the internet/gaming. Children/teens feel rejected and reject their parent's concerns.
3) Parents then try to control the use of technology through software filters or by attempting to set time limits.
4) Children/teens work around technological limits by finding ways to continue to be online and play video games.
5) Parents become increasingly frustrated and angry.
6) Children and parents become locked in a power struggle. At this point parents either resort to more extreme measures such as taking a computer away or give up trying to set limits.
7) Parent-child relationship escalates into alienation, disconnection, volatility and sometimes violence.

Dr. Young recommends the following steps to break free of parent-child technology conflict:

DON'T:

Label your children ("You don't have a brain in your head!").

Blame your children, ("You are wasting your life!")

Nag ("Get off now. How many times do I have to tell to get off that screen!")

Threaten ("I am going to take away your computer for a week.")

Demand change ("Your behavior needs to change today!")

Make comparisons to siblings or peers ("Your sister never wastes her time gaming!)

Avoid blaming video gaming, the internet, gaming manufacturers, internet, servers, friends, other families for your child/teen's behavior ("We really can't change anything. Every one of his friends is doing the same thing.")

DO

Approach your child with an open mind and an open heart.

Be genuinely curious about what draws your child to a particular game or website

Try discover:

- What do they like about games?
- What applications and technologies are they using?
- What video games are being played?
- How are games played?
- How much time are they spend playing games?
- When do they play?
- Where do they play?
- With whom do they play?

Try to find answers to the following questions:

- How do the internet and online games serve my child? Does the Internet and online games lead to feelings of mastery, belonging, purpose, etc.?
- What does my child like about the games he/she plays? Does gaming lead to increase in friendships, a sense of community, cognitive and emotional challenges, and healthy competition?
- What are the emotional and psychological benefits of the game? Does gaming offer purpose and goals? Do games provide a sense of connection to others? Does gaming provide excitement and pleasure?
- What might my child/teen be trying to **avoid** through the internet and gaming activities? Is their off-line world filled with problems at school? Have they been bullied? Do they have problems with body image? Do they have learning disabilities? Attention deficit? Lack a sense of belonging to a social community?

Consider the developmental needs of your child:

- Young are people are now exploring their evolving identity via the internet – by exploring digital content, creating content and connecting with a variety of peers.
- Children's developmental needs include establishing friendships, testing limits of the self/other/ situations, challenging authority, exploring safety/control, autonomy, sexual identity and self-image and technology has become an avenue to explore and meet developmental challenges.
- At different ages children ask: Who am I? Who am I *not*? Who may I become? What are the limits of my life? What is right and just? Social media has become a way to explore and answers these types of developmental questions.

Always try to:

- Show genuine curiosity and interest in their online lives
- Join your child/teen in their interests
- Do not diminish their virtual life as it is as real to them as their three-dimensional/non-cyber life
- Do not diminish the importance of the internet and other forms of technology as this is their "native culture."
- Do not ban the Internet (if at all possible)

- Offer off-line activities that are appealing in addition to, not instead of, online activities

Join your teen:

- Ask your child to show you what they like about their online life
- Demonstrate respect for their interests
- Request they show you how a game or Internet site works
- If you are inclined, play online with your child/teen

Learn and understand the games your child/teen plays:

- ***Know the game so you understand the time and the relationship parameters of the game.***
- Parents need to realize it may take 2 to 3 hours to plan a raid in a game in another 1 to 2 hours to implement the raid
- Many of the role-playing games require organization and action plans involving dozens of people over several hours.
- Do not arbitrarily set time limits as they may be counter to the realistic time parameters of the game.
- Do not use the game as an incentive for good behavior
- **Model and teach moderation and balance.**

Find out what is available and propose games that include::

- History and math
- Reading and writing
- Geography, biology, chemistry
- Nature and oceanography
- How to start and run a business
- How to invest money
- How to build and fix cars, bikes, motorcycles
- Mountaineering, scuba diving, surfing, skiing
- How to play soccer, basketball, hockey
- Robotics and artificial intelligence exploration

How will you know if your child/teen is becoming addicted to the net or gaming?

- Increased time spent playing online
- Preoccupation that last beyond healthy limits or beyond normal excitement
- Lying or hiding gaming use from others
- Disobedience to time and other limits
- Diminished interest in off-line recreational activities
- Diminished interest in essential off-line self-care such as bathing, sleeping, eating
- Social withdrawal from family and friends
- Withdrawal from school or work in favor of being online or playing games
- Unable to find pleasure in any activity other than being online or playing games
- Irritability, anger, depression when off-line
- Continuing to engage in cyber activities and gaming despite clear negative consequences: physical, emotional, occupational, or relational.

Achieving Cyber Wellness

Cyber wellness is a new and valuable term that refers to the positive well-being of internet users and a healthy cyber-culture (the internet community). Cyber wellness involves an understanding of the risks of potentially destructive online behavior, and awareness of how to protect oneself and others from such behavior. Cyber wellness also involves recognition of the power of the Internet to create change in the self and in the community at large.

The internet and gaming are here to stay and we need to develop a way to use the internet and gaming to enhance the quality of life of children, teens, and adults while simultaneously enhancing our social communities. Parents need to prepare their children to be critical thinkers, creative producers of content and pro-active citizens within the cyber community.

Cyber wellness includes embracing the potential positive effects of cyber-action: empowering learning, improving teamwork and self-esteem, improving work-life balance through telecommuting, improving job marketability, creating political and social opportunities for disenfranchised and marginalized populations, and providing opportunities for information and "user" generated content across socioeconomic and cultural boundaries.

Children and young people are becoming ***active producers and consumers o***f online content, services, and communication platforms. With these opportunities, come extraordinary freedoms to express one self and also bring new and complex responsibilities and risks. This fundamental change in children and young people's relationship with new media means it is imperative adults empower children and teens with the necessary tools, knowledge, and skills to create cyber wellness and the ability to make informed decisions about appropriate and safe use of new technologies.

Cyber wellness also involves ***balance***: the ability to take advantage of the extraordinary opportunities to be creative, to connect, to empower, to entertain while simultaneously taking advantage of off-line opportunities to experience travel, food, new cultures, teamwork, collaboration, love, and committed partnerships.

Cyber wellness necessarily includes physical and emotional health: exercise, healthy dietary practices, recreational interests that include connection to nature, and relaxation/rejuvenation practices that maintain health.

Achieving balance in the 21st century is perhaps the greatest challenge for both youth and adults. The dynamic and constantly changing world of new technology and media can easily consume one's time and energy, whether a person is in early elementary school or an adult. The opportunities for recreation and distraction are also at an unprecedented level via the Internet and gaming. The combination of stimulation and unlimited access to both cyber and gaming media can lead easily to an imbalance in one's life -- especially for at risk youth and adults.

Who is most at risk for a cyber-imbalance? Those with neurological, psychiatric, and environmental challenges and deficits: ADHD, depression, anxiety disorders, trauma, OCD and autism spectrum disorder.

Achieving cyber wellness, or a true balance between cyber and three-dimensional worlds, is an ongoing challenge for the 21st century. The crucial first step is awareness of the need to carefully analyze and question the way we interact with new technologies and media. We must adopt a critical stance at all times, whether it is our personal use, the use of our children, and more broadly the use of our community and political and social systems.

"DIGITAL DIET"

1) Limit technology to two hours per day (non-work or school related use).
2) Spend one hour per day, one day per week, and four days per month completely unplugged.
3) Institute a "tech curfew:" no recreational use of tech after 9:00pm.
4) Keep all forms of technology out of bedrooms at all times.
5) Turn off smart phones at 9:00pm (no texting, surfing, etc.)
6) Collect all tech gadgets after curfew and have them "sleep" in the kitchen or family room.
7) Take family "field trips" at least once per week (parks, food, beach, museum, hiking, movies).
8) Exercise as a family: biking, hiking, swimming, treadmill, sports, boogie boarding, bowling).
9) Do not have conversations or meals with any tech devise in hand (eyes "up" and focused on your conversation partner).
10) Structure your "tech" day: set specific times for emailing, Facebook, chat rooms, eBay, research, etc.

Getting Help

If you or your child/teen is showing signs of compulsive/addictive behavior related either to the internet or gaming (or both) you will need to seek assistance through books, websites, and/or a trained mental health professional. There are several excellent books that provide valuable information about the effects of technology on children/teens/adults and offer proven techniques for reducing compulsive or addictive behavior:

Cyber Junkie by Kevin Roberts
Video Games and Your Kids by Hilarie Cash and Kim McDaniel
Caught in the Web and Tangled in the Web by Kimberly Young
Internet Addiction: A Handbook and Guide edited by Kimberly Young
Surviving the Technological Alteration of the Modern Mind by Dr. Gary Small
Virtually You: The Dangerous Powers of the E-Personality by Dr. Elias Aboujaoude
ReWired: *Understanding the iGeneration and the Way They Learn* by Dr. Larry Rosen
The Shallows: What the Internet is Doing to Our Brains by Nicholas Carr
Alone Together: Why We expect More From Technology and Less From Each Other by Dr. Sherry Turkle
Game Addiction: The Experience and the Effects by Neils Clark and P. Shavaun Scott
Unplugged: My Journey Into the Dark World of Video Game Addiction by Dr. Ryan Van Cleave

Websites that are very helpful to parents who have children who are at risk for addiction or have crossed the line into addictive behavior include: **The Center for Media and Child Health, The Berkman Center for Internet and Society, The Internet Safety Zone, Netfamilynews, Connectsafely, The Internet Safety Zone, reSTART.**

With respect to locating a mental health professional with experience in cyber and/or gaming addiction I am available for a consultation and treatment. It is of crucial importance to address compulsive/addictive behaviors as early as possible. There is growing evidence that ongoing compulsive use of gaming and the net can produce changes in brain functioning that may have long-term negative consequences in terms of social, emotional, and cognitive development. The long-

term use of technology, when it takes over a child's life, can lead to the interruption of typical developmental. The group that is particularly at risk is teens -- as this is a time that involves dynamic and rapid changes in social, emotional, and academic capacities and skills. If a teen is withdrawn, isolated, and locked into a fantasy world, they are susceptible to being derailed from normative development: academic excellence, social competence, community integration, and long term partnerships/marriage.