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The Role of the Media in Upbringing Children of Pre-school Age

Abstract: This article contributes to the discussion related to the role of mass media in educating and upbringing children of pre-school age. Man today is best described as *homo mediorum*, who more or less depends on digital media. Those behaviors and other media related addictions are being transmitted to children from almost the very first day of their lives. What are the consequences of this? Unfortunately, most of them are negative. Research shows there are difficulties with language acquisition, selective attention, correct development of cognitive functions and it may even lower the intelligence level. Summarizing, it is clear that electronic media do not support education. What about upbringing? Mass media generate difficulties in interpersonal relations, lead to aggression, lack of empathy and addictions. The conclusion? It is impossible to withdraw mass media from children's lives but let us try to reduce their influence in the lives of the youngest children.

Key words: Electronic media, language acquisition delay, selective attention, cognitive functions, empathy, aggression, addictions.

Introduction

Technological innovations change the world of the media and, at the same time, affect the life of the modern generation - especially children and youth. A lot of children use interactive media in their daily activities and, based on them, organize their activities, acquire habits of unlimited use. The most dangerous are the media that rely mainly on images and sound. The presence of these types of devices in the lives of young children, aged 0–5 years, is a threat to their rapidly developing brains, and may result in the future in various types of deficits in the cognitive, emotional or social sphere. Unfortunately, it can affect adversely the development and physical functioning of children. The purpose of the article is to draw parents' attention to the risks that may be associated with uncontrolled and inappropriate use of new media by young children.

Children in the media world

The pre-school age is extremely important for young children and how they develop further in the future. During this time, the foundation is laid for a number of the functions and abilities of a child. Not only do these functions and abilities play a vital role in future successes and possible setbacks in the child's learning but they also influence how children function in social situations. The human brain can often be influenced by a variety of factors as well as its structures which are responsible for social interactions (e.g. amygdala). The brain itself and its structures need correct stimulation. Nowadays, children are provided with this kind of stimulation by being exposed to unrestricted digital and mass media access. New technologies are often easily accessible in the majority of households as well as upbringing institutions such as nursery schools. This leads to something called "bedroom culture". This term describes situations in which children spend most of the time in their rooms using digital media. Research show two different strands. The first strand outlines positive outcomes based on media access. The second strand points

out possible dangers for the child's development considering negative outcomes of content watched and the length of time spent in front of the TV (Robert, Foehr, 2004).

J. Chwaszcz (2005) specifies the different ways in which mass media exert their influence. They are as follows:

1. Suggesting behavior patterns where natural desire to copy different ways of behaving is used in terms of following and copying the way of looking or behaving presented on the screen.
2. Applying meanings which are based on linking particular events to emotions. If the events and emotions do not follow each other quickly, they may lead to lack of experiencing and reflecting in a correct way.
3. Training based on repetition of living through emotions released by mass media programs. If those kind of emotions are often repeated and lived through, it may lead to desensitization which basically relates to emotional indifference.
4. Deliberate use of fun in order to increase mass media forecast as well as to encourage the highest possible number of watchers.
5. Provocative situations based on arranging circumstances which require a recipient to independently solve problems as well as to initiate its own activity. It needs to be said that TV programs hardly ever encourage recipients to solve problems independently, they rather promote the lack of independence.

Mass media influence recipients by means of the content they provide. There are three options that best specify intentions related to the meanings that mass media promote. The first of those opinions intends to say that mass media very closely reflects the reality. The second opinion suggests that the reality is presented more attractively in order to achieve eye catching outcomes. It makes information provided by mass media unclear and it does not truly reflect on the situation in reality. The third opinion can be described as a critical one in terms of its approach to mass media and the meanings they provide audiences with. Regarding the

third opinion, mass media are seen as a source of viewing pathological situations which are provided to a significant number of recipients.⁵

Forwarding and spreading views, opinions, behavioral patterns through mass media is filled with particular features such as temporariness, variability, quickness in satisfying curiosity, easiness in reception and emotions excitation. Considering those factors, the recipient (it specially relates to little children as the rational part of their brain is still in the developmental stage) is unable to start running features which allow understanding, arranging, rating and valuing the flow of information. The above situation forces the recipient not to take any intellectual analysis and reflection as well as critical thinking in relation to the information flow received.

Excessive and irrational mass media usage may cause mass media addiction. Regarding this aspect, J. Chwaszcz (2005) believes this circumstance has a psychological basis and its outcomes can affect all areas of human functioning. Peer groups are considered to be at high risk. Excessive mass media usage may be generated by boredom, the lack of parental involvement, less attractive play activities as well as over extended play availability and unrestricted toy access. It also involves extremely high expectations set for children and finally wrong and misleading adult role model patterns in relation to mass media usage. Furthermore, in relation to children it also needs to be pointed out that children often lack logical thinking abilities and they find it difficult to distinguish between truth and fiction and they frequently lack experience. The lack of experience contributes to vulnerability of children in terms of negative mass media

⁵ Rational brain - It is the most developed part of a brain also known as the frontal lobes or neocortex. From the point of view of evolution it is the youngest part which takes up to 85% of brain. This part of the brain enfolds the old brains of mammals. The neocortex is a part of the brain that sensitive emotional upbringing has a positive effect on. Functions of this part of the brain include:

1. creativeness and imagination
2. problem solving
3. comprehension and ability to reflect
4. self-awareness
5. kindness, empathy and care.

influence. This is why it is necessary to provide appropriate circumstances for a child's development which should mainly take place amongst family members.

Children need care and attention from those ones who are the closest to them (they do not need it from TV screens or computers) and those people have a significant impact on the child's emotional development, building on and shaping self-esteem as well as a wide variety of skills and abilities such as interacting with others and managing stress. This ascertainment is crucially important nowadays where "mass media and hypermedia have a huge influence on all people regardless of age, education, nationality, religion or outlook" (Gajda,2007). Based on the results of the analysis carried out, there may be more negative consequences, especially in areas linked to human existence as well as the functioning of little children. There are a few somatic disorders that can be specified e.g. posture and spine defects, nervous and metabolic system problems and problems with allergies. The research that included little children who spend a lot of time in front of a TV screen or computer shows a proportional dependence between the time spent in front of TV or computer screen and possible language development delay.

It has been revealed that even educational programs such as *Sesame Street* may delay language acquisition if they are being watched by young children who are still going through the phase of language acquisition (Brzozowska, Sikorska 2016). It is important that an adult who has an emotional relationship with the child helps acquiring language by applying interaction while watching TV (explaining, naming, accompanying) which helps lowering language developmental delays. If the child watches TV alone there is no room for *common attention zone* significantly needed for language development. Furthermore, no mimics, gesture, body language relating to referent or event misleads a recipient. The recipient gets easily discouraged from remembering as well as thinking and the broadcasted program becomes blurred and somehow mesmerizes the recipient.

Children stimulated by TV and computer games would also show problems with selective attention which basically means that they will

have problems with their ability to choose and invest their energy in one stimulus only (Brzozowska, Sikorska, 2016). Not all of the programs correlate with a deficit of selective attention in relation to children. Programs with quick action and scenes of violence or classified as entertainment programs may lead to deficits of attention. M. Spitzer (2016) referred to research findings conducted on a group of children aged 4 and 6 years old. The research clearly proved that watching movies containing quick actions and set in fantasy world leads to concentration disorders. Furthermore, the research findings have also proved that similar negative outcomes arise after watching educational movies with quick action. Additionally, there was no similar outcomes in educational programs in which speed and content were deliberately tailored to the perceptual needs of a child. Risks related to deficits of selective attention seem to be considerably serious (the more TV is watched before the age of 3, the more possible it is that the children will face problems related to maintaining attention at the age of 7. Each hour of screen time increased up to 90% of possible further risks related to maintaining attention) (Spitzer, 2016). These frightening findings are not that surprising when we refer to the knowledge of the development of a child's brain. Not fully formed brain structures exposed to constant mass media influence learn how to function in a pathological way. This can be seen in a lack of persistence in task completion, moving from one activity to another without completing any of them as well as chaotic, uncontrolled and excessive activity.

The harmful influence of mass media has also been proven in terms of the child's cognition as well as its school achievements. There are some frightening reports that talk about a close link between watching TV (especially before the age of 3) and lowering test scores which measure intellectual capabilities. Additionally, it is extremely difficult for children to learn from TV. Additionally, it is far more difficult if not impossible to learn from TV in comparison to natural situations taking place in the child's natural and closest environment. Why? It closely relates to not fully formed perceptual and cognitive structures that are typical for a little child.

Taking into account the syncretism and subjectivism common for pre-school age children, it is important to remember that the correct

perception of TV programs (or from different sources) are significantly difficult for a young child. The lack of cause and effect thinking which children usually develop at age of 6 or 7 may also have a significant effect on how a movie and its message is received and understood. Pre-school children who find it difficult to understand and to interpret symbolic content of the movie often focus on very basic first hand observations (Nowakowski, 2000). This situation, if often repeated, may lead a child to adapt a habitual and thoughtless watching habit. This may also put at risk their still developing psyche as well as the morality of a child. They may become deformed as a final effect of it. The above findings are frightening considering the fact that mass media have had a massive influence on children as well as parents. It changes their daily routines, often destroying the structure of regular daily tasks and commitments by involving whole families in watching TV for long periods of time (Izdebska, 1996).

J. Izdebska (2000) highlights that non-selective and excessive watching of TV by children significantly contributes to:

6. intellectual laziness;
7. lack of sensitivity in terms of suffering and difficult situation of others;
8. experiencing emotional problems such as fear or excessive excitability;
9. expressing aggression and antisocial behavior;
10. susceptibility to disease;
11. interference in communication which links to unilateral screen experience;
12. deformation of imagination and creative actions;
13. impairment of speech;
14. shaping and consolidating of photographic and two-dimensional way of pictorial screen reality;
15. shaping susceptibility for suggestions and credulity;
16. fabricating fictional needs;
17. sense of loneliness (Izdebska, 2000).

Concluding: excessive and non-selective watching TV is harmful for children and results in many negative consequences affecting their

appropriate process of development. Furthermore, TV and mass media, if wisely and rationally used, may play a significant role for family upbringing environment in areas such as:

18. the child's education and development;
19. expanding parental knowledge in psychological, pedagogical and medical aspects;
20. stimulating parents to take actions in upbringing, caring, educating as well as cultural aspects;
21. supporting integration processes taking place while collectively watching TV;
22. equalizing and compensating shortages of family environment.

It is important to remember that parents have a very important role to play while accompanying their children in a journey through the colorful and magical world of TV programs and computer games. The child's contact with mass media based on rational, controlled, astute and prudent parental control may also have advantage such as:

23. enriching the child's knowledge on social, historical, cultural topics as well as science and topics related to art;
24. developing imagination, observation and memory;
25. enriching vocabulary and concepts;
26. arousing interests;
27. stimulating children to take on new activities or actions in intellectual, cultural and social dimensions (Izdebska, 2000).

A. Andrzejewska (2006) claims that TV programs may significantly support the development of a child's knowledge of the surrounding reality and in this matter supporting family in its educational and upbringing role. To make it happen, it is important to properly, selectively and rationally approach the matter that relates to TV programs watched by children.

Voices of the children and their parents – the results of the research

The research conducted in 2012 by a company called AVG Technologies on a large population of children (2,200 mothers of children aged two to five years old), was intended to answer the questions of what children were able and liked to do. The research findings provided sad but predictable information. It turned out that the great majority of five year-olds were able to use smartphones or control a computer mouse rather than swim or to tie their shoe laces. Furthermore, it was revealed that only a few children were able to put cereal into a bowl and pour some milk on top of it. Did anything change within the past few years since the research was carried out? To answer this question, researchers conducted another survey on a population of 100 children attending one of the nurseries in Krakow (Olszówka, 2015). The kids were asked about their preferences in terms of spending free time. The questions were structured to obtain fairly objective answers. Each child answered individually, in a separate room. These questions were supplemented by questions contained in surveys addressed to their parents.

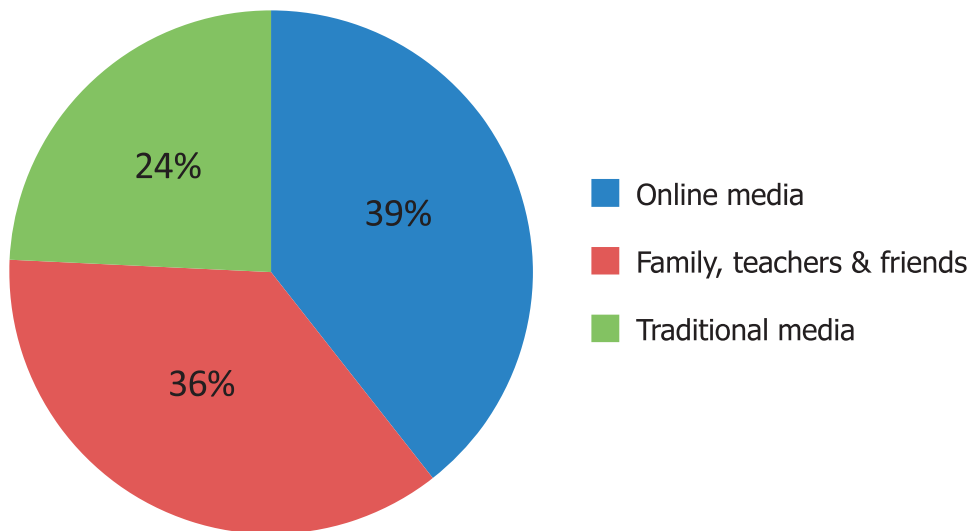
The research findings point out that 99% of surveyed children like watching TV and they do it on a daily basis. It turned out that the level of viewing (and the child's watching preferences) is influenced by the fact of having an access to a TV set. In many families, there is more than one TV not having to say that there are smartphones and tablets accessible for every member of the family.

The results of the research carried out on the population of 100 pre-school children in one of the kindergartens in Krakow coincide with the results included in the "Nobody's Children Foundation" report. The data shows that:

- 64% of children aged from 6 months to 6.5 years use mobile devices, (out of which 25% on a daily basis)
- 26% of children have their own mobile device
- 79% of children watch movies and 62% play on a smartphone or tablet

- 63% of children had played with a smartphone or tablet without a specific purpose
- 69% of parents provide mobile devices to children when they need to have some time off. 49% of parents use this as a kind of reward for the child.

Similar data can be found in the world's latest reports on the preferences of children spending their free time. Children, despite declarations of attachment to their parents and willingness to spend time with them, when asked how they prefer to spend their free time, they answer:



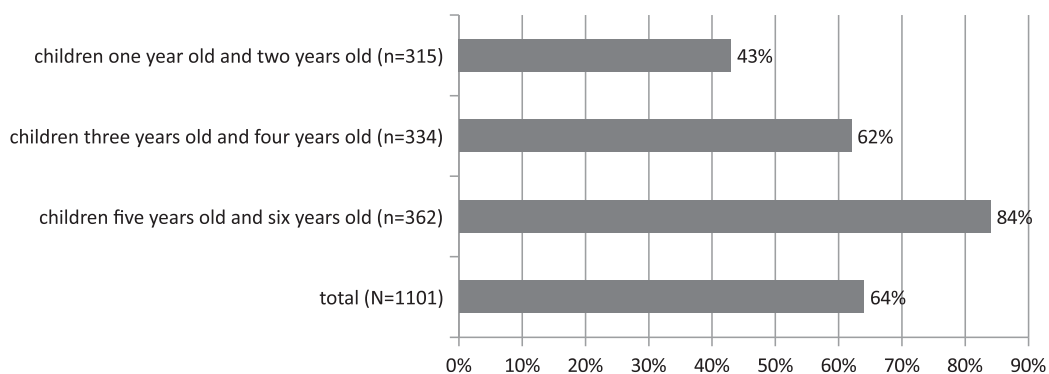
**How children receive and perceive the news. Web source:
www.comonsense.org/research**

Silent killer (mass and digital media access) in a child's room leads to addictions such as; irritability, crying and sleep difficulties. These are the less severe outcomes. The real problems come to light when first and the most important role is played by aggression and enormous socializing problems. For example, children become reluctant to show empathy, do not interact with peers and ignore adult recommendations. Some of them are unable to fall asleep without a smartphone / tablet held in their hands or having a TV or computer on.

There is nothing new brought by research analysis which relates to children who “start” entering the virtual world. Children normally start their journey with a TV set (at first as passive viewers) at the age of one. The highest numbers of children were involved in watching TV at the age of two. Glaring TV or computer screens, quick changes of colors and images naturally attract even a baby’s attention. It may happen that an unformed and immature nervous system of a baby may be negatively affected by becoming hyperactive. It may also be wondered if parents of mentioned children have sufficient knowledge about brain development and how it can be affected by such an early TV and digital media initiation. Furthermore, it is important to notice that the younger the child is and exposed to TV or computer screen, the higher possibility that its brain will not develop properly! It may also happen that monotonous and repeated activities such as looking at the screen or sliding a finger on a screen, will lead to some parts of the brain not being developed enough or not being developed at all, which is fundamental for correct future functioning.

The data presented in the latest reports are alarming. They indicate that already very small children, not even preschoolers, reach for mobile devices. Moreover, as they grow up, the tendency to use these devices increases even further.

**Children using from mobile devices available at home
by age category, %.**



(Web source 1)

It is exceptionally important to pay attention to the fact how much time is spent by a child in front of a TV screen. Children at this age have a natural need of movement and should run, climb, jump, learn how to fall safely as well as maintain the balance as riding the bike and coordinate their movements when they swim. These activities get children ready to learn to write, read and to overcome failure. What about spending time passively in front of a TV screen? It leads to rapid fatigue, apathy, the lack of coordination and reluctance to learn anything. Research findings in this field calm the situation down a bit: most of the surveyed children spend one to two hours per day in front of a TV screen. Only some of the parents (5% in total) declared that they had exceeded the mentioned time limit. They admitted letting their children spend over three hours in front of a TV screen on a daily basis. The author's research is also confirmed by the results of nationwide surveys, included in the previous report (Web source 2). The average time devoted to the media during the day is spent on:

- playing games on the console – 1 hour 11 minutes
- watching movies on your smartphone / tablet – 1 hour
- searching for content on the Internet – 52 minutes
- browsing websites – 50 minutes
- playing games on a smartphone / tablet or using other mobile applications – 49 minutes
- playing with a smartphone / tablet without a specific purpose – 38 minutes.

In light of the conducted research, the amount of time during the day that parents allow their children to spend watching TV is alarming. The highest number of children watch TV in the evenings and major part of surveyed children begin watching TV shortly after they left nursery and arrived at home. Nearly half of surveyed parents admitted that their children mainly watch TV during meal times and in the mornings before leaving for nursery. Professionals who focus on mass media issues do not recommend for children to watch TV in the evenings as the emotions that are

being generated by TV programs do not help falling asleep and disturb further resting at night time. Furthermore, mass media professionals recommend watching TV before midday as the best possible time for young viewers. They also recommend prohibiting children from watching TV during meal times. Children do not focus on eating and do not take an active part in meal consumption. Additionally, watching TV during meal times significantly affect bonding and building family relationships and in this matter adults often fail to be good role models. Children being irritated by the fact that parents were more absorbed by a gadget during a meal time (mobile phone) rather than them [...] did everything they could to attract attention. One of the boys tried to turn his mum's face so she could look at him rather than a screen. A father of three boys did not react as they were singing and when they behaved in a silly way. When they started behaving too loud he shouted to make them quite (Romanowska, Lis, 2015).

The question arises as to why do parents accompany children in their contact with the media? Averaged data shows that in about 50% of situations this is the case. The parent demonstrates, participates or exercises some form of supervision over the child's activity. The remaining 50% of children becomes independent in this matter very early on. Another question arises; why do parents have excessive confidence in the choices of a young child, his preferences, and allow leaving him alone with an electronic device and uncontrolled use of the media? Every fifth parent admits that he lets the child use the devices to eat a meal. Nearly 15% of parents use mobile devices to make it easier for children to fall asleep.

It is extremely important that children who access TV programs watch content that is suitable for them and adjusted to their perceptual capabilities, emotional development as well as development of thinking. This is why it is so important to choose the right TV channels and programs that meet the above expectations. Based on parental feedback, it turns out that slightly less than half of children of pre-school age (46%) have their favorite programs and 54% of young viewers do not show any preferences in this matter. Following on the above subject the *Mini Mini* was chosen as the most favorite TV station. From the programs offered, children most often choose fairy tales and animations. There are also

some children who follow science and musical programs (they can positively stimulate the child's development if they are adequately chosen to match the perceptual capabilities of young viewers and it is accompanied by the wise and supporting presence of an adult).

Based on movie channels and different types of programs mentioned by parents and children from the Krakow kindergarten, it can be concluded that adults are interested in and control what their children watch on TV. Parents who are involved in what their loved ones watch fulfil the need of overlooking, controlling as well as participating and taking part in receiving the content of programs addressed to their children. Additionally, it is very adverse if a child is left to watch TV on its own. Children, due to their developmental restrictions, are often unable to correctly receive media content which may significantly affect their psyche and morality which still are at a developmental stage. Parents who allow their pre-school age children to watch TV or use tablets on their own must be aware of the fact that it will significantly affect their child's social abilities. Moral and ethical values of their child may be dangerously modified as TV programs often do not promote positive values and attitudes that would be worth following. A distorted view of reality formed in child's mind and influenced by mass media can become the only source of understanding the surrounding reality unless this view is adjusted by adults. Concluding, adults should be aware of the fact that children should not watch TV on their own.

An important element that plays a vital role in a child's access to the world of mass media culture is how the time as well as watched contents are controlled in their family environment. Parents who were asked about applying particular rules related to mass media accession declared doing so with their children. Most of the surveyed parents (66%) answered that they set particular rules within the home environment. However, a large group of questioned parents (34%) answered negatively, explaining that they do not set the rules in their home environment. This has a negative impact on children who need help from adults in developing an understanding as to how mass media should be used. Are parents aware of their role as well as the importance of rules they set for their

child's development? This question was answered by parents who explained their knowledge on safe access and usage of mass media.

Nearly all parents (96%) declared they had sound knowledge on how to safely access mass and digital media. Only 4% of parents assessed their knowledge as insufficient. Regarding the mentioned data, it is clear that nearly all surveyed adults are interested in using mass media and consider themselves literate in how to safely use and access TV, computer, tablet or other digital devices. Furthermore, parents were able to name different sources they use to gain their knowledge on mass media effects on their children. The first source of knowledge parents mentioned were articles from different magazines and newspapers (65%). Surveyed adults also referred to professional literature as well as courses and workshops or other forms of training.

A few practical tips

The author presents some advice for parents who declare a willingness to expand their knowledge on how the media may affect their child's development but does not provide any information as to how and where they find relevant information. The author has listed a few practical steps to follow, based on the research conducted by Kaiser Foundation (Web source 3).

1. Do not let your child's interpersonal relations with others to be distorted.

Close relationships with parents and siblings; games, conversations, naming the world, establishing and tightening relationships will have an effect on the future emotional relationships between the child and other people. If the parents devote a lot of time to their child, it is very likely that their contact with the environment will be appropriate. One must be aware that a child's nervous system, exposed to electronic devices from early childhood, develops incorrectly. The consequences are the lack of concentration and incorrect perception of the world around them.

As a result, the child develops another perception of the world, has difficulties with establishing proper interpersonal relations. The "plastic" caricature world of games does not match the real one.

2. Do not let your child to become an addict.

Clicking only once children are able to get what they want. This is why they instantly get used to using mobiles and tablets and, unlike adults, children may find it really difficult to take control over the addiction. "New technologies attract people because the virtual world allows us to try new things. It is difficult to resist the temptation to use electronic equipment, because it will never put a limit to meet the needs" (Small, Vorgan, 2009).

3. There will be fewer reasons to cry.

The child attached to the equipment, using it unlimitedly, gets angry when we take the gadget away from him. The weakness of a parent who capitulates under such pressure just to calm down a fussing child, leads to nowhere. Such actions bring a solution to the problem only for a moment, but they will not teach the child to control the emotions. If the electronic devices become a form of medicine to keep children calm, how will they learn to control their emotions? The normal way to make a young child calm is to make sure the child knows we are with them. We may also give the child a cuddle, say something good about them or turn her or his attention away from the problem and offer to play together.

4. Your child will sleep better.

It has been scientifically proven that using electronic devices in the afternoons have a negative influence on how children sleep at night and how they feel the next day. Over 50% of parents do not supervise the time of using electronic devices by their children. 75% of children have the possibility to use TV and computers in their rooms. 75% of children aged 9 and 10 cannot sleep well because their thoughts shift to games, movies, cartoons, etc. This has a huge impact on concentration and learning outcomes.

5. Your child's interest in education will increase.

Limited access to electronic devices will make your child bored. If someone is bored for too long, then it naturally leads to creative thinking! Some children will start thinking about games they can play while others will get involved in reading books. Most importantly, the mind will be encouraged to do some thinking. Additionally, the more the mind gets stimulated, the more flexible it becomes. It may lead to the situation in which the mind will independently "demand more" information.

6. Your child will become more sociable.

Children experiencing direct contact learn to feel fully relaxed in presence of other people.

A healthy relationship is based on frequent and direct contact with other people. It is necessary to get to know someone e.g. their body language, facial expressions, tone of voice, mood changes and the way to express emotions in order to be able to have a relationship with them. It can be noticed that modern video equipment is not able to develop a child's creative imagination. Teachers of young children complain that many of them have to learn symbolic fun. A few years ago, it was a symptom that occurred only in mentally and emotionally disturbed youth (Large M, 2006).

7. Your child will have better fitness.

The time spent with electronic devices is static. A child looking at the digital screen in a seating position can last for hours. Scientific research proves that children who have restricted access to tablets, mobile phones and computers tend to become overweight less.

8. Selfless kindness of your child will last longer.

The later children come across violent behaviors, the better. Most game scenarios for electronic devices are based on violence. Children who play those games will be less sensitive to cruelty and consider violence as a successful way of solving problems.

9. There is nothing more important than the calmness of your child.

Sometimes a large flow of information may irritate even an adult. Let us try to imagine what effect it can have on children, considering the fact that their nervous system is far less resistant. Social media brings with themselves a lot of bad examples and may cause children a lot of stress. Media reports that are saturated with violence can cause child aggression. Young children are increasingly exposed to the increasing occurrence of physical and sexual violence in today's media. For example, the computer game *Grand Theft Auto 5*, as well as many movies and TV shows, present explicit sexual acts, murders, rapes, torture and mutilation. Omnipresent violence in the media was considered as a threat to public health due to the causal impact on increased aggression in children (Web source 4).

Summary

Today's generation of young people is called "iGen" – it is a shortcut from "iGeneration"; the first generation that does not know the world without "i": iPhone, iPod, iPad. Although the previous generation was said to be addicted to the network, the current one that was born after 1995 does not know any other life than with constant access to the web. The era of the smartphone has meant that the number of acquaintances in the real world has decreased drastically, interpersonal bonds crumble, the quality of conversation and the sentences used in it decreases as well. People tend to make significantly less eye contact during conversation. In return, they are staring at the screen, sending short information, reading insignificant news, their life is full of stillness and stagnation. They obtain superficial knowledge that is temporary and useless. They make virtual contacts – numerous, but very impermanent. They lack friendship, commitment, their own opinions and thoughts. With our actions we lead children to such schemes. Do we want such a future for them?

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