

# Plugged In, but Tuned Out: Getting Kids to Connect To the Non-Virtual World

By JEFF ZASLOW

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When the phone rings at Susan Manion's house in Silver Spring, Md., her three children, ages 16 to 23, almost never answer it. "They know it won't be for them," says Ms. Manion. "They just let it ring."

Across America, a symphony of unanswered house phones reminds us that there's been a sea change within families. More than half of all teens now conduct their lives on their own cellphones, or in a zillion online "instant" conversations parents never see, according to studies by MindShare Online Research and the Consumer Electronics Association.

Children today have been labeled "the connected generation," with iPods in their ears, text messages at their fingertips and laptop screens at eye level. But their technology-focused lifestyle can also leave them disconnected from the wider world, especially from their parents.

Many teens won't give friends their home numbers, says Samantha Landau, 15, of West Hills, Calif. "They don't want friends to talk to their parents, because they don't want their parents to know about their lives."

It's easy to assume that these are just perennial generational tensions in new high-tech boxes. After all, baby boomers and their parents have endured an infamous culture gap. But technology has exacerbated the gulf between today's parents and kids in ways we need to notice. It's easier now for kids to function in their own closed societies, leaving them oblivious to adult culture.

People over age 40 grew up with just a few TV channels. We watched TV news -- at 6 p.m. it was the only thing on -- and soaked up the adult worlds of information and entertainment because that's all that was available. Now kids have their own worlds, their own channels.

I live in Michigan, and two days after Hurricane Katrina hit, I drove my 16-year-old daughter and her friend home from the movies. I mentioned Katrina, and this friend didn't even know there was a hurricane. She's a lovely girl and an A student, but for days, she had chatted online, watched her own TV shows, and saw no news of the tragedy. Her parents hadn't thought to tell her.

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Samantha Landau says she mentioned new Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts to fellow students in her 11th-grade advanced-placement history class and most had no idea who he was.

Baby boomers knew newsmakers from their parents' and grandparents' generation because families watched Walter Cronkite and Ed Sullivan together. But most 20th-century legends are "dead brands" to kids today, youth marketers say. To them, historical figures are last season's reality-show contestants.

Certainly, young people today are entitled to their own heroes. And truth is, surveys dating back to 1915 show kids have always been uninformed about U.S. history. Still, today's parents often indulge ignorance. More than half of our kids have TVs in their rooms, according to a 2004 American Psychological Association report. "Yes, you can watch 'Pimp My Ride' on your TV," parents tell kids. "We'll watch the president's address on the kitchen TV."

One mother I interviewed refers to her son's bedroom as "the technology cave." He has a TV, computer, stereo, iPod and cellphone. She won't allow food in his bedroom because "that forces him out into the open with us."

There are other ways to bring techno kids into the wider world. For starters, immerse yourself in their world. Ask them to go online to help you find Katrina relief groups. Let them teach you complex videogames. Then be the adult and say it's time to turn everything off and come to dinner.

Dawson McAllister, whose faith-based teen radio program airs in 260 markets, says parents should interact with kids rather than lecture them. He used to give 55-minute talks at religious retreats. "Now if you can hold kids for 25 minutes, you're doing well. You also need video clips, and ways to involve them in the presentation. You have to be far more Oprah than Billy Graham."

Because kids multitask -- they'll instant-message six friends while watching TV and talking on a cell -- classroom instruction moves too slowly for them, says Alan Simon, superintendent of the Arlington Heights, Ill., School District. He calls the phenomenon "techno-tasking."

Yes, we should encourage kids to read books and newspapers. But we also must recognize that they collect information from unorthodox sources: blogs, cyber gossip, advertising, comedians. The Internet is filled with shady truths, and kids try to determine which outlets are trustworthy, says generational marketing consultant Ann Fishman. "If it's good, they go with it. If not, they don't. It's called 'Internet thinking.' They don't have a Walter Cronkite." We can help kids sort through the Internet cacophony by discussing with them what they find there, says Dr. Simon.

Six million young people are using America Online's Red service for teens, which is designed to ease parents' concerns by controlling Internet access. Still, AOL's service is purposely edgy, with its teen Q&A offering titled "Truth or Crap." A Web page called "True or False" wouldn't work for today's kids, says Malcolm Bird, senior vice president

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of AOL's youth area. "You have to speak to them in relevant terms." The lesson for parents: Even "safe" sites mimic the coarseness in our culture. Know what's there.

In North Granby, Conn., Kaycee Quinlan, 15, says she doesn't mind that her parents look over her shoulder when she's online. "I feel lucky to have parents who care," she says.

Her parents also have a quaint habit of trading not-so-instant messages with her -- sticky notes on the kitchen counter, often with scribbled hearts. "I'd way rather get those notes than cellphone messages from them," Kaycee says. "I come home, I'm alone, and when I see their handwriting, it's comforting."

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