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The Kids Are Not All Right

By JOEL BAKAN

Vancouver, British Columbia

WHEN I sit with my two teenagers, and they are a million miles away, absorbed by the titillating roil of online social life, the addictive pull of video games and virtual worlds, as they stare endlessly at video clips and digital pictures of themselves and their friends, it feels like something is wrong.

No doubt my parents felt similarly about the things I did as a kid, as did my grandparents about my parents' childhood activities. But the issues confronting parents today can't be dismissed as mere generational prejudices. There is reason to believe that childhood itself is now in crisis.

Throughout history, societies have struggled with how to deal with children and childhood. In the United States and elsewhere, a broad-based "child saving" movement emerged in the late 19th century to combat widespread child abuse in mines, mills and factories. By the early 20th century, the "century of the child," as a prescient book published in 1909 called it, was in full throttle. Most modern states embraced the general idea that government had a duty to protect the health, education and welfare of children. Child labor was outlawed, as were the sale and marketing of tobacco, alcohol and pornography to children. Consumer protection laws were enacted to regulate product safety and advertising aimed at children.

By the middle of the century, childhood was a robustly protected legal category. In 1959, the United Nations issued its Declaration of the Rights of the Child. Children were now legal persons; the "best interests of the child" became a touchstone for legal reform.

But the 20th century also witnessed another momentous shift, one that would ultimately threaten the welfare of children: the rise of the for-profit corporation. Lawyers, policy makers and business lobbied successfully for various rights and entitlements traditionally connected, legally, with personhood. New laws recognized corporations as legal — albeit artificial — "persons," granting them many of the same legal rights and privileges as human

beings. In an eerie parallel with the child-protective efforts, “the best interests of the corporation” was soon introduced as a legal precept.

A clash between these two newly created legal entities — children and corporations — was, perhaps, inevitable. Century-of-the-child reformers sought to resolve conflicts in favor of children. But over the last 30 years there has been a dramatic reversal: corporate interests now prevail. Deregulation, privatization, weak enforcement of existing regulations and legal and political resistance to new regulations have eroded our ability, as a society, to protect children.

Childhood obesity mounts as junk food purveyors bombard children with advertising, even at school. A recent Kaiser Family Foundation study reports that children spend more hours engaging with various electronic media — TV, games, videos and other online entertainments — than they spend in school. Much of what children watch involves violent, sexual imagery, and yet children’s media remain largely unregulated. Attempts to curb excesses — like California’s ban on the sale or rental of violent video games to minors — have been struck down by courts as free speech violations.

Another area of concern: we medicate increasing numbers of children with potentially harmful psychotropic drugs, a trend fueled in part by questionable and under-regulated pharmaceutical industry practices. In the early 2000s, for example, drug companies withheld data suggesting that such drugs were more dangerous and less effective for children and teenagers than parents had been led to believe. The law now requires “black box” warnings on those drugs’ labels, but regulators have done little more to protect children from sometimes unneeded and dangerous drug treatments.

Children today are also exposed to increasing quantities of toxic chemicals. We know that children, because their biological systems are still developing, are uniquely vulnerable to the dangers posed by many common chemical compounds. We also know that corporations often use such chemicals as key ingredients in children’s products, saturating their environments. Yet these chemicals remain in circulation, as current federal laws demand unreasonably high proof of harm before curbing a chemical’s use.

The challenge before us is to reignite the guiding ethos and practices of the century of the child. As Nelson Mandela has said, “there can be no keener revelation of a society’s soul than the way in which it treats its children.” By that measure, our current failure to provide stronger protection of children in the face of corporate-caused harm reveals a sickness in our societal soul. The good news is that we can — and should — work as citizens, through democratic channels and institutions, to bring about change.

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• ROGER EBERT,
CHICAGO SUN-TIMES

December 3, 2011

Talking Face to Face Is So ... Yesterday

By DOMINIQUE BROWNING

ADMIT it. The holiday season has just begun, and already we're overwhelmed by so much ...face time. It's hard, face-to-face emoting, face-to-face empathizing, face-to-face expressing, face-to-face criticizing. Thank goodness for less face time; when it comes to disrupting, if not severing, lifetimes of neurotic relational patterns, technology works even better than psychotherapy.

We look askance at those young adults in a swivet of tech-enabled multi-friending, endlessly texting, tracking one another's movements — always distracted from what they are doing by what they are not doing, always connecting to people they are not with rather than people right in front of them.

But being neither here nor there has real upsides. It's less strenuous. And it can be more uplifting. Or, at least, safer, which has a lot going for it these days.

Face time — or what used to be known as spending time with friends and family — is exhausting. Maybe that's why we're all so quick to abandon it. From grandfathers to tweenies, we're all taking advantage of the ways in which we can avoid actually talking, much less seeing, one another — but still stay connected.

The last time I had face time with my mother, it started out fine. "What a lovely blouse," she said, plucking lovingly (as I chose to think) at my velvet sleeve. I smiled, pleased that she was noticing that I had made an effort. "Too bad it doesn't go with your skirt." Had we been on Skype, she would never have noticed my (stylishly intentional, I might add, just ask Marni) intriguing mix of textures. And I would have been spared another bout of regressive face time freak-out.

Face time means you can't search for intriguing recipes while you are listening to a fresh round of news about a friend's search for a soul mate. You can't mute yourself out of an endless meeting, or listen to 10 people tangled up in planning while you vacuum the living room. You can't get "cut off" — Whoops! Sorry! Tunnel! — in the middle of a tedious litany of tax problems your accountant has spotted.

My move away from face time started with my children; they are generally the ones who lead us into the future. It happened gradually. First, they left home. That did it for face time. Then I stopped getting return phone calls to voice mails. That did it for voice time, which I'd used to wean myself from face time. What happened?

"Text, Mom."

I don't text. Rather, I didn't text. Because before too long, it wasn't just the kids who were no longer listening to voice messages. No one was. Neither was I. A quick glance at the record of who had called was enough. This is mainly because people no longer leave voice messages while they are curled up on a sofa, in the quiet comfort of their living rooms, ready to chat. Instead, they catch up while they are outside, on the way somewhere, so that their message is drowned out by sirens, honking trucks and whistling winds. Why bother to listen?

Texting didn't last long with me; it is difficult to switch to reading glasses while negotiating sidewalk traffic. Now I simply ignore my phone — though I'm filled with admiration at the adroitness of codgers who are able to text and shop, or text and drink, or text and talk.

Now I'm even finding voice time an ordeal. After having had a career of offices to show up in every morning, I went into shock when I woke one morning to realize I had nowhere to go — and no more colleagues to see. No more meetings, no more hallway conversations, no more business lunches. No more face time, when you get down to it. I was upset about this, for months. After all, 30 years of doing work that depended on that chance conversation, that closed-door pep talk when something was wrong, that shared play of delight when something was right — these are difficult work habits to shake.

But now I spend a great deal of time at a computer on my kitchen table. I'm in comfortable sweaters and sweatpants — when I've managed to ditch the pajamas. When I attend meetings, it is via earbud.

At this point, Skype seems impossibly intimate — the worst of both worlds. Imagine having to see the person you are talking to, without being with them. Except with one's mother, why would anyone want to do that?

Apple is now promoting an amiable new feature called, laughably, FaceTime — which, it claims, is remarkable: "talk, smile and laugh with anyone on an iPad 2, iPhone 4," etc.

"Catch up, hang out, joke around and stay in touch with just a click. Sure, it's great to hear a voice. But it's even better to see the face that goes with it."

I'm not so sure. Seeing faces burdens us with responsibilities we may be too weary to shoulder. I've gotten used to not having to deal with everything that gets dragged in behind those voices, smiles and laughs. Things like the wince in the forehead, when you've been too sharp. Or the shadow across the eyes when you've hurt a feeling.

Face time conversation is very different from faceless conversation. Silence, for example, is meaningless in the faceless realm. Whereas, in face time, silences are resonant, often resplendent, moments of connection. Face-to-face silence means, I'm thinking, I'm listening, I'm searching, I'm feeling your pain. Not, I've hung up.

Recently I was talking to my 23-year-old son, Theo, about my nostalgia for LP record albums. Theo thought a moment and conceded that he, too, was feeling nostalgic ...for dial-up modem. (He had nice memories of pleasant beeping sounds.) I suppose the point is that we all start to pine for the way things were, once they've been gone long enough for us to forget how annoying they used to be.

Which means we will soon enough feel nostalgia for face time. I'm not quite there yet. But I'm hoping someone is working on an app that replicates the sensation of snuggling a freshly bathed child. I remember how lovely it used to be, not so very long ago, before they grew out of face time, before I tired of face time, how delicious it was when both boys were little, to wrap my arms around them, listen to the day's woes, rub noses and kiss goodnight. We clicked. And we didn't even need "just a click."

Dominique Browning is the senior director of Moms Clean Air Force, organized to fight air pollution as a children's health issue. She blogs at Slow Love Life.

