

Digital Diffidence

By Jay Taffet

I was at lunch the other day, and couldn't help notice a family seated across the restaurant: a father, teenager, and pre-teen.

They were all separately engrossed on their phones, never looking up to exchange any communication, and shockingly unresponsive to the waitress when she brought their food.

I live in the 21st century, so this is not an uncommon sight, but it struck me even more poignantly than other similar observations I've made in the past being a relatively new daddy.

I've spent countless hours over the past decade studying how a child's brain develops, and what I've discovered is technology, in the scheme of intelligence building, is actually irrelevant.

There is certainly learning value and mental organization associated with digital instruction, but there is nothing more critical in the development of a child's brain – and the progressive ability to build confidence and security – than human interaction.

A shocking revelation, because how can you dismiss the huge impact digital media and virtual instruction has had on our learning potential and advancement? It's huge by any measure of science or psychology.

But it turns out that all our learning apps, educational games and intelligence-building software are just "nice-to-have" supplements for the mental and emotional IQ that we build through human interaction.

All the virtual friend groups and communities in the world can't provide the security, confidence, and intuition we need to seed our cognitive and emotional capability. And, without these skills, we lose our ability to relate to others with empathy and understanding, which are naturally the seeds of civilized society.

Consider this: By the time a child reaches the age of eighteen, he/she will have seen over 200,000 acts of violence, including 40,000 murders, through digital entertainment.

Over 200,000 acts of violence.

Did writers, directors, and developers create this much violence in digital programming because it's entertaining, or because it reflects our reality? I think a little of both.

A world that has minimized the importance of physical human interaction is a world that has lost its ability to empathize. Human interaction creates empathetic intelligence, and, without interaction and empathy, humans lose their value.

The child's brain doesn't care about the virtual communities of our world, only the human ones. The child needs to learn human expressions, gestures, and speech towards building the security and confidence required for intelligence and empathy. And, naturally, this can only happen through physical human interaction.

We adults want the same security and confidence towards building physical communities in which we can survive and thrive. And, as we know by now, we can only do this with other humans, in real time and space.

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