

WHY DOES TECHNOLOGY TAKE OVER YOUNGSTERS' LIVES?
USES AND ABUSES OF TECHNOLOGY
A HELP GUIDE FOR PARENTS, PROFESSIONALS AND TEACHERS

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The computer provides us with videogames, Internet connection and chatrooms, amongst other services. The mobile phone allows us to make calls, send messages, images and videos. It also allows us to play or download music, logos and so on. The MP3 can store an enormous amount of music without taking up much room.

These are technological devices that have become essential in children, teenagers and youngsters' lives. The problem arises when these are wrongly used, without a sense of moderation and without considering that there are other aspects in real life we must not neglect. It is still important to go out and play with friends, to go for a walk or to the cinema. However, this is something that kids tend to do less and less because they would rather stay at home logged on to the Internet or playing games addictively. They feel more secure in themselves.

The Mobile

When do they ask us for a mobile? What must we do? How can we prevent addiction? How do we detect the problem? What should I do with a child addicted to technology?

Our children usually ask us for a mobile from about the age of ten onwards. They reason out that their classmates have one and that it is essential for them. This is all false. Except for one or two exceptions, their classmates do not have mobiles either but, they have to say something so that we buy one for them.

If they do finally get one, we have to make certain that they realize just how useful this device can be, but they must also know that they cannot spend the whole day looking at their mobile either. They must not take it to school because they will spend all day long playing around with it and sending messages to their friends. As a result, they will not pay attention in class and are liable to fall behind. The only exception to consider relates to those children who go and come from school by themselves and find nobody at home when they get there. Mobile can be useful when it comes to helping to ensure their safety.

Once we have accepted buying the mobile we have to decide whether it will be a contract or a pay-as-you-go mobile. Both have advantages and disadvantages. The advantage of the contract mobile is that we, the parents, receive the bill by the end of the month and we can see the calls they have made. The disadvantage is that, since there is not an amount set as a limit, they can spend what they want and bills can be 20, 50, 100, 1,000 or even 3,000 euros, which wouldn't be surprising.

Regarding the pay-as-you-go mobile, the disadvantage is that we have no clue about who our children call, although this can be done if necessary by other means such as going to see the company operator. The advantage is that we will set a reasonable restriction on the money we give them every month and, afterwards, they will not be able to make any more calls.

The first month the credit will last two days, the next month one week, then two weeks, three weeks, and within five or six months they will know how to measure their

calls out. They will learn to use the phone in a more rational way as long as we do not give them 50 or 100 euros for it every month. A reasonable amount is 10 or 15 euros.

Indeed, we must try to reduce the abusive use of this device. We must try to make the addicted person (child, youngster or adult) aware of which calls are necessary and which are not. If this addiction is prevented, social isolating situations will be prevented too.

We have to be careful with the use they make of it, at night for instance. The mobile must be turned off in a common area at night. Out of reach of children. It will not be permitted, under any circumstances, that our children sleep with the mobile turned and with the vibrator on at a handy distance. Otherwise, they will be tense 24 hours a day. Many youngsters receive messages during the night, at 4 or 5 a.m., and they do not get any rest because they usually answer them. In case of not receiving such messages or lost calls they will feel disappointed since they will think that nobody cares about them.

In order to prevent this situation, we have to make clear from the first day that the mobile will remain turned off at night and placed in the threshold or any place out of reach. This is about moderation. It is reasonable that a youngster receives or sends two, three or four messages a day, but it is irrational that this number rises up to fifty, as it happens many times.

The academic aspect is to be considered as well, since they get used to writing wrong when using the mobile language. They skip letters, place accents wrongly and make orthographic mistakes. The problem is that this is moved on to school and many exams are written with this language without them taking notice and, of course, they fail.

MP3: Advantages and Disadvantages

The MP3 is an excellent device that has as many advantages as disadvantages, when referring to both health and education. It is to be said that this MP3 is a wonderful technological device that allows us to store an endless amount of songs taking little room. We also have the option of transferring these songs from one MP3 to another in just a few seconds and in a very easy way. This has turned the MP3 in one of the teenagers and youngsters' favourite digital devices but, it has risks.

In the health field, specialists in audiology do not stop claiming that the increase in hearing-loss amongst youngsters is due to the frequent use, usually in a loud way, of these devices. The increase in hearing problems is mainly due to the so-called earphones, which are directly placed inside the ear and can increase the signal excessively in order to make songs neater.

Unlike the older headphones with earpads and a headband to hold on (much more advisable), the current headphones are hardly noise-isolating, causing the person to turn up the volume more every time and, therefore, causing negative consequences to the ear.

This is why it is recommended to be listened less than one hour a day and at a less of the 60% level limited by the devices. Researches have shown that today's generation that uses constantly MP3 players will have the first hearing-loss symptoms in the future. Generally speaking, if nowadays people start becoming deaf from the age of 80 onwards, today's generation using these devices will start from the age of 60 onwards.

This issue can affect the educational aspect as well if we are not careful. Youngster's must not go to school listening to music. Otherwise, *Beyonce's* song or *Shakira's* last belly dance will remain in their heads during their first hour of class and they will not be able to focus. In addition, during the break they usually use it and when they come back into class, if they have a hard subject, they will just lose their time.

In the afternoon, when they come home the same thing happens if they get down to studying. Consequently, three learning hours out of six is what youngsters can come to obtain if they make a bad use of it. Neither them nor their parents are usually aware of this.

We could make reference, as well, to the addiction that these devices bring about since there are many teenagers and, even older people, that go to bed listening to the MP3 player and continue all night long. It seems to be clear that these people's bodies do not rest at night as they should and, therefore, the morning after they will be beat and sleepy in class.

What Is a Chatroom for and what Dangers Does It Entail?

The chat is one of the favourite applications on the Internet that we will see further on, either on open or closed spaces, or through Messenger. The great advantage of it is that it allows us to communicate with people from all over the world in real time, and exchange knowledge.

However, more complex and problematic situations may come up when we use it because we dislike our personality. We use it as a defence against our frustrations and we introduce ourselves to people on the other side as idyllic human beings with technological prosthesis, this giving us fabulous results while chatting. In other words, a youngster, for instance, who dislikes himself physically, which does not mean he is the way he thinks at all, can show to be the way he would like to be: tall, blonde, 6 feet tall, a computer engineer, a five-language speaker, etc.

The problem is that, at some point, we have to face the difficult truth again, a reason why many people jump from one chat into another one. Moreover, the person on the other side the chatter has met is likely not to be exactly like he said. This person is more than likely to have the same personality problems the chatter has.

One of the advantages of the open chatroom is that its sections are organized by different topics which allows the chatter to get to the point: cinema, travelling, music, sex, gossiping, etc. No one is deceived because everyone knows where they go into,

although it is impossible to avoid that a 12-year-old kid enters an adult chatroom. How would we know that he is the age he says? It is impossible.

Furthermore, chatters remain anonymous, which is an advantage and a disadvantage. On entering a chat a real name is never used (it must not be used), instead we use a nickname. The advantage is that we express ourselves totally free whereas being safe that our remarks will never be used against us. The disadvantage is that we will not know who may be on the other side either and, in many cases, they may be criminals trying to swindle us or trying to push us into an illegal network of pederasty, prostitution, xenophobia or violent groups.

The chat may provoke a strong addiction since those hooked on it suffer from a withdrawal syndrome as soon as they log off. This is why is considerably important not to confuse a hobby with an addiction. Addiction arises when we use the chat compulsively to evade our problems and be satisfied immediately instead of using it to enjoy ourselves. Addicts are easily recognized, they lie more than they talk. They say to be doing something when they are actually doing something different and thereby contradicting themselves. It is certainly true that hundreds of divorces have been provoked by chats for two reasons. The first one is because one of the two members spends hours chatting and neglects family needs and obligations; and the second one is because they have surfed on the net so much that they have probably met and cheated on the other with someone else, and he may have heard of it and put an end to the relationship.

Whoever is affected by this situation, the kid, teenager, youngster or adult, changes his character and priorities. He does not care about exposing to danger important relationships, either couple, family or friend relationships. He even neglects his job or studies, he only cares about getting online. He loses control and is not aware of what is going on. When the situation becomes more serious, they will have to look for specialized professional help, but it will be people surrounding them who will have to make the decision since the addicted person will not be aware of it.

Regarding young people, we have to consider that specialists in teenager problems are worried about chatting with strangers because the lie is something usual and the chat's idealized unreality comes to real life. Many youngsters spend hours chatting on the Internet instead of being socializing with people of their ages.

Basic security rules must be taken into account when our children are chatting. We must never let our children meet friends from a chat without having formerly made sure they are kids. The reason is because many times adults have bad intentions and they act as youngsters with sexual or other criminal purposes.

The Messenger

Without a doubt, this is the great discovery of this decade. It is about an instant messaging client that has succeeded on the Internet, above all, amongst teenagers. Its great advantage and fundamental reason is the friend circle the users establish. On

Messenger they usually communicate with people they socialize with everyday in real life.

We have the contact list and we, as users, are who decide whom to chat with. However, this is not safe a hundred per cent. In fact, no one can keep a pedophile, a computer expert, from sneaking into our computers, stealing keywords and saying to be so-and-so's friend and live in a different city. We can have a look about what may happen if this communication system is wrongly used on the following address: <http://www.adiccionesdigitales.es/Consultas/Messenger.pps>.

This example would be an exceptional case, but these cases are the ones covered by the media and also the ones that cause or may cause family tragedies. Nothing usually happens but we have to be cautious. The former lines are about our children's security but we also have to pay close attention to possible addictions. The truth is that the spending time on Messenger is quite long. A youngster may be online for fifteen or twenty hours per week and consider it something normal, without realizing, neither him nor his family, that it is a very addictive activity that avoids other ways of communication. It is usual that a group of friends go home from school walking for twenty minutes without saying a single word and, that by the time they go through the doorway they decide getting on Messenger and spending hours chatting. What does that mean? It means that they are simply losing their face-to-face oral communication ability and that they only know how to do it through the computer.

Nowadays, Messenger has come to replace the phone somehow. Decades ago when kids came home they used to get hold of the phone to talk to their friends. Currently, they use Messenger instead, in which several friends can communicate at the same time unlike the phone, through which only two people can. Some psychologists think that this behaviour has to do with a certain period in teenagers' life.

Microsoft's policy, the creator of this magnificent communication system, is another world. Many people have Hotmail accounts to use their e-mails and/or MSN Messenger. Hotmail, which belongs to Microsoft trademark, has many users of its services, above all, the e-mail service. For those who want to use a Hotmail account for the instant messaging service, now there is a solution to get rid of the full of advertisements Messenger. From May 2007, we can download from the Internet the instant messaging programme called Pidgin. This software is free (GPL) and it has no advertising. It can connect to several networks and accounts simultaneously. For instance, it is possible to log on with a Hotmail and a Gmail account at the same time. We can download Pidgin for Windows at: <http://downloads.sourceforge.net/pidgin/pidgin-2.2.2.exe>.

Pornography and Minors Attraction

Pornography can reach our computers by two different ways. One is when we look for it and the other one is when pornography finds us. Those who look for it are never deceived because they know what they are doing. Nevertheless, pornography looks for us as well and this happens when we receive junk e-mails where pictures and

videos of any kind are offered or when we surf on the Internet and we are redirected to certain websites without our consent. Sometimes we cannot avoid it.

The true thing is that many teenagers, who use the computers much better than their parents, are eager for sexual material and can find everything they want with no restrictions whatsoever. Generally, youngsters get tired of this very soon and spend more time playing and doing some other activities on the Internet. However, girls feel more interested in chatting with their friends, the so-called social games and downloading videos and songs. This is actually one of the big dangers of Internet we find when we come across unwanted pornography. Amongst teenagers, *E-Mule*, a programme used to exchange files, is very up-to-date. This programme is very easy to use but the problem is that the files may be named as one wishes (*Doraemon, The Little Mermaid, Spiderman*, etc.) and contain pornography that can only be seen when the files are fully downloaded and we open them in our computers. According to researches carried out in the USA, the 80% of the users of these file-exchanging programmes provide videos illegally. The 60% of the downloaded videos are pornographic films and only the 5% are recently released films.

Websites that Incite to Anorexia and Bulimia

Currently, and although it seems unreal, there are hundreds of websites that teach our children how to be anorexic and bulimic and how to lie to their parents so that they do not realize the unhealthy guidelines to lose weight their children are following.

Whenever we have information about websites of this nature we have to report them. Plenty have been closed down once their content were known thanks to agreements with Internet service suppliers.

Surfing Safe and Internet Filters

The first thing that comes up when we think about the little ones at home and their connection with Internet is how to keep them from accessing certain types of contents. The dangers of the Network have fuelled many companies to create filtering programmes that allow the users to enter some websites and that restrict some others. Like everything in life, this has pros and cons because if we prevent them from accessing websites we want to forbid, they will not be able to access the ones that are advisable for their intellectual and cultural development either.

There are filters that prevent them from entering websites depending on the words registered on them. In this case the best thing is to ask computer-programme experts at any specialized shop.

In case we decide to instal a filter, we must know several basic concepts such as: the criterion followed to prohibit a website, the system used to filter the content, the possibility to update the filter on the Internet for free, the degree of difficulty to configurate the filter and if the technology is advanced enough for the kids to control it and manipulate it without their parents' consent.

Safe Purchase and Network Risks

Buying on the Internet is probably the economic use with more projection of the moment. This is being taken relatively slow but safe, once safety and confidence problems posed when giving our personal details, bank account and credit card information have being solved.

In order to achieve the complete development of this electronic trade, it is necessary that security and confidence are totally guaranteed. We cannot ask someone to buy something from his computer or any other computing device if he is not sure that the information he is giving will have the right use. We cannot forget that when irregular situations have taken place, these are brought to light by the media right away, unlike when right operations, which are the most cases, are carried out.

Internet must be safe and convey confidence to whomever buys on it. In order to be sure of our information being sent safe, we just have to look at the bar in which you will read https and not http. This happens when buying a service or product as well as when looking up our bank account. We have the right to bring back the acquisition to the shop as if we had bought it in the shop on the corner, although it is important to look at the conditions of the website we are buying in.

Like on any shop, it is advisable to keep the receipt, whether on paper or digital format, to be able to claim afterwards. We must never pay for the product before trying it out, unless the shop is absolutely reliable. We also have to pay close attention to the information we are giving since, those who use Internet regularly do some operations automatically. This is why we ought to bear in mind what type of information we give. We do not know what use is going to be made of it.

Medicines on the Network

Medicines are the most dangerous products children, youngsters and adults can buy on the Internet. It is estimated that more than 2,000 medicines are being sold illegally on the Internet now, most of them without directions and with information only in English. Many have already expired and do not offer the appropriate health guarantee. doctors and chemists are always essential to order and sell medicines.

We always have to be aware that if we cannot find a medicine in a chemist's is because health authorities do not determine it healthy. It is true that we resort to Internet when we want a medicine which is not authorized in our country and which needs to be ordered by a doctor. We also resort to Internet when a medicine is expensive and we think we will find it cheaper on the Internet. When we buy it, we miss out the basic rules of logic and all the safety and healthiness controls that have been imposed by health authorities just in order to watch over our health.

These products are very easy to get. All you need is a name, a telephone number, an e-mail address and, of course, a credit card to pay with. The problem is that it can be done by either an adult or a teenager.

If this was not enough, this type of sites usually gives very incomplete information about these medicines and it usually says nothing about side effects. They do not warn about the right use of these medicines. Sometimes, they have no information leaflet and they are out of its original boxes, looking just as if they were toys, computer mouses or make-up and, therefore, not being detected during customs controls. Occasionally, open or incomplete containers, with a number of pills different from the regular one and with the information leaflet taped or completely ripped up, are received. Some other times, they are wrapped up in newspapers from the country they come from. It is clear that this situation does not give us any preserving or health guarantees regarding the product that usually comes from places such as Thailand, the Fiji Islands, the United States, Brazil and New Zealand, and that may range from Viagra to androgens or anabolic steroids that have not been medically checked up whatsoever.

Videogames. Who Uses Videogames?

Videogames are one of the greatest discoveries of the computing progress. A great deal of the improvements that take place in the computing field are generated thanks to videogames, voracious consumers of all the resources of our computers. We actually cannot blame the fact of computers being updated every single year on Bill Gates, Microsoft's owner, but on videogames and on children, youngsters and adults' thirst to play.

Videogames, as part of technology, are used by children as an alternative to loneliness and boredom. Some other times, the only reason is that the child cannot be with his friends because of different causes and videogames help him to let off energy. Some videogames, used with no measures, isolate children, make them lose track of time and reality, and may increase violent attitudes.

A videogame may be addictive to users depending on factors such as being impressive and attractive, dealing with a fantasy far from reality and not being too complicated to play.

A large variety of videogames ranges from strictly educational games to absolutely violent or racist ones. Some have to be paid and some others do not. Nowadays, any child can buy or download games, which infringe upon Human Rights, from the Internet freely. Some of them are not even well-rated regarding the age they are targeted. It is advisable that we try to talk our children into using videogames with implicit values that we consider positive and that have a specified and achivable purpose. These games must offer different alternatives, in other words, the player must not be subject to the game guideline, on the contrary, he must set his own pace having enough time to think about, reflect on and make a decision.

In addition, we as parents must try to teach our children to share out their activities so that they spend some time in other pastimes such as sports, cinema or reading. A good example would be that we as adults played with our children sometimes to try to set an example in serenity for them. Of course, we must do everything possible to keep them from playing racist, sexist and violent videogames.

Occasionally, these violent or racist videogames are put up on the Internet and distributed freely by fascist, racist or criminal organizations to attract followers amongst

young people. This is why this type of games is a dangerous time-bomb we have to defuse in time.