



Swallows and Amazons vs. Minecraft

William Goldsmith, Headmaster | Friday, 20 January 2017

According to a report published by the Children's Commissioner, "in the last year, among 3-4 year olds, time online increased from 6 hours 48 minutes to 8 hours 18 minutes a week, and 12-15 year olds now spend over 20 hours a week online" (Children's Commissioner, 2017). This report, aimed at identifying the challenges facing society in managing children's ever increasing resilience of the internet, has prompted very interesting articles in the media with conflicting arguments of the benefits of 'screen time for children'. Sir Anthony Seldon, Vice Chancellor of Buckingham University and ex-Master of Wellington College, has argued of the benefits of getting outside and enjoying a 'swallows and amazons' style of freedom, saying "They are under enormous pressure and the temptation to spend too much time surfing the net, watching TV or playing computer games is difficult to resist" (Seldon, 2016). In contrast, a very recent study suggests that a few hours of screen time each day can "boost mental wellbeing" (a few hours being up to four hours in a weekday and nearly five hours at weekends). Is this moderate use?

What a minefield this is in terms of what the right way forward is for us as teachers, parents and of course the children growing up in a truly digital world (indeed that phrase might even be outdated). The internet, merely 28 years old in commercial terms, has swept over us with such velocity that no-one could have planned for how to manage the extraordinary fall-out of our reliance on social media.

I feel a balance has to be struck. Social media used as a venue to stay connected to friends, to socialise – a critical part of growing up – and develop one's imagination is the equivalent to our generation using the park and playing fields to meet friends. By taking away a child's means of connecting with others, establishing and maintaining positive relationships is stemming a major part of their development and wellbeing, just as getting rid of playing fields would have been ten years ago. That said, I am a passionate believer in getting children outdoors, climbing trees (and falling out of them occasionally), creating games on the beach, learning how to occupy oneself during those long, lazy summer afternoons, going on bike rides, inventing games, and essentially recreating the lives those in Arthur Ransome and Enid Blyton's glorious novels.

Are we at risk of letting down this generation by not allowing them to take real life risks, such as heading off with friends for an afternoon outdoors, making dens and exploring, for fear of accidents and health and safety hazards? As Anthony Seldon argues, screen time presents far greater risks if children are not suitably prepared for it. There is no doubt that digital engagement presents the most incredible opportunities for us all, not least the children we are bringing up. Mumsnet concurred with this with 94% of respondents agreeing that an increased awareness of technology gave children substantial educational and creative opportunities, and we see this in school with our approach to IT and tablet technology. This same survey also saw 73% of parents concerned about their child's safety online and 71% of parents anxious about their child not getting enough sleep through screen time. Parents are right to celebrate this new digital world as providing opportunities we could never have dreamed about, but we are also right to be concerned that without proper intervention, management and, most importantly, a balance between screen time and real life engagement outside, this tide could well engulf us.



St Leonards
St Andrews, Fife

Part of my holiday reading was an outstanding book by a Headteacher in East Sussex who runs the most magical primary school (they have a herd of buffalo on the playing fields). He encourages an element of outdoor risk and danger in schools. As Anthony Seldon puts it “Playing outdoors regularly with others helps with resilience, leadership skills, building confidence and self-esteem. The children in Arthur Ransome's stories took some big risks”.

So, what’s my message? Saturday morning is for Facebooking your friends to galvanise them for the weekend. This should take no more than twenty minutes. This then leaves 8 hours for your mini outdoor adventure.

I will sign off with a [useful video, documenting the changes in society due to technology.](#)