

Students Pull Plug On Their Wired World

Saying No to TV, video games and Web surfing, except on the weekend

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Ask a few Grade 6 boys at Alan Howard Waldorf School how they respond when mom or dad orders them off the computer, and they belt out the answer in unison.

"Just five more minutes!"

Grins are exchanged. Nods all around. That universal phrase of childhood, once the stock answer from kids being summoned inside for supper, is now the refrain heard regularly from in front of televisions, Xboxes and computer screens everywhere.

Jonah knows what usually happens next. "Five minutes turns into half an hour," he sighs. He and his classmates hate getting nagged, but they also know it's tough to break the seductive hold of the screen once it's got you, whether via *Family Guy*, Halo or surfing the Web.

From now on though, they won't have to endure so many of these familiar household exchanges. At least, not on school days.

Because their entire class of 11- and 12-year-old boys and girls, along with their teacher and parents, have agreed to a "media manifesto" that means on school days there will be no TV, Web surfing, MSN, video games or email. The no media policy will be in effect from Sundays at 6 p.m. through to school dismissal time on Fridays.

"Parents realize that there's something kind of out of control. They're at a loss and they need some strategies," says teacher Robert Teuwen, who spearheaded the initiative at the small Toronto independent school after a similar trial with a previous class.

Few would argue. Hardly a day goes by that there isn't yet another study about the steadily mounting number of hours kids spend in front of screens, the predators lurking online, and how technology is breeding a generation of obese

youth with no attention span or tolerance for delayed gratification. Earlier this month, a group of desperate teachers, parents and police called for more restrictions on the TV and music industry to reduce kids' exposure to media violence.

The downtown Toronto Waldorf school had a head start. Some of the families were already living tech-free or had strict policies in place. And curbing media use by children is already part of the philosophy at the Waldorf network of schools, which stress hands-on learning and nurturing imagination. Teuwen will be with his group of 16 Grade 6 children until they graduate from the school after Grade 8. The plan is to keep the media policy in effect until then.

"Some parents were saying 'Hallelujah,'" says Bev Dywan, who has a daughter in Teuwen's class. Having all the parents on board was important, she adds. "Now there's clarity and especially at this age they really need clarity of rules."

Anyone with kids will understand why. It's one thing to ban violent video games or restricted movies in your own home, but what happens at the neighbour's or a friend's sleepover is quite another. A uniform policy for the class removes that dilemma and the peer pressure. If no one else is on MSN, there's not much incentive to sneak on.

"It's not an easy thing to do for a child and it's not an easy thing for me to do," says Beverley Milligan, a mother of two whose son is adhering to the no media policy.

But she says it's worth it. During the worst battles at home over TV and video games, she noticed that sitcoms and games dominated the boys' relationships and conversations. She's seen a big shift in what they talk about since the class gave their policy a trial run in November.

Actor Rick Roberts, who appears regularly on TV though he apparently doesn't own one, gave the scheme an endorsement in the school's news release announcing the move. "It's easy to forget in these media-saturated times how creative kids are. Sometimes they need to be given the opportunity to enjoy drawing, reading, playing and talking with each other," said Roberts, who has a son in the class.

While the sentiment may be appealing, the approach is a little more controversial. Debbie Gordon, a Toronto mother and former advertising executive who runs media literacy workshops for school-age kids through her

company Mediacs, says setting limits on kids' media consumption is "paramount." But bans aren't necessarily the answer, she adds. Kids need to learn about balance and setting priorities in their daily lives by practising it under the guidance of attentive parents.

And the grownups need to educate themselves about what kids are watching on TV, playing on the Xbox and engaging in online.

It takes time and energy – according to Gordon, media management is 80 per cent about parenting and 20 per cent about the technology.

But parents and teachers need to respect that children's communication is different these days and, like it or not, their lives are shaped by media. To try to shut the door on that puts them at a disadvantage, she says.

She'd rather see parents sit down with their kids and learn what attracts them to reality TV or *Borat* and what they're posting on Facebook or talking about over MSN. Just as a hockey parent would drive their child to practice, watch their games, pay attention to the coach's philosophy and chat with other parents. That way they have credibility with the kids and can make informed rules.

But Teuwen points out that curbing the kids' media diet has a big effect on what happens at school.

"My work in the classroom is far more effective when there's a little psychic space in the kids' heads when they arrive in the morning," he says.

"It's like you need to be silent to fill the space. You can't write anything unless you have a blank page. Creation comes out of a pause."

He's watched kids over the years arrive overtired, their fuses blown, from late nights watching TV or playing on the Xbox, sometimes still revved up from the overload. He's listened to the daily buzz about what Bart Simpson said the previous night and what happened on *America's Top Model*. "I can't compete with that."

So what do the Waldorf kids think of their weekly media fasts?

"At first it was hard to get used to," says Nathan, who loves video games and TV. "There was nothing to do."

But now he'll kick a soccer ball around, hang out with friends, even spend more time on his homework. His buddies are quick to list the activities they do instead: reading, skating, drawing, tobogganing, playing the guitar. They say they don't make up for lost time on weekends. Older brothers and sisters confine their tech time to later in the evening.

Jonah concedes he kind of misses it, but it's been easier than he thought. "At first I was like, 'Oh no, this is going to suck ...' But I personally wouldn't go back to watching a lot more TV. I like it now. I like having the limit."

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